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# teach EARLY YEARS

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Outstanding advice for foundation stage professionals



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How rhythm builds strong brains

**FUNDED PLACES:**  
what you can do to meet demand

**Problem-solve with picture books**

p.48

*"I'm hungry"*

Healthy snacking explained



**STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT CHILDREN WITH AUTISM**

**WHY MOVEMENT MATTERS ACROSS THE EYFS**

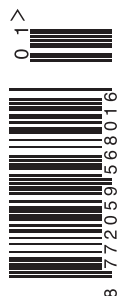
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# Hello



When we want to make it clear that something is simplicity itself to complete or understand, we often find ourselves reaching for that well-worn phrase, “It’s as easy as one, two, three.” The truth is, though, that numbers can be a tricky proposition, whether you’re an early learner grappling with the very concepts of counting and quantity, or a nursery owner balancing incomings with outgoings... or indeed a politician desperate for the figures on your press release to obscure those that exist in reality.

We can’t promise to tackle all of the above this issue, but with an eye on both the development of vital early maths skills – including tips on helping children make sense of money in an age of contactless payments (p41) – and the ongoing funding issues the sector faces, we can at least make a start.

That’s not all you’ll find over the following pages, though. There’s plenty to enjoy centred on picture books too, from ideas on unlocking creativity with shared reading (p48) to recommendations of engaging interactive titles (p50), plus insights into the power of wordless books to develop critical thinking (p37). And don’t miss Emma Spiers’ exploration of rhythmic play (p26) or Nikky Smedley’s thoughts on managing our expectations of young children. Enjoy the issue!

Helen Mulley – Commissioning Editor



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## THE EXPERTS...



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CEO of the London Early Years Foundation



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Award-winning childminder



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# Inspire a lifelong love of reading from a young age

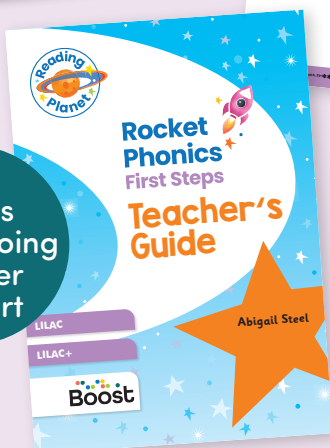
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CPD videos and ongoing teacher support



“ We are loving it in our Nursery. We really like the way it is accessible to all children whatever their ability. Some children are learning their speech sounds through the scheme whilst others are reading and writing the graphemes.”

Laura Foley, EYFS Teacher, Woodlands Primary, Merseyside



Scan to learn more

# Nursery Now

News and views from the early years



## In brief...

February saw the official launch of the 33-member-strong Speech, Language and Communication Alliance at the House of Commons, the beginning of a collective effort to improve the lives of the 1.9 million children with speech and language challenges across the UK.



The Education Endowment Foundation has launched 11 research projects to better inform the education sector about how to boost children's outcomes. Two of these are aimed at early years, including Reception Jigsaw, a professional development programme focused on improving maths teaching in Reception, and Plan, Do, Review, a 25-week intervention designed to improve the communication and language skills of 3–4-year-olds. Read more at [tinyurl.com/TEYeef11](https://tinyurl.com/TEYeef11)



Local councils are asking government to ensure that disadvantaged children don't miss out on Free School Meals. At present, 470,000 eligible children in England aren't signed up.

## Quality matters

It's fair to say that a DfE social media post ([tinyurl.com/TEYdfefb](https://tinyurl.com/TEYdfefb)) promising "cheaper childcare" and highlighting government action to prevent "overcharging" hasn't gone down well, with both settings and parents angry about the policy and the way it is being communicated. "It is misleading for the government to claim that the new early years charging parents guidance will make childcare 'cheaper'. It could have the opposite effect," stressed the NDNA, adding, "Parents don't want cheap childcare; they want high-quality early education and care for their children."

*"For the government to achieve its ambition to drive up standards in education they must sufficiently fund high-quality early education and care."*

NDNA



## TWEET TALK

**@paceychildcare.bsky.social**

Our Manifesto for Childminders sets out 9 actions to address plummeting childminder numbers, ensuring children have the very best start in life. Let's make 2025 the year for childminding! bit.ly/3D3oViZ

**@booktrust.org.uk**

"Books cannot be eaten or provide a physical refuge or home, but they can be a tool promoting empathy, escapism and reassurance."

@lawrencepatrice.bsky.social has been an incredible #WriterInResidence over the past six months - and now she's reflecting on her time in the role bit.ly/4gXINR3

## Toilet trouble 60%

INCREASE IN THE CONSTIPATION RATE FOR PRIMARY SCHOOL-AGE CHILDREN, WITH NUMBER OF AFFECTED PRESCHOOLERS ALSO UP. IN TOTAL, 44,000 CHILDREN WERE HOSPITALISED IN 2024 DUE TO THE CONDITION. [BIT.LY/3QGVHJH](https://bit.ly/3QGVHJH)



**“Intervening at an early age to support young people who have low cognitive and behavioural skills is critical to improving their future outcomes.”**

**JUDE HILLARY, CO-HEAD, UK POLICY & PRACTICE, NFER**

## Prioritise play

The Raising the Nation Play Commission has called on government to increase school playtime, which has fallen significantly since the mid-90s – visit [bit.ly/3QGPyxb](http://bit.ly/3QGPyxb)

## New study highlights early education’s lifelong impact

It won’t come as a surprise to advocates of the importance of early education, but new research has again highlighted the impact of early learning and development on individuals’ later academic success and, indeed, their employment prospects as adults. The NFER-led study ([tinyurl.com/TEYnfbf](http://tinyurl.com/TEYnfbf)) suggests that addressing cognitive and behavioural skills gaps that emerge in the early years may go so far as to support improved labour market outcomes, and consequently urges government to both incentivise and support schools to develop six “Essential Employment Skills” (EES): communication; collaboration; problem-solving; organising, planning and prioritising work; creative thinking; and information literacy – all highlighted by previous NFER research as being increasingly important for workers.

As its starting point, the report holds that children’s cognitive and behavioural skills are precursors for their EES in early adulthood. It notes that “There is clear evidence that high-quality education right from the early years can impact the development of essential/transferable skills” and provides evidence that suggests “skills gaps in the early years are predictive of skills gaps at the end of childhood”.

Commenting on the report’s findings, the programme’s principal investigator, Jude Hillary, said, “To deliver future skills needs and grow the economy, the government needs to adopt a ‘cradle-to-grave’ approach to skills development, promoting the development of a broad mix of cognitive, behavioural, and technical specific knowledge and skills, starting from the early years.”

As part of this holistic approach, the report also stresses the importance of children’s home environment, which influences “not just their starting points when they enter school but also their progress through every stage of primary and secondary education”, and thus recommends supporting parents in disadvantaged areas, particularly during children’s early years.



## CHANGES AT NDNA

In recognition of her 20 years as NDNA’s chief executive and services to early years education, Purnima Tanuku was awarded a CBE in the New Year’s Honours List. This news was followed by the announcement that Purnima will be taking up a new role at the organisation as its executive chair – a position that will see her leading NDNA’s strategic work, including managing vital relationships with government ministers and policy work across the UK. Tim McLachlan will take over as chief executive from 31 March, joining NDNA from the Institute of Food Science and Technology and the Natasha Allergy Research Foundation.



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### Fundraising fitness challenge

Try a sponsored star jump or host a sports tournament. You could have a fun run or walk and encourage parents to get involved at home!

### Bake-A-Wish

Whether your bakes are star shaped, or you have star sprinkles, let your imagination run wild! Have a bake sale to raise funds for wishes.

### Wear what you wish

Have a non-uniform day at school and have everyone donate to take part. **Make it fun - why not have a pyjama or themed day!**



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NEIL LEITCH IS CEO OF THE EARLY YEARS ALLIANCE

# “Urgent action is needed on funding”

*National Insurance and wage rises risk capacity fallout if they're left unaddressed, says Neil Leitch...*

It's fair to say that as October's Budget approached, the early years sector held its breath. With nurseries, preschools, and childminders struggling to meet demand for places against a backdrop of severe underfunding and a staffing crisis that was only getting worse, perhaps, this time, providers would finally receive the support they need. After all, it was only a month earlier that the government stressed its steadfast commitment to the early years.

And yet, as the dust settled, it became increasingly clear that this Budget – like so many that had come before – wouldn't make it easier for providers to deliver the early entitlement offers. In fact, it would do the exact opposite, with record minimum and living wage increases announced alongside sharp rises in employer National Insurance contributions.

Of course, it doesn't take an expert in the early years – or economics – to know that these changes would hit setting finances hard. And yet, when we at the Alliance carried out a provider survey on the likely impact of these rises, we were still struck by just how severe the pressure on providers is likely to become. Not only did 95% of respondents warn that if the impact of wages rises and National Insurance changes weren't properly addressed, parent fees would be forced to rise, but two in five said that they would be at risk of permanent closure.

If that wasn't bad enough, half warned that they would have no choice but to reduce early entitlement places (50%), with 40% expecting

to withdraw from some or all of the offers completely. Hardly a mark of confidence for the successful rollout of the expansion.

You would think that in light of these stark warning signs, the government would put in place meaningful measures to – at the very least – limit the impact of these changes. But that couldn't be further from the case.

When local authority early years funding rates were confirmed at the end of last year, the government repeatedly insisted that these rates took into account changes in the national minimum and living wage. And yet, not a word was said about factoring in the impact of National Insurance contribution rises – despite the fact that ministers have confirmed that schools and maintained nurseries will be compensated in full for the changes.

Given that providers have estimated the changes will cost them an additional £18,600 per year on average, it's no exaggeration to say that turning a blind eye to the impact will likely sign the death warrant for countless settings.

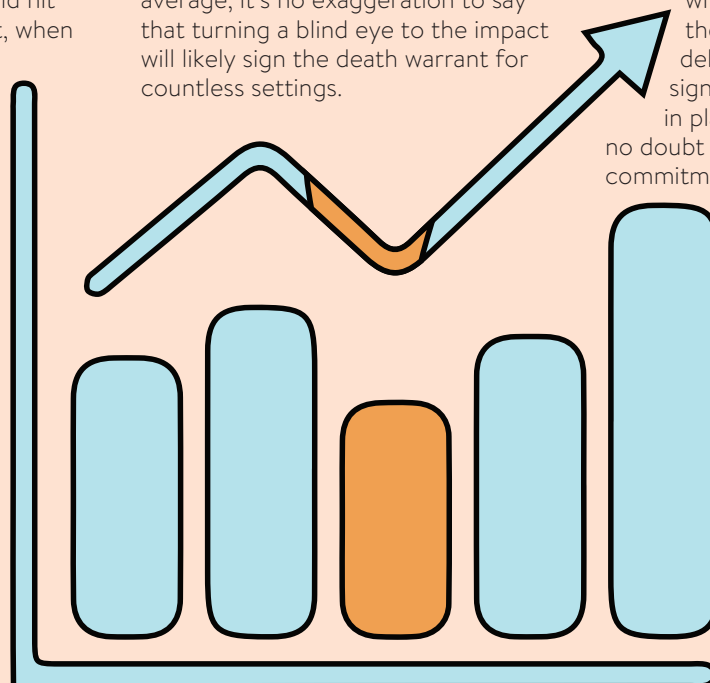
That's why we at the Alliance are clear that urgent action is needed. At the very least, ministers must commit to fully funding the National Insurance changes or exempting the sector from the changes completely. Without this, it simply won't be possible for the government to keep the promise that it has made to parents. And of course, overall sector funding simply must reflect the true cost of delivering high-quality early education, including supporting settings to pay their staff a wage that reflects the value of the vital work they do and, critically, maintain wage differentials between junior and senior staff members.

Ultimately, quality, affordable, and reliable care and early education is a cornerstone of both the economy and wider society, and so the fact that our sector continues to battle against the odds to deliver it is entirely unacceptable.

Simply put, the government cannot expect the sector to deliver the biggest capacity expansion in years

while not only failing to provide the proper infrastructure to deliver it but actually putting significant additional barriers in place. As such, while there's no doubt that the government's commitment to put children – and in turn, the early years – at the heart of their plans is a positive and refreshing step, this must be translated into tangible action if there is any chance that there will be a sector left to make the government's vision a reality.

And at the Alliance, we will do whatever we can to continue to push the government to do just that.



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# “Here’s how to meet 2025’s challenges”

*There are steps we can take to bridge the policy gap and safeguard our staff’s wellbeing...*



I’VE LONG SAID EARLY YEARS IS HIGHLY POLITICAL. The sector’s staff are thrust into a world that requires them to navigate social and political policy issues, then respond to them through their practice. Early years centres on children’s lives, touching on bigger topics such as poverty, housing, education, social justice, war and health. The impact of society’s changes, good and bad, is first seen in the children. However, those of us who work with children know they don’t have time to wait for adults to acknowledge and address the big problems, so we must advocate on their behalf.

What are the major challenges we face? Let’s start with child poverty, which has devastating effects on development and wellbeing. We advocate for policies including initiatives such as social enterprises, family centres, and campaigns to improve early intervention services. Similarly, the child obesity crisis was ignored until it became a full-blown emergency, despite early years staff proactively ensuring nutritious meals, employing skilled chefs, and providing resources for parents.

While the environmental committees focus on net zero goals and carbon footprints, the early years sector has taken the conversation further, working to become sustainability-informed. By integrating sustainable practices, we aim to make better decisions that minimise environmental harm and safeguard the planet for our children’s future.

## **PEDAGOGY AND POLICY**

Pedagogically, we operate within the societal view about the purpose of education. This means knowing how children learn and how we deliver an age-appropriate education, challenging the political concept of school readiness. Childhood is a vital stage of life, deserving recognition as its own unique phase – not merely preparation for the future but a fundamental right of every child. This is why we must remain pedagogically confident, translating learning into child-centred, play-based practices that incorporate the right balance of challenge and differentiation.

In 2025, our new government will implement the childcare expansion policy to children as young as nine months. The talk is of using empty classrooms and allowing


childminders to operate outside the domestic settings to deliver 3,300 nurseries to meet the requirement. Parents are led to believe their fees will be reduced, but that is now in jeopardy following the recent budget, which increased salary costs by an average of 12% overnight. In order to facilitate this expansion, we will need 35,000 new staff in a sector already struggling with recruitment and retention, varied quality of practice and random access to consistent quality of training, service support and public recognition. In the midst of this, Ofsted is being reformed and single-word judgements are to be replaced with report cards.

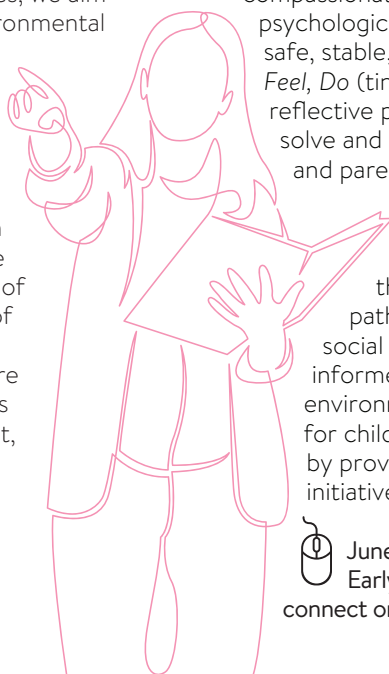
*We must remain pedagogically confident*

## **FINDING SOLUTIONS**

What does this mean for hard-pressed staff trying to manage these competing issues, many of which are out of their control? We’re seeing practitioners signed off by their GPs for “stress”, with no guidance to employers as to what this means or how to support them. In life, we know some worries are unavoidable and that some people cope better than others. So, how do we enhance staff’s resilience to our rapidly evolving educational landscape?

I believe we must do the following: Foster a compassionate environment that encourages psychological wellbeing by building and nurturing safe, stable, harmonious relationships – read *Think, Feel, Do* ([tinyurl.com/TEYtdw](https://tinyurl.com/TEYtdw)). Create an ethos of reflective practice that encourages staff to problem-solve and act with autonomy. Build harmonious team and parental relationships and address behavioural problems quickly (are your policies clear about how you won’t tolerate bad behaviour?). Develop a CPD approach that gives staff equal access to a career pathway. Teach staff about the theories of social and emotional development and trauma-informed practices to create an emotionally literate environment that promotes consistency in care for children and staff. And, finally, look after staff by providing them with health benefits, wellbeing initiatives and opportunities.

 June O’Sullivan OBE is the CEO of the London Early Years Foundation. Visit [juneosullivan.com](https://juneosullivan.com) or connect on X @JuneOSullivan



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# Schools



**NIKKY SMEDLEY IS A WRITER, EDUCATOR AND PASSIONATE ADVOCATE FOR THE CHILD**

## HOW TO SPEAK CHILD

# Manage expectation

### WHAT MAKES YOU FEEL SAD IN SCHOOL?

*“When I can’t do it.”* W (Male)

It’s a wonderful thing when a child exceeds your expectations, isn’t it? When they manage to do something that they have hitherto struggled with, it’s a joy to behold. I always expect a great deal of children, yet they can still surprise me with what they are capable of achieving. I’m sure you’re aware of all the research showing that “level of expectation” and “level of performance” are directly linked (Carol Dweck et al.), so it seems like the right thing to do – to communicate to our children that we expect great things from them. But what about individuals like poor W? If he feels that he is repeatedly failing to live up to expectations, he’s in danger of coming to believe that he is “someone who can’t” and his expectations for himself are negatively reinforced. So, what can we do to prevent this from happening?

### Children develop their skill sets at different speeds

Spreading the expectation over a broad spectrum of challenges is one way to offset a habitually negative self-image. There are certain areas of classroom life where expectations need to be high across the board – rule-following, manners, considerate behaviour and so on – but beyond that, it’s worth focusing on different specialisms in order to draw the best out of as many children as possible. It’s not always a matter of capability – it can be something as simple as timing. Different children develop different skill sets at different speeds; we know this to be true, yet very often we are asked to measure achievement against an inflexible set of markers that does not take this into account. If we can apply some creativity



to our classroom projects, it’s possible that we may uncover hidden talents or, at the very least, give children the opportunity to shine in unexpected areas.

Drawing on the Olympic Games for inspiration, I worked with an infant school on a project we called “The Learning Olympics”. Our aim was to give the children as much autonomy as possible – supporting them closely as they invented a range of events, figured out how to score them, and made medals for the winners, working towards a single day of activities. Our expectations were high, and they didn’t disappoint. The Storytelling event was, for me, the highlight of the day. Very few children had indicated that they wanted to take part, but when the time came, they dutifully got up in front of the class and told the stories they had prepared. Then magic happened.

Everyone listened intently, applauded each competitor rapturously, and gave generously high scores. After the storytellers had all finished, the teacher speculatively asked if anyone else would like to have a go. We were astonished, not only that so many leapt on the opportunity, but that it was the children we least expected to expose themselves who wanted to get up in front of everyone and tell stories they made up on the spot.

It was a beautiful thing, but tricky to unpick. The learning I took away from this project and into my general practice was that it’s not just the expectations of grown-ups that are important to children: the expectations of their peers can be equally as impactful.

Children’s ideas about themselves – their identity – is formed in response to the views of others. If you can create an environment of mutual support within your classroom, the shared norm of high expectation can be achieved without creating counterproductive pressure, giving the opportunity for each child to bloom according to his or her proclivities and capabilities.

**Nikky’s book *Create, Perform, Teach!* (Jessica Kingsley Publishers, £15.99) is available now on Amazon.**

### LEARN MORE

**Nikky heads up the How to Speak Child initiative and has been collecting interviews with children about how adults communicate with them. To find out more, you can...**



Head to the [How to Speak Child blog](http://HowtoSpeakChild.com/blog), at <http://HowtoSpeakChild.com/blog>



Join her [Facebook page](https://www.facebook.com/HowtoSpeakChild) at [facebook.com/HowtoSpeakChild](https://www.facebook.com/HowtoSpeakChild)



**KATIE GALLAGHER IS MANAGER AT MUNCHKINS DUNTON PARK**

# “Munchkins is like a second family”

*From a focus on pedagogy and the needs of parents to exceptional CPD, manager **Katie Gallagher** explains what makes her Outstanding nursery and its sister settings tick...*

know that many, if not most, nurseries pride themselves on a “family feel”, but for me and my staff, not to mention the children we look after, Munchkins really is like a second family. Perhaps a lot of that comes from the fact that

Munchkins as a business was actually set up by two sisters – Jo Callaghan and Liz Makin. With seven children between them, not to mention decades of experience as an early years practitioner and a primary school Reception teacher respectively, they were able to feed their deep understanding of both parental priorities and pedagogical strategies into the design and development of each of the six Munchkins settings they own today, whether nestled by the woods in Wivenhoe, near the seashore at Brightlingsea, or at the heart of the Dunton Fields estate in Laindon, where the nursery it’s my privilege to manage is located.



demographic it serves. At Dunton Park, we are based in a very residential area, so being a part of the community is very important to us. We understand the challenges of working with a young family, and we are here to support parents and carers as much as their children through those important transitions of starting nursery, moving rooms and preparing for school. From that very first inquiry to the moment we open our doors for the showaround visit, we are building a relationship. We pride ourselves on transparent communication; we have a genuine interest in our Munchkins’ lives, and we want to get to know every family as a unit. We have a parent portal on our website, which is an exclusive area where they have access to over 50 business discounts and offers, plus lots of free guides, tips and tricks and information – and on top of this, we work to make sure our families feel comfortable calling up whenever they have a question or if they just want to check in.

I love the fact that our setting was built from scratch with the explicit purpose of supporting early childhood education, so everything is laid out exactly as you’d want it to be. As you sign in from the door, you walk into our reception area, with the office directly opposite. Every entry and exit of the nursery is secure, of course, and there is CCTV throughout the inside and outside of the setting. Once you are all signed in, there are two more doors that are locked with a keypad, leading into a wide hallway, with every room clearly labelled: “The Nest”, “The Burrows” and “The Den”. Like all the Munchkins Nurseries, we follow a forest school learning approach – and because every room has direct access to the outdoor areas, we are able to have full free flow at all times.

## **BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS**

Each Munchkins setting has a different personality, depending on its management team as well as the

## MEET THE SLT



**Jo Callaghan & Liz Makin – Munchkins owners**



**Linsie Dare – Director**



**Libby Houston – Operations manager**



**Sarah Richmond – Area manager**



### CHILD-LED LEARNING

We follow our own curriculum, with the needs of our children at the heart of everything we do. For example, we use ITMP, which is short for “In the Moment Planning”. This means we follow what the children’s interests are, extend them, offer teachable moments and extend further – continuing until our Munchkins are interested in something else or, as we say, “find a new spark”. In our forest school context, this might look like mud painting, firepit snacks or perhaps even branch whittling, using real, age-appropriate tools; led by their own interests, the children are able to take calculated risks in a completely safe and supervised environment.

To ensure our Munchkins with additional needs thrive alongside their peers, we have Layla, our wonderful area SENDCo, who is there to support each setting’s own SENDCo. As a SEND parent herself who has worked in the sector for many years, Layla has boundless personal and professional experience and uses this to make sure that children who need enhanced support are actively receiving it in a way that best suits the little one in question.

### SUPPORT FOR ALL STAFF

Munchkins is a wonderful company to work for as an early years professional. The senior management team all care deeply about everyone’s interests and goals, and are always ready to support individual staff members as well as the teams in each setting. The CPD on offer is exceptional – Linsie, our director, and Libby, our operations manager, have designed a programme



*The senior management team all care deeply about everyone’s interests and goals*

of induction training which covers the Munchkins ethos, expectations of the team, the curriculum, and basic training and incorporates the full range of learning styles, to make sure it’s accessible for everyone. And the support doesn’t stop there – the door to the SLT is always open, and everyone makes full use of that.

All of the Munchkins settings are special, but I must admit to being particularly proud of Dunton Park. Towards the end of November 2024, we were inspected by Ofsted for the first time and were graded Outstanding in all areas – a massive achievement for the whole team. I was so pleased to see everyone’s hard work and dedication recognised, and to give the Munchkins family something else to celebrate!

### BREAKING BARRIERS: SIGNING AS STANDARD

During the Covid-19 pandemic, when our nurseries were forced to close for three months, all Munchkins staff used the time to qualify in Makaton, which we began implementing across all our settings as soon as our doors opened again. We expected a surge in speech and language delays and wanted to be ready to support children and their families through this as best we could.

Makaton doesn’t replace language; it enhances vocabulary and tunes in to different learning styles by creating that visual element, which most children benefit from. For some youngsters, it is their sole or main form of communication, but by ensuring it is used daily across all our settings, we ensure that there are no communication barriers for anyone. Children who mainly use Makaton are not limited or restricted in terms of whom they can sign with, because we all understand. In this way, the introduction of Makaton has supported us in creating an environment full of equal opportunities.



KAYTE COOLING-SMITH IS A MULTI-AWARD-WINNING CHILDMINDER BASED IN ESSEX

# Why Ofsted loved my slow pedagogy

*We often talk about children leading their play, but what if we also have the confidence to let them lead inspection? asks Kayte Cooling-Smith...*

For many of us, the early years is more than just a nine-to-five job; the dedication and commitment that we have is deeply rooted. It is justified, then, that we have feelings of trepidation in confidently managing inspections when half a decade of hard work is judged on a snapshot taken over just one or two days.

For those of us who have a more relaxed, unhurried approach, we can also be left pondering how to cram in everything inspectors want to see effectively while staying true to our slow, child-led practice.

Despite my advice to others about being confident in our approach, even I admit to having had a wobble in the days preceding Ofsted's arrival. I considered adding in some concrete planning and adult-led activities to ensure that I covered everything, and was worried they would expect something more structured and traditional. But then I reminded myself that Ofsted want to know what it's like to be a child in the setting, and I felt that if I could evidence the impact and outcomes, and could confidently explain my approach, then I would trust my children to lead, just as I would on a typical day.

I needn't have worried; the inspector loved this slow, child-directed approach.

## **A hands-off approach**

*"Children's imagination is captured, and they show sustained concentration. Even the very young have a thirst for learning."*

Having a predominantly "in-the-moment" approach, for me, requires a carefully considered balance. It's about enabling children to be the pioneers steering their ship while I tag along for the ride, helping them to navigate the big, open waters with some careful guidance and sustained shared thinking.

Here, our environment always functions as the third teacher. Providing an enriching, dynamic space and having no set expectations of its use means that our days are curated based on where the children's interests take them right then and there. I subsequently pull in other resources and scaffold learning if and when the moment arises.

*Our environment  
always functions as  
the third teacher*

I was open about this with the inspector from the start, explaining that I wouldn't be providing an adult-led activity, and that I would step back from children if they were busy and engaged, mindful not to interrupt their concentration. I wanted her to know that this was strategic on my part. The inspector was really positive about this hands-off approach, and it meant that I didn't feel under pressure to "perform" just because she was there. In moments where I felt she might have expected me to step in, I quietly explained to her what the child was

learning, what I was noticing about them, how it related to their next steps, and how I would extend when the opportunity was right.

## **Learning without limits**

*"A holistic and ambitious curriculum"*

The most wonderful aspect of a slow, child-led approach is that there are no boundaries to learning. Children's interests, imagination, and ideas throw out infinite possibilities when we let them lead, and this was true during inspection.

We spent most of our time under the apple tree exploring a huge block of clay, water, fresh herbs, teabags, and an array of authentic tools. Alongside this I had laid out our usual creative areas, including watercolours, chalks, pens, pencils and scissors, plus our cosy little reading nook amidst the jasmine.

The children demonstrated how they confidently lead their play, busying themselves while we talked about our nature-based curriculum and how following the rhythms of the seasons and utilising nature's loose parts supports every area of learning. The inspector loved this stripped-back, natural approach and commented on how contented and engaged the children were. Eventually they invited both of us into their group play, where we explored the concoctions they were making and investigated the volume and weight of the clay together.

Throughout the day, they transitioned from one thing to another,





and we either joined them when invited or observed from the sidelines when they were busy. By simply going about their normal play, the children showed the inspector not only what they learn, but also how, which was incredibly powerful.

#### Time to talk

*“Children excel in their speech and language development, and literacy is embedded in the curriculum.”*

I’ve talked before about how slowing things down creates more space for rich, meaningful conversation, and again this was true on inspection day as the children chatted away to each other, to myself, and to the inspector, demonstrating their expansive vocabulary and understanding.

Written language also features heavily in our everyday experiences, and I place books and dedicated reading areas strategically throughout the setting or bring them along when we’re out and about. The inspector was delighted to see even my youngest children taking themselves off to sit with a book or bringing one over for us to read.

I believe that spontaneity is the key to capturing children’s interests, and by stripping back our scheduling, we have opened up many more opportunities to relax with a story as and when the moment takes us.

#### Everyday adventures

*“The natural world and community have a strong influence in the curriculum.”*



One of my biggest concerns was that most of our time is spent out away from the setting, whiling away the hours in the countryside, visiting our vibrant village, and connecting with the huge array of people in our local community – obviously something we wouldn’t be able to do on inspection day.

However, we were able to talk about this thoroughly, and although she didn’t experience it first-hand, the inspector spent a lot of time on the floor with the children, asking them questions and listening to them chatting enthusiastically about everything we get up to while showing her examples in our photo album.

My focus is always on active learning, and our play spaces are filled with natural treasures that we bring home from our daily adventures. Luckily for us, the pupa that we had brought in from the garden chose inspection day to emerge as a beautiful ladybird, with the children able to excitedly show the inspector their knowledge of life cycles and their fascination with minibeasts.

#### Making it look easy

*“There is an exceptionally calm, happy, respectful and reassuring atmosphere.”*

Because I was able to relax into the inspection by staying true to our comfortable, unhurried ethos, it made space and time for my children to naturally demonstrate their knowledge, skills and creativity as they normally would. They were calm and confident because I hadn’t thrown them a curveball by making any inauthentic changes, and they made wonderful connections with the inspector, inviting her to be part of their journey, sharing their understanding and ideas with her first-hand.

Towards the end, she commented that it all looked so easy. I admitted that by shaking off the urge to cram in activity after activity, I have certainly taken a huge amount of pressure off myself, but that really is the magic of a slow pedagogy – when we allow children the time and space to be curious, the learning opportunities present themselves almost effortlessly.

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# How to foster a love of reading

Supporting early learners to develop a positive relationship with books can boost language, literacy, empathy and wellbeing, says **Abi Ellis**...

It's essential that children develop a connection to books and stories in the early years. Here are some ideas that can have a big impact on the reading culture in your setting...

## Be their role model

One of the most impactful ways to spark children's interest in books and stories is to demonstrate your own love of them, showing your enjoyment in looking at books together and sharing your enthusiasm through your tone, body language and expression.

## Read aloud every day

Ensure story time is a planned, prioritised and valued time of the day. All children should have the opportunity to hear stories read aloud, exposing them to engaging, challenging texts and new vocabulary.

## Surround them with books

Ensure there are numerous daily opportunities for children to choose to look at books independently, both with their peers and familiar adults, one-to-one and in small groups. Children should be surrounded by books to support and inspire play as well as in inviting cosy spaces.

## Talk and listen

Sharing books provides opportunities for powerful serve-and-return interactions. Respond to baby's touch, gesture, and gaze towards the pages of a book, and encourage older children to comment on and question what they see and hear. Invite them to consider characters' feelings and use their imaginations to anticipate what might happen next. Model "book talk" (*page, author, beginning*) to provide children with the necessary vocabulary to talk about books.

## Explore diverse stories

Our research ([tinyurl.com/](https://tinyurl.com/TEYnltrd)

TEYnltrd) shows that when readers see themselves, their families and their communities represented in books, they are more likely to enjoy reading. Books also support the introduction of less familiar people, families, communities and environments, broadening children's knowledge, understanding and empathy.

## Share a range of texts

Providing children with a range of high-quality reading materials gives them the opportunity to discover what they enjoy and develop an understanding of print as a form of communication. For example, use non-fiction texts to

answer questions, retrieve information, follow instructions, and create and use signs and messages.

## Use repetition

Repeated reading of stories supports children to consolidate their understanding, enabling them to connect with the story, learn new vocabulary and anticipate what's coming next. It also builds their confidence to become actively involved in storytelling, at story time and within their play.

## Boost engagement

Immersing children in stories enables them to use their imaginations, build relationships with characters, and understand the plot and its meaning. Extend opportunities for children to engage with stories within their play through the provision of open-ended resources alongside props to support storytelling. Be creative in your approach; for example, observe real caterpillars after reading *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*, or create a new story that reflects the plot or rhyme of a favourite.

## Work with families

Sharing your knowledge about early reading and the importance of developing a love of books at home with the families of the children you care for is essential. Building families' confidence and knowledge of how they can support their child's relationship with books will have a significant impact. As with the children, your enthusiasm for books will be contagious in demonstrating to parents the impact they can have.

Access NLT's free practitioner resource *Supporting reading in the early years* at [tinyurl.com/TEYnltrd](https://tinyurl.com/TEYnltrd)

*Be creative in your approach to building connections with stories*





**BETH DOWNIE IS A REGISTERED NUTRITIONIST**

# *Is snacking a problem?*

*Growing children need plenty of energy, but it's important that they get it from the right places, says **Beth Downie**...*



ver the past few decades, snacking has become an increasingly common part of children's daily routines.

But this raises an important question: is it driven by genuine physiological need, or is it simply a matter of habit and desire?

Many parents and caregivers worry about their children's snacking habits – and it's easy to see why. In the UK, many school-aged children are consuming up to four high-sugar snacks each day! This is partly due to the vast array of snack foods and convenience items marketed to children and their parents, starting as early as the weaning stage.

## **DO CHILDREN NEED SNACKS?**

Is there a role for snacks in a healthy, balanced diet? Research suggests that, yes, healthy snacks can play an important role in maintaining a balanced diet. Children, especially during periods of rapid growth, need to eat little and often to meet their high energy demands and nutrient requirements. Since children have smaller stomachs than adults, they can't consume large portions in a single mealtime. When spaced appropriately, they may benefit from a healthy snack to contribute essential energy and nutrients to the diet and help to bridge any gaps of longer than three hours between meals.

## **THE ISSUES**

The key to whether snacking is beneficial or detrimental depends

on the type of snacks provided and portion sizes. High-energy, sugary snacks may provide a quick burst of energy, but they can leave children feeling hungry again soon after. This leads to frequent snacking and grazing between meals, which can reduce their appetite at mealtimes.

In fact, research in the UK reveals that children are consuming more than double the maximum recommended amount of sugar each day, with half of that sugar coming from unhealthy snacks and drinks. Over time, excessive sugar intake can lead to serious health concerns such as obesity and Type 2 diabetes. Encouraging children to choose healthier snacks is crucial for their long-term health, and early childhood settings offer an important opportunity to promote healthier habits at an early age.

## Encouraging children to choose healthier snacks is crucial for their long-term health

### ADVICE FOR EARLY YEARS SETTINGS

The Eat Better, Start Better guidance provides practical recommendations for early years providers to support healthy eating habits among young children. Developed to meet the EYFS welfare requirements, this guidance aligns with the UK government's dietary recommendations for children aged six months to five years. It sets out food and drink guidelines that help ensure children receive the right balance of nutrients, including protein, fats, vitamins, and minerals.

The guidance suggests that energy requirements should be divided across meals and snacks throughout the day. The following breakdown shows the proportions of which snacks should contribute to a child's daily energy intake:

- Breakfast: 20%
- Mid-morning snack: 10%
- Lunch: 30%
- Mid-afternoon snack: 10%
- Tea: 20%

The remaining 10% of a child's energy intake can come from snacks or drinks at home. Sharing menus with parents

can help families balance meals and snacks provided at home with those provided in early years settings.

### CHOOSING HEALTHIER SNACKS

When planning snacks, the Eatwell Guide is a helpful tool, just as it is for planning main meals. Variety is a key principle of healthy eating, and by incorporating foods from the four main food groups (starchy foods, fruit and vegetables, dairy, and protein) into snacks, we can provide children with the essential nutrients they need.

Here are some healthy snack recommendations from each food group:

#### Starchy carbohydrates

- Offer starchy snacks like breads, crackers, breadsticks, or rice cakes at least once a day.
- Provide at least three different varieties of starchy foods each week.
- Choose bread products with lower salt content (look for the green "low" or amber "medium" labels).

#### Fruit and vegetables

- Provide fruit or vegetables as part of some snacks.
- Aim for a variety of colours and types – fresh, frozen, or canned.
- Dried fruit is best served at mealtimes, as it can stick to teeth and contribute to tooth decay.

#### Dairy and alternatives

- Aim for three portions of milk or dairy each day: one can be included as a snack.

#### Protein-rich foods (e.g. beans, pulses, fish, eggs, meat)

- These are important sources of iron and zinc and can be included in snacks once or twice a week.

#### Avoid sweet treats like cakes, biscuits, and confectionery

- Keep sugary snacks to a minimum between meals.

#### Drinks

- Offer water or milk as a drink at snack time to help keep children hydrated without adding extra sugar.

#### Healthy snack examples:

- Dips with pitta strips, breadsticks, and vegetable sticks
- Slices of melon or tinned pineapple rings

- Cheese, apple slices, and wholegrain crackers
- Half a bagel or a slice of toast with low-fat soft cheese
- Plain rice cakes topped with hummus

For further guidance on healthy eating and snacks in early years settings, visit the Foundation Years website ([foundationyears.org.uk](http://foundationyears.org.uk)) for the Eat Better, Start Better resources and materials.

**Beth has experience across the food industry, as well as in public health and community nutrition and wellbeing, and is a consultant nutritionist to Purely Nutrition and the PhunkyFoods programme. Visit [purelynutrition.com](http://purelynutrition.com)**

## FIVE WAYS TO GET SNACKS RIGHT!

**1** Make sure the snacks you offer are timed appropriately – not too close to mealtimes.

**2** Pay attention to portion sizes – snacks should satisfy hunger between meals, but not replace the appetite for dinner.

**3** Homemade snacks are often healthier and more cost-effective than pre-packaged options. They can also help keep children fuller for longer, reducing the likelihood of continuous grazing.

**4** Involving kids in preparing snacks can also be a great way to teach them food preparation skills.

**5** When choosing packaged snacks, check the traffic light labelling and opt for those with mostly green or amber labels (indicating lower levels of sugar, salt, and fat). Aim for snacks under 100 calories per serving, and limit packaged snacks to no more than two per day.

**Are you looking for outdoor or nature-based provision for your setting?**



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# Let's get kids moving more!

Use dance to fire the imagination of every child with these ideas from Naomi Wilkinson and Nigel Clarke...

Many of us feel self-conscious about dancing, using phrases like “two left feet” to describe ourselves. This lack of personal confidence can make us apprehensive about teaching dance to children. The good news is that teaching dance in the early years isn't about complicated choreographed moves. Young children express themselves through movement constantly. Our approach to dance is centred around using different stimuli to help children develop their movement.

## FORGET FANCY FOOTWORK

Focus on imaginative movement ideas, rather than teaching a specific style of dance, with young children. Creating an imaginary environment, such as the ocean, provides ideas for children and lots of jumping-off points for movement. How do we move through water? What happens to our movements if the conditions underwater change? How can we move like a tiny, darting fish or a huge whale?

This has been the inspiration for *Let's Move*, which comprises four 20-minute films themed around topics like space or the ocean. Created with our dance education consultant and expert teacher, Kristina Scott, each film starts with a fun warm-up using aspects of the movements that we return to later on. Throughout, we encourage freedom of expression rather than specific dance steps, and each film finishes with a cool down for the children before the rest of their day.



## TOP TIPS



**Fun first:** Build children's confidence, enjoyment and engagement. Dance in the early years is not about teaching steps. Choose a theme and some music and explore movement ideas together.



**Basic skills:** You don't have to be a dancer to teach dance!

It's about showing children fundamental movement skills without inhibitions.



**Inclusion:** Use learner-centred approaches promoting universal, diverse values, and enabling *all* children to feel successful. Be aware of stereotypes and always use language and examples that avoid them.

## EXPRESS YOURSELF

Remembering there is no “right” or “wrong” dance is incredibly freeing for both educators and children. Dance is about different ways of moving. It's about expressing yourself, joy and having fun. You have two left feet? Great, let's do the “two left feet” dance. There is no wrong movement. Dance is about encouraging children's expressive movement and valuing their interpretations as unique and important.

Think about presenting ideas that each child is encouraged to interpret in their own way. We are fans of paired or group work, so, if someone is struggling, their friend or the rest of the group can step in to help.

## BE HAPPY

Most of us know that having a good boogie is a great way to feel better (even a kitchen disco!); you're using your body to express yourself, using every drop of energy you can muster. Dance is transformative. It can give children a chance to step away from any day-to-day worries and create a space that makes them feel alive, free and happy.

The music you select is also important for helping children to feel positive and to spark their imaginations. Experiment with lots of varieties, whether it's Beyonce, Queen or Johann Strauss!

Create a safe space for children where they can perform to their peers but without the pressure of performances in front of their families. A positive and inclusive approach to dance in the early years can inspire children to explore movement creatively, fostering a lasting appreciation for self-expression and physical activity.

Naomi Wilkinson and Nigel Clarke feature in the new BBC Teach resources *Let's Move with Naomi and Nigel!*, which can be accessed at [bit.ly/4gcSDQW](http://bit.ly/4gcSDQW)



# “Observations are evolving”

*Recording children’s development is an essential part of any early years setting’s role, but the approach to doing so continues to change, as **Dr Helen Edwards** explains...*

It seems that group observations are on the up. A quarter of early years educators reported that they had increased the number they were carrying out at their setting – just one of a number of trends highlighted in the Tapestry survey.

This is good news. Group observations are a great way of demonstrating curriculum coverage and a reminder of the activities with which children engage. They provide a record of what has worked well, inform future planning, and provide inspiration. They offer different insights to individual observations, demonstrating the breadth and depth of the learning experiences that you provide for children as well as how your provision is working.

However, group observations, whether they’re in a floor book or a digital learning journal, don’t demonstrate the learning of individual children very well. At parents’ evenings, flicking through a floor book containing observations of multiple children isn’t an efficient method of sharing a particular child’s learning and development. For this, we still need individual observations, sensitively created in the minimum amount of time.

## INDIVIDUAL OBSERVATIONS

A fifth of educators reported that the number of individual observations they undertook had decreased in the past year, and a quarter reported that the number of written observations had also decreased. The revised EYFS (2021) may well have led to this drop.

We don’t want to return to the stressful practices of multiple observations per child and lots of time away from children, but observations

are an essential part of an early years educator’s role. You cannot do your job effectively without them!

So how can we find the right balance? I think it’s about being realistic about what we can retain in our heads, as Dr Julian Grenier explains: “When we are noticing what children can and cannot do, and they are changing rapidly, we have to jot down notes. It will not be possible to remember all this information at the end of a busy day.”

Whether we make a quick written note or capture a short video, individual observations provide the means to remember this important information.

*A fifth of educators reported that the number of individual observations they undertook had decreased in the past year*

## PARENT AND CARER OBSERVATIONS

Another trend we’ve noticed is the growing emphasis educators are placing on sharing observations with families. Our survey found that 91% of educators use observations in this way. Educators also reported that a similar proportion of parents and carers shared their own observations of their child through the online platform.

This involvement is an encouraging trend. Recent research from Kate Cowan and Rosie Flewitt for the

Froebel Trust ([tinyurl.com/TEYtpobsv](https://tinyurl.com/TEYtpobsv)) looked at the power of parent and carer observations in the early years. They found that many parents underestimated the importance of sharing their knowledge about their child with educators. The research also identified that parents and carers enjoyed the insights their children’s learning journals gave in terms of their child’s development, and that they often “bridged the gap” between home and setting. Families



valued a child's journal as a future keepsake of their early years.

### CAPTURED ON CAMERA

The growing popularity of using photos and video doesn't look like it's diminishing: 21% of educators reported increasing their use of video in observations, and 25% had increased their use of photography. Similarly, they reported that along with creating their own observations, families added photos and videos. Information from families about a child's activities and experiences outside of the setting really helps educators to know the child's interests well and to plan for their future learning.

### AI AND OBSERVATIONS

Many commentators have discussed how artificial intelligence can support the early years. As far as writing observations are concerned, we need

to reflect on what we want from new technology, particularly as we want to ensure that the early years workforce is one of qualified and highly skilled individuals. Undertaking an observation is a human-specialist activity that early years educators are skilled in, requiring an ability to note tiny changes and an understanding of the nuances of a child's communication skills. AI can't replace this professional judgement, but it can be a tool to support us, and I'm sure over the next few years we will see some very innovative uses of such technology in the education sector.

### EVOLVING BUT REMAINING

I'm a huge advocate for observations, as I think most early years educators are. And as Dr Stella Louis, an early years consultant, trainer and author, states: "We can only develop observation practice if we cultivate the central place given to observing children, building it into initial and continuing professional training and qualifications, and if we proactively encourage educators to think about what they see and to act on their observations."

The welcomed changes to the EYFS framework and requirements for assessment have seen many pause for thought, and I think it's one of the reasons why we're seeing a greater variety of observations. The involvement of families is exciting, and I wonder whether it would have developed so much if we'd not all experienced a pandemic during which online communication was our main way to stay in touch.

The statutory summative assessments (progress check at age two and the EYFSP) can only be effective if we can reflect on the formative assessments we've completed throughout a child's time with us. To do this, we need to have captured the evidence; some can be in our heads but not all of it.

Observations also play a key role in staff discussions that help us to moderate decisions about each child's learning. Without observations, it's hard to imagine how these kinds of discussions could be conducted.

Understanding a child's next steps in their development and learning is central to our role as educators. Creating the right opportunities and

learning environment in which they can thrive requires our experience, expertise and our professional judgement. The ongoing evolution of observations is really positive, but equally, the ongoing *use of observation* is essential.

Read about the Tapestry survey findings in full at [bit.ly/3B6IXaC](https://bit.ly/3B6IXaC)

## THINGS TO CONSIDER

**Reflect on group observations in your own practice and as a team.** Do you use them to keep families up to date with collective learning experiences? Do they inform your curriculum? What is the balance between group and individual observations?

**Support your provision and professional learning with video observations.** Use them as discussion opportunities around child development and how children make use of the learning environment or to nurture less experienced team members as they notice good practice in colleagues.

**Consider why you are making an observation.** Is it to inform future provision? To remember an important milestone? To celebrate and share with a child's family? An observation is only necessary if it will have a direct, positive impact on the child.

**Use video observations as a way of sharing ideas for learning at home.** For example, educators at Wentworth Nursery School encourage parental engagement by sending parents video clips of learning happening in the setting that they could also be doing at home.





EMMA SPIERS IS AN EARLY EDUCATION CONSULTANT AND AUTHOR

# Learning to The beat!

*Every setting should provide children with opportunities to engage in rhythmic play, says Emma Spiers...*

Rhythmic play has long been an essential ingredient of early learning, but I hadn't always understood its importance until I met Patience. This super-enthusiastic three-year-old with a love of music and an amazing sense of rhythm reminded me of the rhythmic play I loved as a child and of its potential to unlock learning across so many areas of development, too.

## WHAT IS RHYTHMIC PLAY?

Rhythmic play involves hearing patterns of sounds. Initially, these can be musical, for example, joining in with clapping a steady beat or moving to the rhythm of music. However, playing with rhythm can also relate to the patterns of sounds in words. Joining in with catchy stories and rhymes with repeatable phrases like *We're Going On A Bear Hunt* by Michael Rosen and Helen Oxenbury, or *Brown, Bear, Brown Bear, What Do You See* by Bill Martin Jr and Eric Carle, are great examples.

Rhythmic games can also involve sequencing clapping patterns, copying and repeating patterns with instruments, or joining in with interactive songs with repetitive actions.

## BUILDING STRONG BRAINS

Human brains are hardwired to seek out patterns to make sense of the world, categorising and organising memories effectively in the brain for rapid recall. Most rhythmic activities are intentionally repetitive, so these have amazing memory-building potential.

Teaching early years children to

remember is vital for learning overall, and memory is a muscle that needs exercise to work well. The patterned and repetitive nature of rhythmic stories, songs, and games makes these a powerful workout for the brain!

Patience had a brilliant memory for a three-year-old. She picked things up very quickly, matching, copying, and repeating anything she heard with ease. Her brain was getting the regular exercise it needed through the joy of playing with patterns in sound and words.

*Memory is a muscle that needs exercise to work well*

## LANGUAGE AND LITERACY

Rhythmic stories, songs, and games are popular with preschoolers, who are eager to explore patterns in language. Their vocabularies are growing speedily, expanding by up to eight new words every day. Hearing patterns in words and sounds helps two- and three-year-olds remember new words, so rhythmic play is language development rocket fuel!

As vocabulary expands, three- and four-year-olds are increasingly ready to move beyond using words simply for communication. At this stage, playing around with rhythm in words is the first building block towards being "reading ready". It helps preschoolers hear "chunks" of spoken sounds in words, without the added complication of letters. This is the beginning of

an important process known as phonological awareness.

## PLAYING WITH SYLLABLES

Rhythm in stories, songs, and rhymes is created by syllables. These sound like the "beats" in words. Syllables are created by vowel sounds: a, e, i, o, u. All words have at least one syllable or beat. The vowels are dominant sounds that create the "heartbeat" of words.

Everyday words always include at least one vowel, which means they all have syllables. This makes it easy to use toys and objects from around the setting for instant rhythmic play.

Patience loved to play a simple treasure hunt game. I provided a clapping clue (one clap, two claps, three claps or four claps); these corresponded to the number of syllables in familiar objects. Patience would hunt for an object with the corresponding number of claps, such as:

**Car** – one syllable, one clap

**Du-plo** – two syllables, two claps

**Di-no-saur** – three syllables, three claps

**Wa-ter-ing can** – four claps

Patience couldn't get enough of this game. It was a challenge thinking of words with more syllables for her to find!

## STRUGGLING WITH SYLLABLES?

Patience is not typical of all children. Children with limited rhythmic play experience often have trouble remembering spoken instructions or blending sounds together when they start reading. This is because their

mental models of patterned language have not been developed enough through repeated, playful language practice.

Playful rhythmic games, stories, and songs can be a way of capturing the interest of more reluctant readers, too. I've consistently observed a strong link between those who experience success with early reading and the repetitive language and literacy experiences they've engaged with before school.

### **BUILDING A SENSE OF RHYTHM**

Rhythmic play begins with babies! Clapping along to the beat of any song, any time, anywhere, is super easy and costs nothing. All rhythmic activities build on clapping or stamping a steady beat, so setting a strong foundation like this is key.

Children are ready to move on to building simple rhythms when they are around three years old. Some indicators for rhythm readiness include:

- Using words for everyday objects, people, or actions
- Saying two-, three- or four-word sentences
- Matching everyday sounds to animals and objects
- Making sounds matched to animals or objects
- Clapping a steady beat to music
- Listening and joining in with simple stories and songs

### **RHYTHMIC PLAY IDEAS**

Here are some instant rhythmic play ideas that were a big hit with Patience and her friends. The children loved these games because they were simple and repetitive. They were highly engaged and picked up an awareness of the patterns in language fast!

#### **Follow-the-leader to music**

– using rhythmic sequences of movements including stamping, waving, jumping or clapping.

**Tapping names** – using a drum to tap the “beats” or syllables matched to the children. We used this at circle time or as part of daily routines.

## **FIVE TIPS FOR RHYTHMIC PLAY**

- 1** Introduce rhythm by clapping a steady beat with babies.
- 2** Regularly move rhythmically to music with two- and three-year-olds.
- 3** Read simple books with patterned language and repeated phrases.
- 4** Use children’s names and everyday objects to introduce “beats” in words.
- 5** Play clapping games and learn patterned rhymes off by heart.

**Copying clapping patterns** – using toys to create simple sequences to clap along to. For example, *car, trac-tor, car, trac-tor* or *digg-er, digg-er, am-bu-lance, digg-er, digg-er, am-bu-lance*.

### **KEY MILESTONES**

As children engage in rhythmic play activities, they become more “tuned in” to the patterns of language. You will see them grow in confidence, developing their own rhythmic patterns as they play. Like all aspects of child development, hearing, copying, repeating, and making rhythmic patterns develops step by step over time. Look out for whether the children can...

**Step 1:** Join in with clapping, stamping, or tapping a steady beat as they join in with rhythmic stories, rhymes or songs.

**Step 2:** Repeat and continue a rhythmic pattern by clapping or using an instrument.

**Step 3:** Clap the “beats” in their own names and familiar words.

### **THE IMPACT**

Patience was a great illustration of how rhythmic play builds memory, vocabulary, and an early awareness of syllables as “chunks” of sound. These were all areas where she made huge progress developmentally, which meant that she was “school ready” when the time came for her to move on.





**TIM RICHARDS IS DEPUTY HEADTEACHER AT BURNHAM-ON-SEA INFANT SCHOOL**

# Make the most of movement

*Physical activity has the power to support positive learning experiences across the EYFS, as **Tim Richards and John Parsons** explain...*

**P**hysical development in early years is much more than just getting children active. It can lay the foundation for a lifetime of joyful, confident movement. Young children naturally love to move, and with thought and planning, we can also use physical activity as a vehicle for developing all other Prime and Specific areas of learning. Here are seven things to try in your setting...

## 1 Create an inclusive movement environment

Design your space and activities to accommodate different ability levels, ensuring every child can participate successfully. Consider using visual cues, adaptable equipment and flexible challenge levels to suit all children, including those with additional needs.

## 2 Weave movement into storytelling

Transform physical activities into adventures by incorporating storytelling elements. To make movement meaningful and memorable, rather than working on balance, children become explorers on a pirate ship; instead of practising footwork and spatial awareness, they pretend to go for a ride on their bikes. This approach aligns with how young children learn and makes physical development an organic part of their day.

Using a thematic approach of stories, games and songs has provided a great hook for all our children to develop their learning.

## 3 Celebrate individual progress

Implement a celebration system that recognises each child's unique journey. Focus on personal improvement rather than comparison with peers, highlighting not just their



For more ideas to support physical development, explore real PE's FREE Early Years resource pack at [realpe.co.uk/support-teacher-confidence-and-expertise](http://realpe.co.uk/support-teacher-confidence-and-expertise)

of movement in early development. This partnership helps reinforce positive attitudes towards physical activity.

## 6 Build teacher confidence

Invest in professional learning and support that empowers practitioners to deliver high-quality movement

experiences. When teachers feel confident, they're more likely to provide regular, engaging physical activities that challenge and support every child appropriately.

Using great demo videos supports teachers and

allows our infant children a great start to building an active and healthy lifestyle.

## 7 Follow the child's lead

While structure is often important, remain flexible enough to follow children's interests and spontaneous movement opportunities. This might mean turning an impromptu balancing game on a log into a focused skill-development activity or using children's fascination with animals to inspire new ways to move and travel.

These approaches have proven successful at our school. They have offered more structure to physical activity and PE and removed teacher preference when planning for these sessions. This consistent approach for each year group has had huge benefits for both teachers and pupils, allowing them all to thrive.

physical achievements but also positive learning behaviours. This approach helps build confidence and creates a supportive atmosphere where every small step forward is valued.

## 4 Make skill development playful

Structure activities that develop FMS while maintaining the joy of play. For example, turn jumping practice into a game of exploring the moon, or develop sending and receiving skills through imaginative scenarios like being jugglers in the circus. Moving to music and adapting well-known nursery rhymes also brings a new dimension. The key is to maintain the balance between skill development and playful engagement.

## 5 Partner with parents

Create a movement-positive culture that extends beyond your setting by actively involving parents and carers. Share simple activity ideas they can try at home, celebrate physical achievements during parent meetings, and communicate the value

**This article was co-written by John Parsons, director of innovation at real PE, which supports primary schools to deliver an outstanding PE curriculum.**



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SAL MCKEOWN IS A FREELANCE EDITOR AND JOURNALIST

# “What families need is expensive”

*The School-Based Nursery Capital Grant is intended to address several thorny issues, but is it a good idea or too little too late? Sal McKeown looks at the issues...*

You’re going to hear a lot about toilets over the next year as the government rolls out the School-Based Nursery Capital Grant (SBN Capital Grant) 2024 to 2025. In fact, toilets could be the hill on which this initiative will die. Despite the Building Schools for the Future project carried through by the last Labour government, our stock of primary schools is old and dilapidated, and nowhere is this more obvious than in the lavs.

In some schools there are not enough toilets for the number of pupils. Some toilets are too big, some too little, and often they are in the wrong place. This may not be an overwhelming problem when children can take themselves to the toilet, but with early years, you lose a member of staff for several minutes each time a child needs a wee. Unfortunately, the Capital Grant does not cover staffing costs. With a maximum sum of £150k per school, applicants may have to cast around for other sources of money just to fix the infrastructure and make the space safe for small children.

When Labour announced its Plan for Change, Sir Keir Starmer said: “As any parent with young children will tell you, childcare and nursery places are really essential. They’re so good for children in their development, for making sure that when they arrive at primary school, they’ve got the skills that they need. Really good for parents and carers, because they can get back into the labour market, so very good also for the economy. And our scheme is fully funded, fully costed but also fully planned, so it’ll be wrapped around primary schools.”

It’s clear that the School-Based

Nursery Capital Grant is intended to address several issues at once:

- Keeping schools open at a time of falling rolls
- Ensuring parents have affordable childcare available locally at the end of maternity leave so they can return to work
- Making children “school ready” by the age of five

That might sound exciting, but we asked schools, parents and early years organisations for their views.

## **Parents want flexibility – a headteacher in Cheshire**

“Attracting families to a school nursery when the birth rate is dropping can mean survival for some schools. Our authority is forward-looking and does

*They are not offering training or funding to pay qualified staff*

A DfE spokesperson said: “By September 2025 the full rollout will be completed, with working parents able to access 30 hours from the end of maternity leave to when their child starts school, saving parents an average of £6,900 per year.”



not want to close any of its schools, but over the next four years they are losing 400 children they might have expected to be in Reception.

“What families need is expensive. Parents returning to work may want provision from 7am to 6pm for 52 weeks of the year. However, women returners no longer have the same drive to come back into the workforce. Many want hybrid working for work/life balance. This might mean they only want their child to attend morning sessions or just three days a week. The logistics of this are difficult for schools to manage. Staffing is an issue. You need a lead practitioner, who must be level three. A trained member of staff would be £30–£40,000 with on-costs. Nurseries need an adult to every four children under two. For eight children, that would be two staff, but if six are there in the morning and two in the afternoon, they are going to be overstaffed for part of the day.

“This government project targets return-to-work parents. The current funding is not for vulnerable children, but we have a moral imperative to support two-year-olds, to take down the barriers that they will face as they move up the school. A £250,000 capital build would let us purchase a

pod with toilets. It would be a purpose-built space with a food station. This would be a far more effective solution than the current piecemeal offer.”

### **Finding care post-maternity leave**

One parent I spoke to in Yorkshire has tried both a private nursery and a school nursery that has an EYFS unit. She returned to work when her child was 11 months old and used a private nursery, which accepted babies from three to four months, as the local school had no provision for children under three.

She noted the difference in coverage (nursery: 51 weeks per year, 7.30am–6.30pm; school unit and holiday club: 48 weeks per year, 8.15am–5.30pm) and the availability of free hours funding (available at any age at the nursery, but from the term after a child’s third birthday in school). However, her private nursery provision proved much more expensive, as she was obliged to pay for 11-hour days even when only using eight hours. She also raised the nursery’s higher levels of staff turnover and lower levels of staff qualification.

With the Institute for Public Policy Research warning that “[a]t current rate of decline, there will be no childminders left by 2033” ([tinyurl.com/TEYprcc](https://www.tinyurl.com/TEYprcc)), the expansion of nursery provision feels even more urgent.

### **We’re at full capacity – a headteacher in Lancashire**

“My school has just over 200 children. We are at full capacity at the moment. Next year we can take 30 in Reception, but 72 have applied. I don’t have any empty space in the school, but I do have over 50% free school meal children who are from a deprived area and don’t have suitable nursery provision.

“When these children come into our Reception class, they are always significantly below national average in areas such as communication and language. We see signs that children are learning models of speech from TV, rather than from family. For example, children are coming into Reception with American accents and use vocabulary such as “the trash” and “garbage truck”. We want to ensure that these children are getting a

decent level of education at three and four years old, delivered by a qualified teacher.

“I don’t think the grant should just be awarded to those schools that have a spare classroom. There is obviously an issue with nursery spaces, or they wouldn’t be making this investment. At the moment, they are not offering training or funding to pay qualified staff. I don’t believe it has been thought out particularly well.”



## **SCHOOLS WILL STRUGGLE TO FIND STAFF**

**Neil Leitch, CEO,  
Early Years Alliance**

“Even for schools that are able to introduce or expand their early years provision, questions remain on whether they will be able to adequately staff places. As it stands, the sector is already facing an acute staffing crisis, and given the specialist knowledge and experience needed for the younger age groups, schools are likely to struggle to find suitable staff both from within their existing school or when recruiting externally.

“Ultimately, we know that the only way that provision can be increased is if longstanding sector challenges are addressed. While schools may be a part of the government’s overall expansion strategy, this policy must just form part of a much bigger puzzle. On its own, it will scarcely have an impact.”





**NIKKI SAUNDERS IS THE CREATOR OF READY EDDIE GO!**

# 8 ways to support children with autism

*There are simple strategies every early years setting can use to meet its learners' additional needs, says **Nikki Saunders**...*

**T**here is a saying that once you have met one autistic person, you have met just one autistic person. When my son, Tyler, started school, I was so worried: would he feel lost? Would he understand what was expected of him? I was very grateful to his teachers, who took time to listen to me and communicate what he was unable to. You really can feel like “that parent” sometimes, demanding all the details, but the little things would need communicating because they were huge to him and could affect his whole day. Along our journey, we have learned so much; the tips below made a significant difference in terms of meeting Tyler’s needs in school, and whether you work in a preschool or daycare setting or are a teacher in Reception, I hope you will find them helpful.

## **1 EASING TRANSITION**

Create a booklet that the parents/carers can use to support their child over the summer before they start school. This can apply to starting a new class or year group too. Provide photos of their teacher, classroom, toilet area, dinner hall, playground, teaching assistants, assembly, their peg and tray, carpet time, etc. All of these will help children process their surroundings and feel more comfortable during their transition, as they will be getting to grips with a lot of language, the school environment, new people and routines. A few extra opportunities to visit school, perhaps just with one or two trusted adults, will help too.

## **2 VISUAL TIMETABLES**

Visual timetables help children establish clear routines and know what to expect. They may well be

more useful on the desk in front of a child than displayed on a wall, in case the child becomes too distracted or overwhelmed to refer to them. The timetables help children feel safe and secure in their routines. For example, if they were to have a sudden change such as a cover teacher or a new child joining the class, the timetable is something that is already in place, that is safe and reliable to them, and that reduces uncertainty and language demands.

*Colourful displays are fun, but too much can lead to sensory overload*

## **3 STRUCTURING PLAYTIME**

Playtime is generally the most unstructured part of the day. Therefore, you may find autistic children don’t feel confident in expressing their needs to you, especially if there has been confusion socially. By adding structured play to the start of playtime every day, this can lessen anxieties and help children to feel more confident in seeking an adult when needed. For example, you could start playtime by relating the play to their personal interests.

## **4 USING INTEROCEPTION**

Interoception is an internal sensory system by which the physical and emotional states of an individual are noticed, recognised and responded to – for example, challenges in recognising hunger, thirst, body temperature, or needing the toilet.

You can use visuals as prompts for these and add as many as possible into a child’s routine. You might use toilet prompts at certain times of the day and encourage regular water-bottle stops. If you are concerned about the lack of water being consumed, you can place a hairband around the bottle, moving it down a little to encourage a visual line of where to try and drink to. For body temperature, a child could be hot and may not recognise this or know when to remove their jumper. You can teach them with visuals and to look in a mirror, encouraging them to touch their cheeks – do they look and feel hot?

## **5 SENSORY STIMULI**

Consider the environment in your classroom carefully. There are plenty of visual distractions already in mainstream settings. We can assume that colourful displays are fun, but too much can lead to sensory overload as children try to navigate other challenges. Ear defenders are useful to have on hand for when they are needed, and fidget toys are designed to provide sensory outlets. Wobble cushions promote posture and improve balance for those who seek movement. Weighted blankets provide comfort and help soothe anxieties for some children. Liaise with family, and observe how the child interacts with different sensory supports.



## 6 DEALING WITH DYSREGULATION

When a child is overwhelmed or dysregulated, it can be helpful to have a known, quiet space where they can take their time to find some calm. Try to minimise your words; it's tough, I know, as you may just want to reassure them. Just being by their side can be enough, however, and they will eventually join your calm. An autistic adult once described this situation to me as, "It can feel like an extra radio going off that I cannot tune into; it gives me even more to process." Once they are calm, talk to the child and/or use visuals to help them name their emotions.

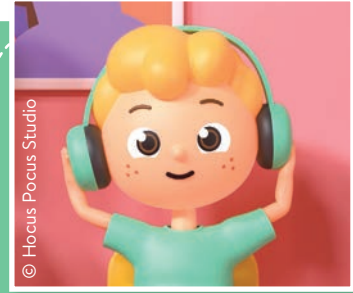
## 7 MODELLING PATIENCE & COMPASSION

Modelling patience and compassion towards autistic children teaches their peers to do the

same. You'll find this extends into playtime, and you will be super proud watching your pupils help one another, often hearing your own words back! Never doubt that your efforts will make a difference. As a parent of two autistic children, I appreciate this more than you know.

## 8 GIVING POSITIVE DIRECTION

When giving instruction to an autistic child, it's useful to direct a child towards what "to do". Often, we direct autistic children on what "not to do", leaving them with no idea of the action or behaviour that is required. You will also get a better response from them by using a positive direction, as they will feel as though you have understood their challenges. It's also important to consider language choices; autistic children can be very literal, so it's helpful to avoid idioms, using visuals and keywords you know that they understand.



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## SUPPORTIVE STRATEGIES

*Ready Eddie Go!* is a series of children's books by author Nikki Saunders that takes young readers through day-to-day experiences that an autistic child may find challenging. Featuring themes such as "Eddie's First Haircut", "The Birthday Party" and "Painting", the books use a clear structure and visuals to help readers understand each story and provide gentle, supportive strategies that may help when they face similar experiences to Eddie.

The books were created by Nikki to support her eldest son, Tyler, after he was diagnosed with sensory processing differences, hypermobility, and autism at the age of three. As Tyler grew older, he began asking questions about how he perceived the world differently from his peers. Nikki searched bookshops for vibrant, positive books about autism but found nothing. This lack of representation led her to write a book herself, creating a character named Eddie, modelled after Tyler. Eddie became a symbol of understanding for Tyler, offering him comfort and connection.

Inspired by Tyler's reaction to Eddie, Nikki's efforts grew beyond books, leading her to bring *Ready Eddie Go!* to life on screen with SKY Kids, voiced by Jodie Whittaker. Visit [nrsaunders.com](https://nrsaunders.com)





PROFESSOR CHARLES HULME IS THE FOUNDER OF OXED & ASSESSMENT

# The key that unlocks learning

*Prioritising oral language skills in the early years helps to remove the barriers to later success, says **Prof. Charles Hulme**...*

Oral language is the heart of literacy and learning. It's fundamental for reading, comprehension, communication, and social development. Children's language skills develop rapidly between the ages of three and six, making the early years a crucial period. Yet, despite the significant attention given to phonics and literacy more generally, oral language often remains overlooked: it's estimated that approximately one in five children are behind in their speaking and understanding of words, the largest ever recorded.

Language difficulties can have a cumulative effect throughout a person's life. Pupils with poor language skills are, as adults, more likely to receive fewer qualifications, have lower incomes and reduced employment opportunities, and suffer from mental health problems.

The good news is that, if identified early, delays in oral language development can be ameliorated.

## WHY ORAL LANGUAGE MATTERS

Good oral language skills are the foundation of school life, enabling pupils to participate fully in lessons and classroom activities. They're also critical for social and emotional development – how can children play with their friends if they can't join in the conversation?

Critically, oral language skills are essential in learning to read. The Simple View of Reading, a model referenced in the DfE Reading Framework, states that to understand what you are reading you need two skills: decoding and language comprehension. Decoding – or translating written



words into speech – while crucial, won't get you very far without a solid grasp of language. You can know how to pronounce every word, but if you don't understand the meaning of what you are reading, the whole point is lost.

However, research takes this model further by showing that language underpins the whole process of learning to read. Oral language is not just essential for reading comprehension but also underpins the development of foundational decoding skills – phoneme awareness and letter knowledge.

This expanded model comes from a long-term research study that followed three groups of children from three to eight years, including those with

preschool language delay, those with a dyslexic family member and a control group. The study found that language skills at three and a half years strongly predicted children's prereading skills at school entry, which in turn predicted how well they could read words at the end of their first year in school. In other words, early language skills are strongly related to how well children will learn to read words once they enter school. Furthermore, these early language skills were also strongly related to children's understanding of what they read at age eight.

Looking at each group at age eight, seven per cent of the control group had reading difficulties (which is about what we would expect in the

general population) and 26% of those with a dyslexic family member had reading difficulties. But, perhaps most surprisingly, 66% of children with poor language skills at three and a half had poor reading skills aged eight. This striking finding highlights just how important focusing on oral language development is in the early years.

### **ASSESSING ORAL LANGUAGE SKILLS**

Language skills develop very rapidly between the ages of three to six years, so it may not be immediately obvious which children have language delays. Implementing a universal, standardised screening programme provides a baseline against which educators can measure children's language development over the year and ensures those with language delays are not being overlooked.

*Encourage children to speak, and provide them with supportive feedback when they do*

When looking for an assessment, settings should look for those that are objective, standardised and research-backed. An objective test means anyone can administer it effectively, for example, through the assessment providing clear yes/no, correct/incorrect rules. A standardised assessment requires a large dataset; the bigger the dataset, the more accurate and reliable an assessment is, so you can be confident in its accuracy. And again, if the assessment backed by research, its outcomes will be more credible.

LanguageScreen, developed by OxEd & Assessment, emerged from decades of research at the University of Oxford to meet the need for a quick, reliable, and school-based oral language assessment. It evaluates four key areas: expressive vocabulary, listening comprehension, receptive vocabulary, and sentence repetition. Built upon a dataset of over 600,000 assessments (and

growing), LanguageScreen enables nurseries and primary schools to assess each child in less than 10 minutes, providing automated scoring and clear reporting to support decision-making. LanguageScreen quickly and accurately identifies children with language delays and makes educators aware of the range of language abilities present among the children they are teaching. Many cases of language delays are "hidden"; children may be quiet but understand very little of what is being said to them.

### **ORAL LANGUAGE DEVELOPMENT**

To foster oral language development, early years settings should create a language-rich environment. Modelling effective communication by narrating actions, incorporating storytelling and singing, and providing opportunities for role-play provides diverse contexts for pupils to experience and practise language. Encourage children to speak, and provide them with supportive feedback when they do, sometimes expanding what a child says to you. Consider also adding copies of books you are using in work with children to your reading corner or labelling key vocabulary on activity stations to encourage children to make connections between spoken and written language.

Effective, evidence-based interventions, such as the NELI Intervention and NELI Preschool, should also be a key part of the early years toolkit. Interventions like these provide an intensive focus on building oral language skills, without which, those with the weakest skills are unlikely to be able to catch up with their peers.

The NELI Intervention, for children in Reception, has been shown through randomised controlled trials and rigorous independent evaluations to help children make up to seven months' additional progress in their oral language skills. More importantly, this progress is shown to last – with children still showing improvements two years after the intervention has taken place ([tinyurl.com/TEYneli](http://tinyurl.com/TEYneli)). Such durable results from an intervention are very unusual. Recognising the importance of a holistic approach to oral language, NELI Whole Class complements the NELI intervention,

following the same six topics, and its intensive focus on active listening, vocabulary and narrative skills. It supports schools, through a flexible bank of activities, to help all children build strong oral language skills while further boosting the skills of those receiving the intervention.

NELI Preschool is a new language enrichment programme designed specifically for preschool settings, built around shared book reading and guided play. A randomised controlled trial led by the University of Oxford showed that NELI Preschool significantly boosts the language skills of children, with those who participate making the equivalent of three months' additional progress ([tinyurl.com/TEYneli2](http://tinyurl.com/TEYneli2)). This results in a stronger language foundation and children being better prepared for school entry.

## **WHY ORAL LANGUAGE MATTERS**

### **Signs of oral language delay in children:**

- Short listening span
- Limited vocabulary
- Poor sentence formation
- Poor behaviour
- Difficulty following instructions
- Disengaged from learning
- Unable to express themselves

### **What happens if we don't intervene?**

- A widening gap in language skills
- A high risk of reading difficulties
- Writing difficulties
- Socio-emotional and behavioural difficulties
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- Higher incidences of mental health issues

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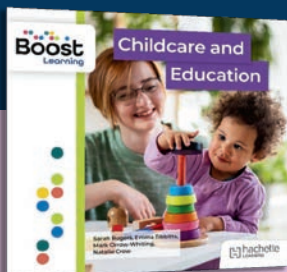
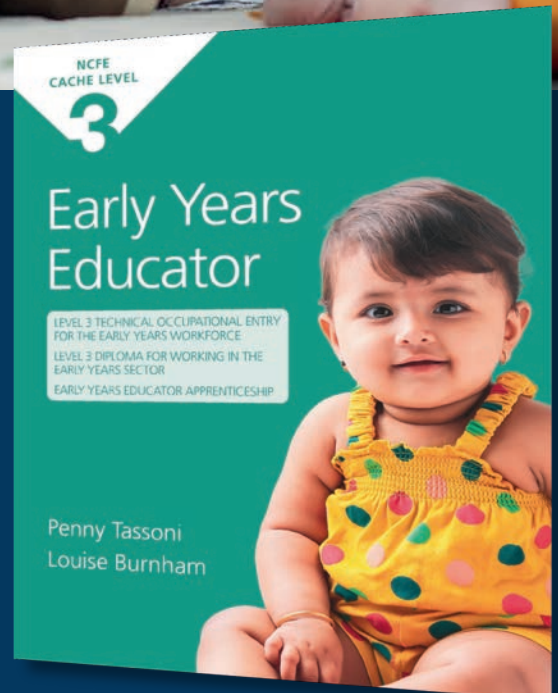
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SARAH PAVEY IS A LIBRARIAN, EDUCATION TRAINER AND AUTHOR

# “Picture books boost critical thinking”

*We can harness wordless stories to develop children’s cognitive skills and emotional growth, says Sarah Pavey...*

**H**ave you ever noticed how a toddler’s eyes light up when opening a picture book? It’s not just about fun – it’s actually kickstarting their journey into critical thinking and emotional growth. Research by Sun et al ((2024), [bit.ly/42Rqn29](https://bit.ly/42Rqn29)) found that children who start reading for fun early on tend to do better in cognitive tests and have better mental health as teens.

Back in 2023, BRIDGE, an Erasmus project ([bridgeinfoliteracy.eu](https://bridgeinfoliteracy.eu)) across six countries, looked at how wordless picture books could help 8–12-year-olds develop their information and digital literacy skills. The best part? These ideas work great with little ones too!

Let’s dive into what’s called the BRIDGE approach. Picture this: three-year-old Mia picks up *The Colour Monster* and asks, “Why is he all mixed up?” She figures out that the rainbow-coloured monster might be feeling lots of things at once – just like when she’s excited about the park but nervous about the big slide. That’s exactly what this pedagogy is all about!

## WONDER PHASE

In the Curious Caterpillars Room (ages 2–3), the class were doing something clever with *The Very Hungry Caterpillar*. The teachers put together a basket of toy fruits for the kids to touch and explore before reading.

You can get creative here – try setting up mystery boxes with recorded messages, bring in puppets to introduce the story, let the children play detective with the book cover, or create a hands-on area with objects and textures from the story.

*Just a single comment from a child might inspire a week’s activity*

## EXPLORE PHASE

The class in Rainbow Room (ages 3–4) were using *We’re Going on a Bear Hunt*. They turned their classroom into a sensory adventure – children got to squish through “mud” with their fingers (chocolate mousse!), swish through “grass” (shredded paper), and tiptoe through “snow” (cotton wool). Why not try something similar? Set up story-themed sensory baskets, get the children moving like characters in the story, make a mini theatre from a box, or create picture maps of the story’s journey.

## COMMUNICATE PHASE

Shy Amir attended his class in the Changing Places room (ages 4–5). While exploring *The Gruffalo*, he started making monster noises and eventually became a confident storyteller through puppet-making. You could try changing the story’s setting for fun, grab some props for storytelling, let the children lead the narrative, or set up a special spot for sharing stories using the Helicopter Stories technique ([helicopterstories.co.uk](https://helicopterstories.co.uk)).

## REFLECT PHASE

This is where the magic happens. At Little Stars Nursery, after reading *Ruby’s Worry*, the children started drawing their own “worry bubbles” and chatting about what makes them feel better. Leo even created a “happy box” of things that helped him stay calm. Try getting the children to make art inspired by the story, put together emotional literacy boxes, draw or use pictures to make a simple journal, or create a cosy corner with mirrors and feeling cards.

Here’s a brilliant bit – if we use wordless picture books, they are fantastic for families where English isn’t their first language. Grandparents or relatives can join in, no matter what language they speak!

## HOW TO MAKE IT WORK

- Start small, beginning with one aspect of the BRIDGE approach each week – gradual implementation leads to better sustained results.
- Follow their lead – just a single comment from a child looking at a book might inspire a week’s activity around a topic.
- Create story spaces to encourage children to pick up books voluntarily.
- Keep sessions short (5–15 minutes).
- Use lots of movement and sensory elements.
- Include physical objects related to the story.
- Allow for repetition – young children love and learn from it.

Remember, every child’s journey with books is different. The BRIDGE approach is just a helpful roadmap; the real adventure happens when we follow where children’s curiosity leads us!

**In her role as a librarian, Sarah specialises in information and digital literacy and represented the UK in the BRIDGE project. Visit [SP4IL.co.uk](https://SP4IL.co.uk)**





# “We need a positive maths mindset”

The Education Endowment Foundation’s **Dr Julian Grenier** shares three principles that will help you get children off to the best possible start in their mathematical learning...



**M**athematics is part of children’s lives, from the everyday struggle to find a matching pair of socks in the morning to the sense of wonder a child might feel when looking at the hexagonal patterned arrangement of honeycomb.

Remarkably, we even know from research that babies are hard-wired with a sense of quantity and pattern in the world. From a young age, children can approximate quantities without needing to count. This early mathematical understanding is independent from language: toddlers can recognise three things, although they may not know how to say the word.

Despite this natural ease and sense of wonder, many of us don’t find maths

easy or fun as adults ([tinyurl.com/TEYnatn](https://tinyurl.com/TEYnatn)), but it is important for all of us to develop a positive, confident mindset about maths and make sure that children get off to the best possible start in this area of learning. Fortunately, there is plenty of robust research evidence for us to act on, so we can support every child to reach their potential. Here are three key principles to consider.

## DEEP UNDERSTANDING

Firstly, we must give children plenty of time, focusing on deep understanding, not superficial, fast-paced coverage of the curriculum. The Education Endowment Foundation’s (EEF’s) guidance report, *Improving Mathematics in the Early Years and Key Stage 1* ([tinyurl.com/TEYeefme](https://tinyurl.com/TEYeefme)),

comments that “it can take a considerable amount of time for young children to learn mathematics, and this learning can be taxing”. The report adds that “importantly, even if children appear to be engaging in mathematical activities (for example, reciting the count sequence), they may not have a full grasp of the underlying concepts (for example, understanding the meaning of the numbers in the count sequence)”.

For example, once children are counting accurately to 10, it is important not to rush them on to bigger numbers. Our focus should be on deeper exploration. We might ask children to show us different ways of representing a number like six, for example, using coloured counters. We could additionally ask further questions,

like “How do you know that shows six?” or “Can you show me other ways?”

Discussions like these help children to build up mental images of numbers. Using apparatus like the abacus-like rekenrek also helps children to “see” numbers and, over time, enables them to develop the automaticity in number facts they need to achieve the Early Learning Goal in number by the end of Reception.

### SPATIAL REASONING

The second key principle is making sure that we put a strong emphasis on spatial reasoning. Maths is not just about numbers. Some of the important aspects of spatial reasoning are:

- Knowing how to climb (up, down, over, under, through) and to squeeze yourself into different-sized spaces
- Knowing how to fit different types of blocks and construction equipment together completing inset puzzles and jigsaws
- Noticing and making patterns
- Talking about the properties of shapes, using terms like sides, corners, straight, flat and round
- Recognising and naming simple 2D and 3D shapes (circles, triangles, rectangles, cuboids)
- Understanding position through words alone, without pointing (on, under, next to)
- Combining shapes to make new ones, for example building an arch during block play, or moving and combining 2D shapes to make pictures

### FOCUS ON EVERY CHILD

The third key principle is a focus on every single child. Some children get lots of support for their mathematical learning at home and will be confident and playful as they explore maths in nursery and Reception. We need to be alert to children who maybe do not have the same earlier experiences. For example, a pretend shoe shop is a great way of teaching children about numbers and sizes. We might help children explore which shoe size fits them, put shoes in order from smaller to larger, and to notice the price tags, for example. This sort of play is engaging for children who have been to a shoe shop or talked about the different sizes of shoes. To engage the children who have not had these experiences, we might need to make a special effort to encourage them to

## *Saying the sequence of numbers off by heart isn't the same as knowing how to count*

join in. Maybe they would benefit from a trip to a real shoe shop first? When children are learning about numbers during a group time, perhaps singing “Five Currant Buns”, keep an eye out for those children who do not join in or look uncertain. They may need a chance to learn and join in with the song again, either individually with you or in a small group.

### HELP IS AVAILABLE

There is plenty of high-quality support

you can draw on. If you are in a nursery class or setting, you could sign up to take part in Maths Champions ([tinyurl.com/TEYeefmc](http://tinyurl.com/TEYeefmc)), a programme of online professional development with support from a mentor. The EEF found that children taking part in this programme make an average of three months' additional progress (and two months' additional progress in language and communication). For children eligible for the Early Years Pupil Premium, the average impact is as much as six months. If you are in Reception, your school could take part in the evidence-informed Mastering Number at Reception and KS1 programme ([tinyurl.com/TEYmnr1](http://tinyurl.com/TEYmnr1)) from the National College for Excellence in the Teaching of Maths (NCETM). You can access this through your local Maths Hub – visit [ncetm.org.uk/maths-hubs](http://ncetm.org.uk/maths-hubs)

## FOUR WAYS TO TEACH COUNTING

Learning to count isn't easy, but we have strong research evidence about the everyday practices we can use to help children learn the association between number names and quantities...

**1 Naming and labelling:** the educator names and labels quantity. This means taking care to model counting with 1:1 correspondence between items and number words, then explicitly stating that the last number you say tells you the number of items in the set. You might say “one-two-three-four” and then do a circular hand movement as you say, “That means we've got four.”

**2 Estimating:** the educator encourages the child to estimate the quantity of a small set of items. At snack time, you might have a group of five children and a small bowl of satsumas and ask the children, “Do you think we've got enough for everyone?”

**3 Emphasis:** the educator draws the child's attention to significant mathematical learning in a range of contexts. For example, while playing at the water tray with children, you might emphasise the concept of “more”. You could say to a child: “You've found two penguins now – look, one, two. I've only got one – so you've got more than me.”

**4 Visualising:** when you're singing “Five Currant Buns” with the children, you could have props for the buns. Each time you call a child to come and take a bun away, the children can see the number of buns left and how the quantity reduces each time a child “bought a currant bun and took it away”.

You can find out more about these practices, and many more, in the Early Mathematics theme on EEF's Early Years Evidence Store – visit [tinyurl.com/TEYeefvs](http://tinyurl.com/TEYeefvs)

# Collins

# Number Builders

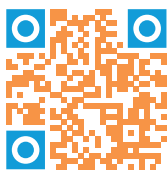
## Encourage confident understanding of number with **Number Builders**

A new comprehensive, multi-sensory number support programme for Foundation and KS1

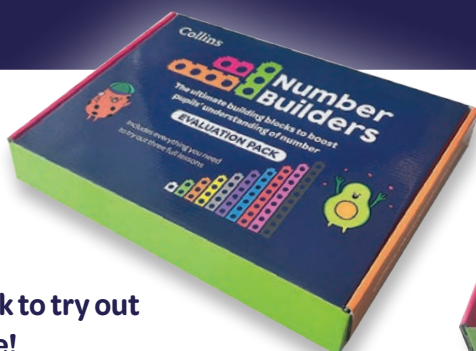


Pupils at South Ossett Infants Academy experiment with Number Builders

Includes digital resources, number lines and frames, activity cards and a new maths manipulative - n-bars!



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[collins.co.uk/NumberBuilders](https://collins.co.uk/NumberBuilders)





JO AUSTEN IS THE AUTHOR OF *SMALL NUMBERS, BIG IDEAS*

# Making sense of money

*Contactless payments have dramatically changed children's early experiences of money. Teaching it well in the EYFS is more important than ever, says Jo Austen...*

**A**s an NQT in Year 1 just under 10 years ago, I loved teaching the money unit. Children already had a tonne of useful knowledge and experiences, and they did really well as we tackled the various concepts in class. Fast forward to today and things have changed: the proliferation of contactless payments has dramatically affected many children's early understanding of money.

So what to do about it? My take is that before children begin KS1 maths units on money, there are some broader concepts we need to embed in the EYFS. Firstly, using money is about an exchange. Tapping pretend debit cards doesn't model this, so we need to set up activities where children are physically exchanging coins for stuff. Secondly, children should learn that we can exchange money for services, not only physical goods. So as well as playing shop, set up an area for them to sell and provide services. Something they can actually do would usually be better: for example,

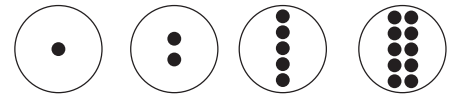
a window cleaning business using your window onto an outside space would be more realistic and a lot less calamitous than a hairdressers! Third, children should practise attaching different values to different things. When they play shop, make sure they have opportunities to assign prices to items for themselves, talking about how much something might be worth.

**Children should practise attaching different values to different things**

At this stage they will be assigning wholly unrealistic prices, but that doesn't matter; the key is assigning different values to different items and talking about their reasons. A similar activity would be to give 10 objects and 10 different pre-made price labels, prompting children to debate which label should be attached to which item.

I'd also argue that EYFS teachers should have a clear view of the major potential money misconceptions and address those head-on. Why isn't there a 3p or 4p coin? Isn't a big 2p coin worth more than a little 5p coin? And if I've got three coins, surely I've got more money than that other boy who's only got one coin? The latter two misconceptions here are both about recognising the value of the coins, rather than paying attention

to other features like the size and/or number of coins. To support children with this, consider using "pre-money tokens": circles for 1p, 2p, 5p and 10p that show the correct number of spots (read more at [tinyurl.com/TEYpmtk](http://tinyurl.com/TEYpmtk)) before introducing representations of the actual coins.



Lastly, rather than rushing children towards KS1 concepts such as making amounts in different ways, the most efficient way, or understanding change, my view is that EYFS teachers should use money as a motivating and meaningful context through which to further practise the essential "count, compare, compose" skills that we know are so essential to making good progress in early maths. Play "Do I have enough?" to practise comparing numbers and "What can I buy with 10p?" to practise addition and number bonds. If the concept of change does come up and children are curious, model it as ensuring a fair swap, drawing attention to the critical concept of equality (if I give 10p, I should get a 6p lolly and 4p change).

With these general maths essentials more secure, children will be well set to thrive when they encounter money in KS1. And as for the contactless payments issue... It won't go away, but we can talk to parents, explaining the immense value of young children applying their emerging mathematical understanding in their lives outside school.

**Supported by vibrant full colour diagrams and illustrations, *Small Numbers, Big Ideas* explains essential concepts for teaching early maths in an accessible, straight-to-the-point format. Follow Jo on X @mathswithin10, BlueSky @joausten or LinkedIn @joausten**



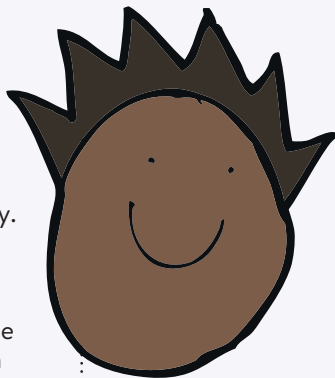
# Count and play throughout the day!

It's easy to include engaging mathematical activities as part of your daily routine, says **Jude Harries...**

## Registration

### HOW MANY CHILDREN?

Here's a simple way to see instantly how many children are at the setting each day. Invite each child to draw a self-portrait and write their name on a small square of paper. Laminate the pictures so they will survive regular handling! Attach three 5x2 grids (for up to 30 children) onto an accessible wall, and show the children how to attach their picture to a square using sticky tack. Provide a small whiteboard and pen so children can take turns to count the children and record the number.



### REGISTER NUMBERS

Use the register to create a special number for each child. Help children to learn their "register numbers" by saying, repeating, writing, and so on. Use a washing line as a number line with all the numbers pegged in order. Invite children to remove their number from the line when they arrive at your setting each day.

The numbers that remain are those children who are absent or who have forgotten! Put children's names and photos on the other side so children can look at those if they get stuck.



### DAILY QUESTION

Choose a simple yes/no question to add to the registration routine, e.g. "Do you like dogs/cats/chocolate/carrots?" or "Is ice cream cold?" or "Do you think dragons are real?" Write the question on a whiteboard. Set up a jar with lolly sticks with all the children's names on and invite them to answer the question by placing their stick in the "yes" or "no" column. Help the children to add up how many have voted for each option. Talk about which number is bigger or smaller.



## Snack time

### SNACK DICE

Make a set of six cards to match the six faces of a die. Draw empty circles in place of the pips, and add the correct numeral on the back. At snack time, in small groups, show the children the cards and encourage subitising the numbers from the position of the pips. Invite children to select a card and then place the corresponding number of pieces of fruit or cereal onto each card. Use dried fruit such as raisins, glace cherries, chopped-up dried apricots and cranberries, or breakfast cereal such as hoops. Enjoy eating the snack dice together.

### SHAPE SORTING

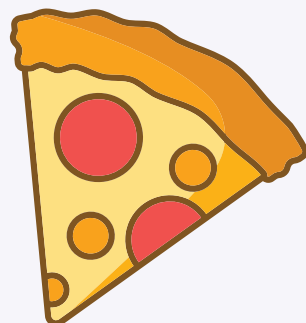
Make a collection of different-shaped snacks to share in a small group.

Try round, square, rectangular, and triangular crackers or crisps. Cut toast into more unusual shapes using cutters. Challenge by using 3D shapes such as cubes of cheese and cone- or cylinder-shaped crisps and sweets. Place a sheet in the middle of the group with pictures and the names of all the shapes so children can sort them and learn mathematical language. Can they identify the shapes that they are eating?



### SHARING FAIRLY

Talk to the children about how to share out their snacks fairly. If items can be counted out, then make sure each child has the same number. Sometimes, snacks will need to be cut up or divided to be shared out, such as pizzas, apples, toast, cake, etc. Can the children work out how many pieces they need? Show them how to count the children in the group and then divide the snack into the same number. Introduce mathematical language such as simple fractions, e.g., halves and quarters, as they share their snack.



## Playtime

### OUTDOOR GAMES

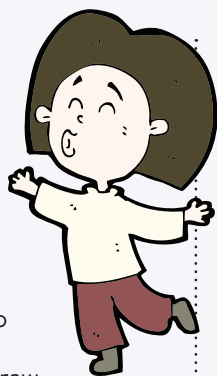
Use thick playground chalks to create number games to play outside. Support children to draw a traditional hopscotch court and demonstrate how to play with or without a stone. This game develops balance and coordination at the same time as counting and number recognition. Try a version of "Chindro", a popular Indian game, and invite children to take turns to throw a beanbag backwards over their heads to land in an assigned number. Remind them to take care when throwing objects!

### GIANT NUMBER LINES

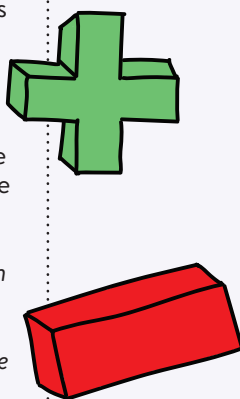
Use the chalk or paint to create giant number lines. Invite children to write the numbers in order on the line. They can stick to simple 1-10 or start at 11-20. Can they write the numbers in twos? Challenge children to find different numbers on the lines that you call out. Can they work out simple number sentences by jumping backwards or forwards on the line? Encourage them to make up their own sums for friends to work out.

### TIME TRAVEL

Use different times of day to encourage children to be more aware of time. Take the opportunity at playtime, lunchtime, or home time to look at an analogue clock together and start to read the time. Try this time chant: *At 12 o'clock, it's time for lunch. / Both hands at the top. / At 12 o'clock, it's time to eat. / Time will never stop! / At 3 o'clock, it's time to go home. / Big hand at the top. / Little hand points at the 3. / Time will never stop!*



**TIP:**  
*Set up a "Number book corner" or library with lots of number books for children to look at during the day and borrow to take home.*



## Home time

### STORY NUMBERS

At the end of the day, sit on the carpet and recall the events of the day, or retell a traditional story that the children are familiar with using "story numbers". Give out cards with the numbers 1-10. Invite No. 1 to start the story by saying, "At school, today I" or "Once upon a time..." Can No. 2 carry on by saying what happened next or introduce the story characters? Continue the story by inviting the next number to speak and so on. No. 10 must finish with the words "And now it's time to go home" or "And they all lived happily ever after."



### STOPWATCH CHALLENGE

Use an online stopwatch to time how long it takes the children to get ready to go home at the end of a session. Who can get their coat on, their bag ready with all their belongings, water bottle, books, letters, gloves, and hat in the quickest time? Talk about what else the children could use the timer for, such as tidying up, sitting on the carpet, lining up to go home or even standing on one leg!

### HOME TIME SONG

Use the Register numbers described above to help children line up in order as they get ready to go home. This can also be useful for lining up to go out to play or for assembly. Try using this simple chant: *No. 1 get in line / No. 2 it's home time / No. 3 we've had some fun / No. 4 the day is done. / No. 5 get in line...* If you want to surprise the children, try using the Register numbers in reverse, or start in the middle and count in twos!

## MATHS THROUGHOUT THE DAY

One of the five recommendations in the report *Improving Mathematics in the Early Years and Key Stage 1*, published by the EEF (Education Endowment Foundation) is to try to integrate maths into a variety of different regular activities throughout the day. This helps children become more familiar with mathematical language and concepts, develop their confidence to use it in their play, and make the most of the routines of the school day. The activities in this article encourage children to enjoy maths throughout the day in a variety of ways: by counting, reading and writing numbers, sharing number books and rhymes, and developing their sense of time.



*Jude Harries is an author and teacher of music and drama, with experience of working with children aged nine months to 11 years.*






# Funding Forms Automated






## STRESSED BY FUNDING?

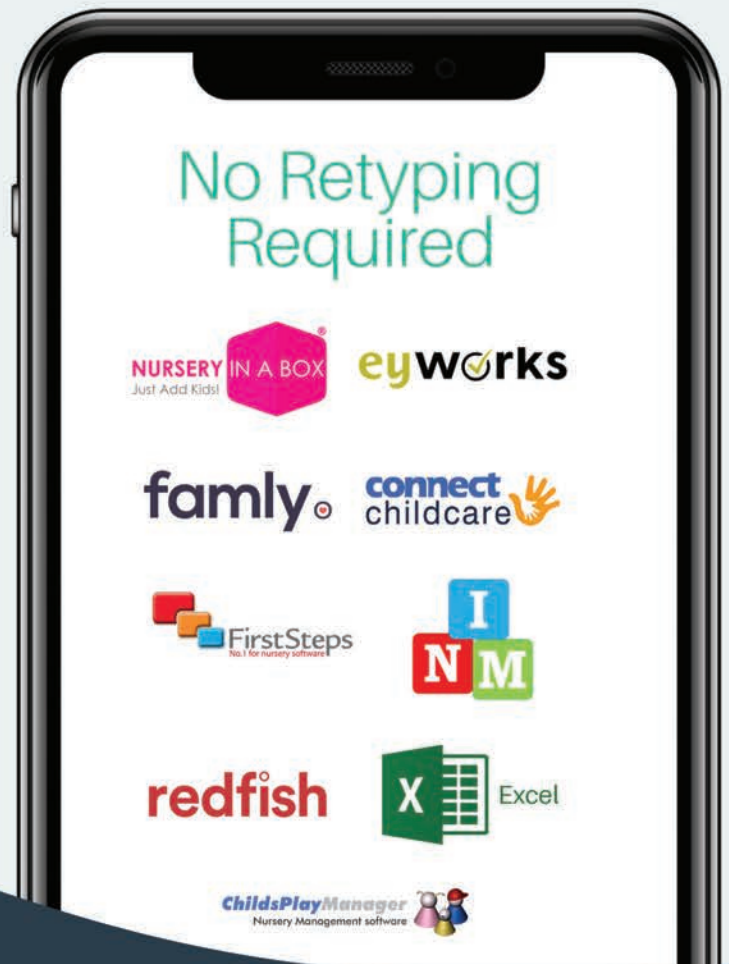
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SARAH PHILPOT IS EYFS CURRICULUM LEAD FOR UNITED LEARNING

# Let's make maths more meaningful

*With a little creativity, we can provide children with engaging ways to explore numbers and shapes, says Sarah Philpot...*

When I set foot in an early years classroom, often one of the first things I notice is the book being taught that week. It might be through themed role play provision or a hands-on small world area, but whatever form it takes, there is usually real engagement surrounding literacy topics that spills over into every area of the curriculum. Can we truly say this is the same when it comes to maths? How often have we been given a scheme of work to trawl through that chops and changes too quickly and that doesn't align

with the children's interests or give them enough time to investigate their understanding? But it doesn't have to be that way. When given a licence for creativity, we can make maths learning much more engaging for our children.

## THE BARRIERS

Maths teaching is often viewed differently from other subjects. It can lack the creativity that comes so easily to other areas of the curriculum. Why is that? Well, it often comes down to practitioners' own experiences. For a start, traditionally there's been a focus on rote learning with maths – I'm sure

we've all experienced memorising times tables and formulas. But a study of more than 3,000 adults by National Numeracy has also found that over a third (35%) said that doing maths makes them feel anxious, while one in five were so fearful that it makes them feel physically sick. Subconsciously, this bias could be transferred to practitioners' delivery, meaning there is a reluctance to deviate from the "script" or scheme and question whether it is the right way to make maths meaningful and engaging for children.



## THE CASE FOR CREATIVITY

Play and exploration are inherently motivating. Young children's learning begins with real-life situations: sharing out snacks, working out the number of friends allowed in the playhouse, or estimating how high you can build a tower before it falls. These activities all have direct impacts on children's lives and offer an immediate result. In stark contrast, sitting in front of a screen or reciting number facts out of context often has little impact on children's understanding. With more creativity, we can boost children's engagement and foster a lifelong love of maths.

So, let's look at how we can go from meaningless to meaningful learning with direct teaching and continuous provision.

*Reciting number facts out of context often has little impact on children's understanding*

## DIRECT TEACHING

When teaching in a group, think carefully about the objective you want to achieve. For example, let's take a Reception class with the learning objective to *find one more than another number, working with numbers up to 5*.

Think about adding elements of music, story, competition and interaction. Try involving children's favourite toys in the classroom. Put these into a drawstring bag, then ask children to count how many and add one by one; ask them to say how many there are in the bag now. To make sure all children are actively learning, try giving them five frames to represent the objects in the bag, or children can count on their fingers. You may also want to use stories such as *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* and encourage children to build Lego towers as the caterpillar eats each piece of food.

Linking a nursery rhyme to your objective can also be effective – for example, “One man went to mow” would work well with this lesson for

numbers to 5. Or try this tower-building game: invite groups of children to roll a die that returns a “1” or “0”; with each “1” they can add a block to their tower, and the team who builds their tower to 5 blocks first wins.

If you feel the class has not grasped a concept by the end of the week, try not to feel the pressure to rush on to the next topic; instead, think with your team about how you could approach things differently.

## CONTINUOUS PROVISION

We know that mathematical learning won't just be happening in a “maths area”; it will be embedded across all provision areas inside and outside. Here are two steps to unlocking children's enthusiasm for maths throughout your learning environment.

### 1. Identifying key opportunities

Let's take the following areas of learning and look at where opportunities may arise for meaningful activities:

- **Number:** This may be as simple as adding numbers to the parking spaces in a small world garage or including measuring tapes on rulers for children to measure their creations in the construction area. Also, think about including calendars, clocks, cash registers and paper for receipts in the role play area. Look for opportunities in the snack area to discuss sharing equally or counting out fruits. Try and find the links to number within everyday jobs in the classroom.
- **Numerical pattern:** Provide activities where children can subitise and spot patterns in number, for example, setting up a play train carriage or bus with passengers. This will also help children to understand concepts of one more/less when passengers get off and on the vehicle. Also, think about adding objects in formation, such as cake trays in the playdough area or egg containers in the home corner. These will help children to subitise numbers into different orientations.
- **Shape:** Watch for children using equipment to make their own version of shapes or patterns; loose parts give children the freedom to explore on their own terms. There are opportunities for children to explore

the properties of 3D shapes and their 2D-shaped sides in the construction area by using shadow backing to store these blocks on shelves.

### 2. Using sustained shared thinking

Now we have established some clear strategies to make maths more engaging, we can consider the role of the practitioner's interactions. We want children to have ownership over their learning and follow their interests, so a good strategy is to use sustained shared thinking, which supports *encouraging, modelling and extending children's thinking*. Practitioners *encourage* children's ideas and take time to understand their point of view. Next, practitioners will *model* thought processes out loud to give children a structure that they can use themselves. Finally, both participants *extend* their thinking together.

You may want to use questions such as *What about...?*, *Could we try...?*, *I wonder what would happen if we...?*, *Would using... help?*. When sustained shared thinking is embedded in practice, children will feel safe and empowered to suggest and explain their own thinking and take more risks with their learning.

## THREE STEPS TO SUCCESS

- Feel confident to adjust the pace for the children in your class and use the scheme of work as a guideline rather than a step-by-step instruction manual.
- Work with your staff team to update and share knowledge of quality adult-child interactions in provision.
- Ask if children's learning is engaging and links to children's interests. How well does your classroom follow early years pedagogy?



CATHERINE CAWTHORNE IS AN AUTHOR AND FORMER SPEECH AND LANGUAGE THERAPIST

# Get creative with shared reading!

Enjoying picture books with peers and adults can teach children a lot about the skill of problem solving, as **Catherine Cawthorne** explains...



I guess when most people think about creativity, they think about the arts. Van Gogh's *Sunflowers*. Spielberg's *Jaws*. And the greatest rock song of all time, *Livin' On A Prayer* by Jon Bon Jovi. (This is a hill I am prepared to die on.)

The British Psychological Society defines creativity as "the ability to discover new and original ideas, connections, and solutions to problems". It's the last bit of that definition, the solutions to problems, that maybe sometimes gets forgotten when we talk about creativity. And I think that we can all agree that finding solutions to problems is a very useful and key life skill!

So how can shared reading of picture books help children develop this aspect of creativity?

## A LADYBIRD IN PERIL...

Recently I came across "The Laideaberd In The Darc", one of the first picture books that my daughter wrote when she was four or five. The basic plot goes something like this (SPOILER ALERT):

*A ladybird goes for a walk in the woods.  
Oh no! She is lost!  
She runs and runs.  
She finds her mum.  
Everything is okay.*

Obviously this is a brilliant book that is destined to become a literary classic, but if I were to be just a *teeny weeny* bit picky I might say that it wasn't an entirely satisfying story arc. My daughter had obviously understood that her story needed a character who

experienced some kind of peril, but she hadn't really figured out a way to resolve it.

## WHAT'S YOUR PROBLEM?

Let's think about the basic structure of most stories:

1. Introduce a character and a setting
2. That character has a problem (which generally gets worse)
3. The character has to solve or overcome the problem in some way
4. The problem is resolved, everything is back to normal

We see this structure in lots of well-known picture books, and children learn to expect that pattern in the stories they hear. Have a look at these two well-loved classics:





### Supertato by Sue Hendra & Paul Linnet

- 1. Character/Setting:** The vegetables living in the supermarket.
- 2. Problem:** The Evil Pea has escaped and is causing havoc!
- 3. Solution:** Supertato traps the Evil Pea in some jelly.
- 4. Resolution:** Supertato returns the Evil Pea to the freezer where he belongs.

### Dogger by Shirley Hughes

- 1. Character/Setting:** Dave has a special toy dog called Dogger whom he loves and takes to bed with him every night.
- 2. Problem:** Dave loses Dogger, only to find he has been accidentally sold at the Summer Fair. A little girl now owns Dogger, and she doesn't want to give him back.
- 3. Solution:** Dave's kind big sister Bella offers to swap her new teddy for Dogger. (Even writing this bit down has made me well up!)
- 4. Resolution:** Dave and Dogger are happily reunited.

These stories would fall absolutely flat without a problem to solve! Imagine Supertato capturing the Evil Pea straightaway and returning him to the freezer before he could do any mischief. Or the little girl in *Dogger* happily returning him to Dave once she'd realised the mix-up. We need the horror of everything going wrong, then the satisfaction of everything turning right at the end.

So the narrative structure of a picture book is a lesson in creativity. It takes a new idea, a new situation, a new character, then creates a problem for that character, and then solves it. If we want children to be creative thinkers, not just in their writing but in their approach to life, then picture books provide a wonderful tool for learning those skills.

### BREAKING THE RULES

Having talked about a standard story structure, it's always fun to break the rules! So in my new picture book with Mike Byrne, *Oh No, Flo!*, the story structure doesn't quite follow the norm, because the problem-solver makes things a whole lot worse:

- 1. Character/Setting:** Flo the sheepdog lives with Farmer. She loves helping Farmer do all the jobs on the farm, and

especially likes getting tummy rubs.

- 2. Problem:** Farmer is ill, and is too poorly to do all the jobs on the farm.
- 3. Solution:** No problem, Flo will do all the jobs for her! Flo is well meaning but incompetent, so this does NOT go to plan!
- 4. Resolution:** In the endpapers, Farmer and Flo set about tidying up the chaos.

So in this story, our main problem-solver is bad at solving problems, and is completely unaware of her own mistakes! The humour lies in young children knowing more than Flo, and seeing how everything is going wrong. This also gives young children a rare feeling of confidence and empowerment because they, for once, know more than someone else. (The same feeling you get when you shout "It's behind you!" at the panto.) We only get a resolution when Farmer gets out of bed and takes charge again.

*The narrative structure of a picture book is a lesson in creativity*

### BE CREATIVE ABOUT CREATIVITY

There is a huge body of evidence that shared reading in the early years is massively beneficial emotionally, socially and cognitively for young children. I believe it's also a golden opportunity for us to encourage creative thinking. Next time you read a picture book out loud, try getting the children to think about the main character's problem. How else could they solve the problem? What other things might work? I am sure they will come up with some highly inventive alternatives!



***Oh No, Flo!* by Catherine Cawthorne, illustrated by Mike Byrne, is published 27 March 2025 by Templar Books in paperback, £7.99.**

## TOP TIPS FOR SHARED READING OF *OH NO, FLO!*

**1 Highlight familiar language.** The names of animals and animal noises are some of the first words that English speaking children learn. When each animal gives Flo a job they start with their animal noise ("Moo! Milk the cow!"). Children can join in with this.

**2 Get children to join in with repeated phrases.** This encourages children to be active listeners by participating in the story. Every time Flo muddles up a task, children can join in saying, "Oh No, Flo!"

**3 Can you remember?** Challenge memory and attention skills. The animals give Flo a list of jobs to do at the beginning of the book. Each time, Flo muddles it up ("Sow the sheep!"). Can the children remember what the job should be?

**4 Talk about action words & instructions.** Each instruction has the same structure of a verb followed by a noun ("Milk the cow", "Sow the sheep").

**5 Look out for the cat!** Cat only speaks to say "Miaow! Stroke the cat!" and "Miaow! Oh no, Flo!", but Cat is present as an observer in most of the illustrations. There is a lot that can be inferred about Cat's thoughts and feelings from his expressions and his spectacular eyebrows!



# Invitations to engage

*Both educational and entertaining, interactive books are an invaluable tool in our efforts to support early literacy, says **Phoebe Demeger**...*

Few books exemplify the power of the shared reading experience quite like interactive books. Whether read aloud to a group or enjoyed one-on-one, they possess the ability to create meaning and humour, invite verbal or physical engagement, build empathy, and even demonstrate how a book is put together through an eclectic mix of techniques. Here are some of my favourite examples...

## Familiar favourites

Fairy tales and traditional tales are frequently some of the earlier encounters that young children have with literature – by design these stories are often particularly engaging and memorable due to their repeated and predictable story shapes. A book like *Please, Mr Magic Fish* is a strong example of this, as the main characters visit a magical wish-granting fish four times, calling out the repeated song-like refrain “Please, Mr Magic Fish, will you grant us one more wish?”, which the audience can be invited to join in with while also tracing the verbal and visual differences between each fish encounter – the sea growing stormier, the fish getting angrier, etc.

## Exciting sounds

Sound effects and onomatopoeia are another key way of inviting interaction from young readers. *Quiet!* follows a young child through a day in the life at home – they move from room to room, accompanied by the refrain “Sssh! Listen, what’s that noise?”, and within each room the onomatopoeic sounds of each object – the “rumble burble” of the kettle, the “brmm zoom” of the toy car – appear written

next to that object. *Quiet!* is a lovely book for speaking to the experiences of a young child and building awareness of the built environment. Similarly *Snap!*, told entirely in onomatopoeia, is great for exploring environmental sounds, while also encouraging predictions through rhyme and repetition: in one example of this soundscaped adventure, our hero, Frog, “tap tap tap”s on a crocodile’s snout, which on the next spread erupts with a “SNAP!”.

*Interactive books may be enjoyed by readers of all ages, including our very youngest*

## Interactive information

Interactive elements can be a useful tool in information books, encouraging embodied engagement with the subject matter. *Dig Dig Dinosaur* takes this perennially popular topic and incorporates repetition, descriptive vocabulary and peep-through lift-the-flap elements, allowing young children to guess which dinosaur is going to be unearthed next. Meanwhile *Body Detectives* is a helpful tool for exploring self-regulation and sensory signals: this interactive board book uses flaps, pull-tabs and activities to encourage young children to interpret their body’s sensory cues, such as hunger or needing the toilet, to name their feelings and how to act upon them.

## Getting physical

Some interactive books take things a step further and playfully illuminate the notion of a book as a physical item to be interacted with while still telling a story. *This Is Owl* makes a great read-aloud: using direct address, it introduces the audience to an owl and invites them to interact with the character by calling aloud, tickling, tipping and turning the book, and more. Another example of this, recalling the classic *Book With No Pictures* is *The Quickest Bedtime Story Ever*, which similarly speaks directly to the reader and invites them to take part in interactive instructions – a silly vocal warm-up, a big stretch, making sure every teddy is tucked in – during the wind-down towards bedtime.

## Key concepts

It would be remiss not to mention *Don’t Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!*, a fourth-wall-breaking modern classic about persuasion, in which an increasingly desperate pigeon uses a variety of rhetorical tactics to convince the reader to let him drive the bus. Interactive, metafictional books like *Pigeon* introduce even the youngest reader to the concept of writing with a purpose, and the existence of an audience. In a more subtle, but no less effective way, Chris Haughton’s picturebooks use repeated and/or patterned text as an exposition of how narrative and meaning is constructed. Both tension and humour are built through repeated refrains and either meeting or subverting expectations: in *Oh No, George!* we have the refrain “What will George do?” followed by a spread of inevitable naughtiness (accompanied by the



1 *Please, Mr Magic Fish*, by Jessica Souhami (Otter-Barry Books) 2 *Quiet!*, by Kip Alizadeh (Child's Play) 3 *Snap!*, by Anna Walker (Scribble) 4 *Dig Dig Dinosaur*, by Dr Anjali Goswami & Maggie Li (Nosy Crow) 5 *Body Detective! Decode Your Sensory Signals*, by Janet Krauthamer & Christiane Engel (Barefoot Books)



6 *This Is Owl*, by Libby Walden & Jacqui Lee (Little Tiger Press) 7 *The Quickest Bedtime Story Ever!*, by Louise Fitzgerald & Kate Hindley (Nosy Crow) 8 *Don't Let the Pigeon Drive the Bus!*, by Mo Willems (Walker Books) 9 *Oh No, George!*, by Chris Haughton (Walker Books) 10 *Shh! We Have a Plan*, by Chris Haughton (Walker Books)



11 *We're Going to Find the Monster!*, by Malorie Blackman & Dapo Adeola (Puffin Books) 12 *Would You Like a Banana?*, by Yasmeen Ismail (Walker Books) 13 *Guess Who's Getting Dressed*, *Guess Who's Going to Sleep*, *Guess Who's Playing* and *Guess Who's Munching*, by Smriti Halls & Marta Altés (Walker Books) 14 *Cows Are Pink!*, by Becky Davies & Gareth Lucas (Little Tiger Press) 15 *Rhyme Hungry*, by Antonia Pesenti (Scribble)

exclamation “Oh no, George!”); and in *Shh! We Have a Plan*, the tension builds as the bird-catchers count “Ready one...ready two...”, followed by an equally inevitable visual mishap. These books brilliantly establish an easily followable pattern of “action equals consequence”.

#### All together now...

A few more contemporary examples of books that encourage engagement through repetition are *We're Going to Find the Monster!*, a vibrant adventure in which two siblings traverse a range of imaginary landscapes to a cumulative refrain which simply asks to be joined in with: “Over the shimmering ocean... Up the huge,

high mountain... Through the deep, dark jungle... We're going to find the monster!” I also love the *Green Eggs and Ham*-esque *Would You Like a Banana?*, in which an unseen – and very patient – narrator tries to convince a hungry gorilla to have a banana, to be met with the repeated line “No, I won't eat a banana.” Great fun to read aloud and, like *Don't Let the Pigeon...*, good for exploring persuasive writing.

#### Board books

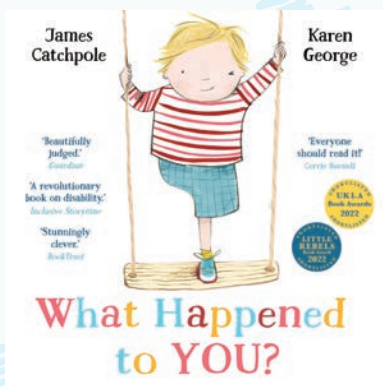
Even the youngest of readers get to enjoy the subversive humour of interactivity through the format of board books. In the *Guess Who's...* series, clever optical illusions invite the

reader to guess which animal is hiding behind each flap, with the patterned rhyming text providing a clue to the answer: “Who's put on this spotty coat? Is it Cat? No! It's...[spoiler!]” Meanwhile, *Cows Are Pink!* uses cut-outs to paint farmyard animals in unexpected colours; the reader must lend the exasperated narrator a hand and help put things right. And finally, the brilliant *Rhyme Hungry* is a verbal and visual treat filled with rhyming wordplay, and sees fold-out pages transform food items into unexpected things – a cheese toastie becomes a cheese ghostie, with friendly spirits made from melted cheese.

Visit [clpe.org.uk](http://clpe.org.uk)

# The Book Corner

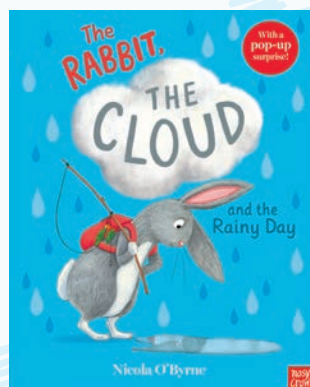
GREAT TITLES TO SHARE WITH YOUR BUDDING READERS



## WHAT HAPPENED TO YOU?

(Faber, paperback, £7.99)

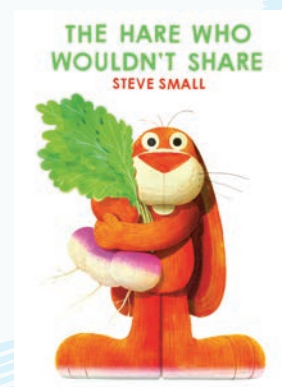
How inclusive is your book corner? Does it feature characters with different backgrounds and abilities? These questions matter, because if children don't see both themselves, and those who are different from themselves, in the stories they encounter, then what messages are they getting about who really matters and whose voices should be heard? This feisty, funny narrative from James Catchpole, illustrated by Karen George, captures beautifully the frustration of a child repeatedly having to answer the same question from his peers when all he really wants to do is be accepted as a playmate. It's a touching exploration of difference and a rich starting point for learning: is it okay to be curious about people? How does all that interrogation make Joe feel? Can your charges think of better ways to discover what they might want to know? Joe only has one leg, but it's a strong one; why not find out how good everyone is at hopping and balancing, using PE apparatus to create imaginative challenges?



## THE RABBIT, THE CLOUD AND THE RAINY DAY

(Nosy Crow, hardback, £12.99)

If you're having trouble convincing your children that there's no such thing as bad weather, as long as you've got the right clothing, then this story about a bunny who *really* doesn't like getting wet could be just what you need to persuade everyone into their wellies. Rabbit is off to do a spot of fishing when he spots a rain cloud and decides to take action to make sure it doesn't put a dampener on his fun. However, Duck knows that precipitation is something to be celebrated – and when his arguments about beautiful plants and flowers, flowing rivers and delicious, crunchy carrots fail to convince Rabbit of rain's importance, he has one final, impressive point to make... Nicola O'Byrne is a wickedly clever author/illustrator, combining sharp dialogue with beautifully judged expressions to bring her characters to life in a way that's both understated and hilarious. Do your readers agree with Duck or with Rabbit? What's their favourite weather of all?



## THE HARE WHO WOULDN'T SHARE

(Simon and Schuster, paperback, £7.99)

There's no lack of picture books dealing with the often fraught issue of sharing – and for good reason. It's a tough notion for little ones to grasp, yet a behaviour that's highly valued by society, and often from an earlier age than is developmentally appropriate to expect it. On those grounds alone, this tale about a grumpy hare who wants to hang on to all his turnips would be a useful title to add to your bookshelves; but author/illustrator Steve Small is exploring other ideas here, too. His protagonist takes a logical approach: if he gives *his* stuff away, there is less for *him*, so what is the point? It's only when the wider community is threatened by a much stronger, greedier enemy that his sense of responsibility kicks in; he risks his own safety and sacrifices his crops to protect his neighbours – and in return, they take him in. A geopolitical parable for our age? Perhaps, but above all, a warm, positive story, with a happy ending, that children will love.



## I HEARD A BIRD

(Sallywag Press, paperback, £7.99)

*I Heard a Bird* is the fourth and final title in Rob Ramsden's beautiful In the Garden series, which encourages children to relate to the natural world around them. The narrative is deceptively simple: a young girl hears a bird, which is scared away by some cats fighting. As she tries to find it again, she becomes aware of all kinds of tiny, lovely sounds, from the rustling of a tree's leaves, to a scurrying mouse and a hopping, flopping frog. Eventually, she closes her eyes and finds a silent space. She hears her own breathing and her heart beating, and in this mindful moment, rediscovers her bird. Ramsden's illustrations are delightful, and he chooses his language carefully for what is essentially a meditation, the alliteration and internal rhymes making each page a gentle joy to read aloud. Once you've shared it with your little ones, why not take them outside, with blankets or mats to lie on, and see how quiet they can be? What can they hear around them?

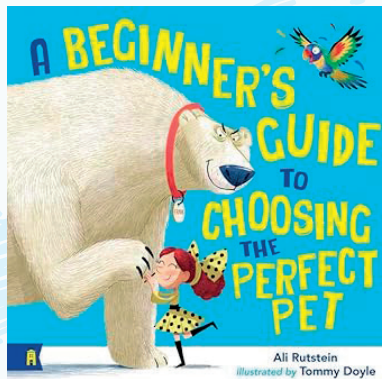


## BUNNY'S MOST FABULOUS HOLIDAY EVER

(Sallywag Press)

Explore differences with activities based on Brian Fitzgerald's funny tale of unlikely friendship...

- Talk to children about the story. Why do they think Bunny likes to holiday on her own? Why is it such a problem for her to have a messy, noisy neighbour? Do friends have to be the same in every way, or can there be fun in differences?
- Bring out a box full of blocks, bricks and other building materials, all mixed up together, and ask the children to come up with a tidier method of arranging them. Are there any advantages to sorting them by size, colour or any other way?
- What would the children's ideal holiday be? Can they come up with a list of "essentials" and "nice to have"s?



## A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO CHOOSING THE PERFECT PET

(Allen & Unwin, paperback, £7.99)

"Every family should have a pet," begins this book, earnestly. "A faithful friend to welcome into your hearts and home." It's a reasonable enough start, but things soon take an unexpected turn. People think kittens and puppies make great pets, but rhinos and tigers are *much* better. Not to mention crocodiles, with their "cheerful, happy-go-lucky personalities". Expect a topsy-turvy world of well-meaning advice as author Alison Rutstein plays with the gap between what we know and what she's telling us, while Tommy Doyle's energetic artwork takes the joke to another level. Anyone old enough to twig that we're not meant to trust the narrator will enjoy the interplay between words, pictures and subtext; and you could be surprised at the level of sophistication shown by your charges here, even if they don't understand every nuance.

# READ ALL ABOUT IT!

Have you seen these fantastic publications?

## Spiro

(Scribble, paperback, £7.99)



Do you know the all-important recipe for success? According to Spiro, it's 11% hunger, 34% trying again, 53% giving it another shot, and 2% luck. Plus, quite a bit of spider silk... Anna McGregor shows rather than tells: cause and effect is a key story component, with text and pictures working together to suggest more than first meets the eye. Spiro's neon body makes a visual splash, and changes in viewpoint add to the humour and suspense.

## One Button and the Sea

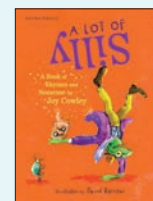
(Sallywag Press, hardback, £12.99)



"Grandpa, tell me the story again of when we went to sea..." Powered by something wild and fundamentally significant, this beautifully illustrated picture book prompts us to think about loss and change. It may be read as an allegory about refugees or interpreted in ways that speak to other experiences and concerns. But, infused as it is with wisdom and charm, it's easy to enjoy and is essentially uplifting.

## A Lot of Silly: A Book of Rhymes and Nonsense

(Gecko Press, hardback, £16.99)



Most of Joy Cowley's poems rhyme; a few don't. Some restrain themselves to four lines of absurdity; others are longer. Many evoke more

than just a giggle on their way to unexpected destinations, and a handful are recognisably tall stories or jokes. But they are all, as advertised, most gloriously silly. David Barrow's illustrations match the timeless exuberance of the text.

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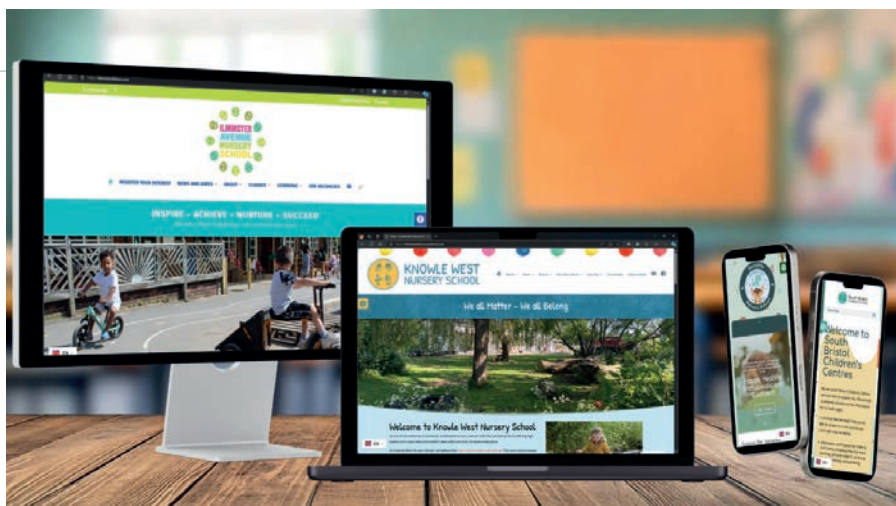
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Its websites are designed to be communication hubs and a valuable marketing resource – Hartcliffe Nursery School saw website traffic surge by 700% within a year of launch, demonstrating how an effective digital presence can transform engagement and reach new parents and carers.

Visit [chaoscreated.com/earlyyears](https://chaoscreated.com/earlyyears) or call 0117 332 1235.



# HAVE YOU

*TEY's look at the latest early years tools, toys, books and activities...*

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offering a free resource pack to UK education settings. You can choose one beautiful resources pack, made from natural UK timber, from the following selection: Three Bears; Owl Family; Story Creation Counters. Each resource comes with activity ideas, written with teachers and play specialists.

To get your pack, send a large envelope with a *large letter stamp* – addressed with your contact name; name of the education/childcare setting; address and post code – to Outdoor Classrooms Ltd, 3 Cromack View, Pudsey, LS28 7PX. This offer is subject to availability.

Visit [outdoorclassrooms.co.uk](https://outdoorclassrooms.co.uk)



## BUSINESS SUPPORT

Are you looking for support to start, grow or sustain your early years childcare business? Childcare Works has launched two new free, comprehensive toolkits for early years and wraparound providers, specially created for 2025 and funded by the DfE. The resources are organised into six categories: Business Planning, Running Childcare Provision, Business Growth, Leadership and Management, Partnership Working, and SEND and Inclusive Practice; from establishing your business structure and registering with Ofsted, to expanding across multiple sites, to identifying ways to improve your existing provision, both are packed with useful information to help businesses small and large navigate the sector's challenges.

**Access these resources and more on the Childcare Works HUB: [childcareworks.org.uk](https://childcareworks.org.uk)**



## MULTISENSORY MASTERPIECES

FRAMELESS London is an accessible, multisensory immersive art experience that offers unique, transformative learning opportunities for children.

Through four stunning galleries, they'll engage with some of the world's greatest masterpieces like never before, exploring, learning, and finding inspiration in the power of art. Choose from mainstream tour options, including Guided and Flexi, or opt for the Relaxed tour, depending on your educational needs. FRAMELESS also offers dedicated Chilled Sessions specially designed for SEND visitors, available in February, April, May and August.

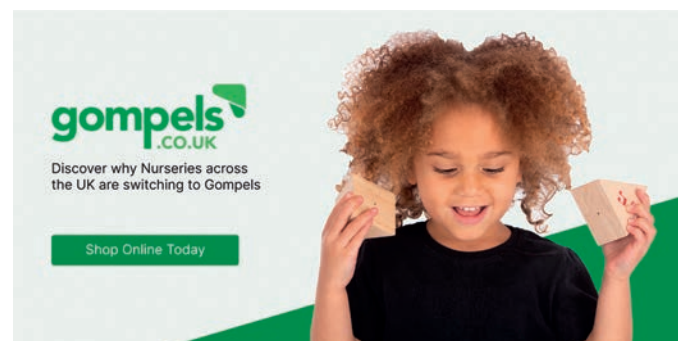
**Find out more at [frameless.com/schools-programme](https://frameless.com/schools-programme)**



## CODING WITH CRITTERS

This new range of remote control woodland animals has been specially created by Hope to equip little ones for a technological future. Moxy the Mouse, Bo the Badger, and Fifi the Fox have been designed to evolve alongside the child's development, with each product increasing in complexity. Suitable from 10 months to 4+ years, the range enhances fine motor skills and understanding of the world as well as guiding children in using directional language.

**Find out more at [hope-education.co.uk/remote-control-animals](https://hope-education.co.uk/remote-control-animals)**

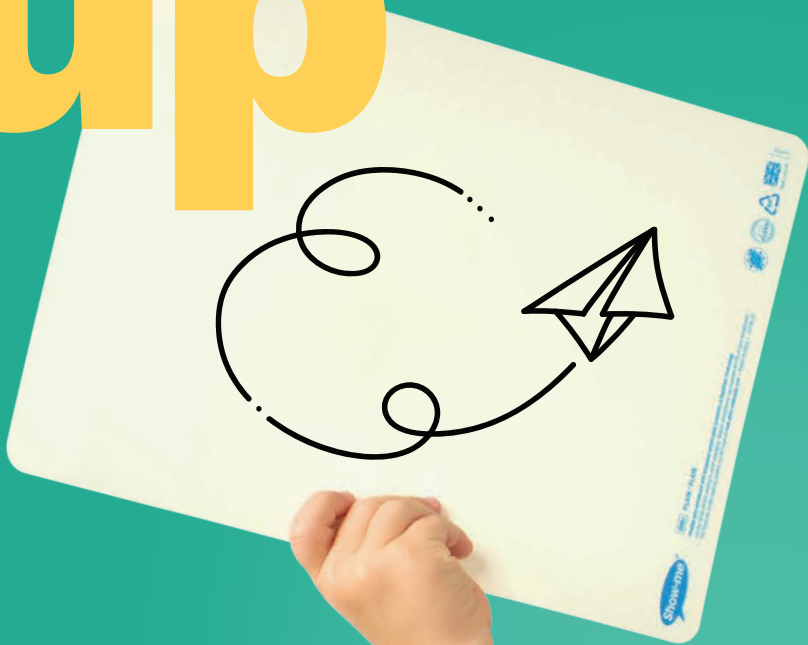


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*Practical support and comment for owners and managers of early years settings...*



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Have you seen the winners of the Teach Early Years Awards 2024? Visit [tinyurl.com/TEYawrd24](https://tinyurl.com/TEYawrd24) to download our exclusive guide and read all about them!



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Citation's Gill McAteer and Jonathan Broadbery of the NDNA explore the role good HR can play in recruitment and staff retention.

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Three titles to inform and improve your team's practice, covering topics as diverse as attention and the impact of early relationships on later health outcomes.

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**MARK BOTHA**

is CEO of training provider Shaping Lives



**GILL MCATEER**

is director of employment law at Citation



**JAMES HEMSALL OBE**

is managing director of Coram Hemsall's

# Safeguarding Every Day... it's what we do.

Cath Bennett, founder and director of Safeguarding Every Day Ltd (SED) comes from an education and social care background with expertise in the areas of adverse childhood experiences (ACES) and specifically the impact of domestic abuse on children.

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EVERY DAY



**SED aims to enable education providers' skills and knowledge to teach through a trauma informed approach, allowing children to develop and grow into happy, healthy adults. With a preventative approach as well as essential, reactive responses, there is always a heavy focus on understanding behaviour as communication and recognising indicators to intervene early.**

#### **A clear ethos**

Consent in itself is not always considered as part of Early Years education, and on surface level be deemed as inappropriate for the age group. However, when we look at the foundations of what consent stands for, it is clear that early education around boundaries, trust, and respect create a starting platform to launch future learning during their educational journey. Teaching the life skill of consent in Early Years is the first step to developing a generation of healthier and trusting relationships in adulthood.

#### **Essential CPD for Early Years professionals**

The 'Let's Teach Consent in the Early Years' course was developed to provide an insight for educators on the importance of teaching the early stages of consent, what this looks like in an age-appropriate curriculum, and the potential impact of missed opportunities. Much of what is developed in Early Years paves the way to future learning and future life choices. The course, which we offer to settings and childminders, helps to highlight the importance of early relationship development, the development of key vocabulary and communication as well as emotional literacy.

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As well as training offers, another approach to embedding consistent and effective safeguarding processes is through a safeguarding review of a provision. This two-day process provides opportunity to highlight existing good practice as well as access advice and guidance on developing further.



**Reach out to Cath through email, the website or social media. Alternatively, you can schedule a FREE 30-minute consultation to discuss training or safeguarding reviews at [calendly.com/safeguardingeveryday/30min](https://calendly.com/safeguardingeveryday/30min)**

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# “Apprenticeships can benefit existing staff”

**T**oday, there is an increasing appreciation of the importance of high-quality early years provision.

The first five years of a child’s life are critical for their long-term development, and early years educators play a vital role in ensuring positive outcomes for young children.

Early years practitioners have the unique opportunity to pursue a career with purpose, foster a love of learning in young children, and make a positive, lasting impact on their early development. However, the sector continues to face pressing skills gaps and a growing recruitment and retention crisis, which will only worsen unless urgent action is taken.

## Sector challenges

The early years sector has seen significant change in recent years, following the expansion of free childcare under the Conservative government, set to be extended further by September 2025, and Labour’s pledge to open up an additional 3,000 new nursery places. This is in addition to changes to government-funded childcare hours. The new measures will offer up to 30 funded hours of childcare per week, over 38 weeks of the year, to children aged nine months and over, with the policy set to be delivered from April 2024 to September 2025.

According to the Department for Education’s projections, around 70,000 new places and 35,000 additional early years educators will be needed to meet the demand placed on the childcare sector through the planned expansion of government-funded entitlements.

The sector is also responding to the urgent challenges around SEND provision in early years. Recent reports highlighted that a shortage of special needs support in the sector, combined with rising numbers of children diagnosed with special educational needs, is increasing pressure on childcare providers and schools (bit.ly/4i2pliM). DfE data shows that the number of youngsters with an education, health, and care plan for SEND in England has soared to the highest rate in six years.

**Apprenticeships allow employees at all levels to upskill**

## Training is key

With the early years sector facing evolving challenges and growing pressures, the need for a highly trained and motivated workforce is more important than ever. However, for nursery providers, staff retention remains a key concern. With the sector typically attracting a younger workforce, competition from other industries is fierce, and many young recruits may not consider early years as a long-term career option.

This is where early years

apprenticeships can help. And not just for new or younger recruits – apprenticeships can offer fresh career routes and on-the-job skills training for existing employees of all ages. Open to anyone aged 16 or over, apprenticeships allow practitioners at all levels to upskill and learn while they work and can deliver significant benefits to nursery providers too.

## Award-winning apprenticeships

Early years apprenticeships are a vital tool in creating future pathways to long-term careers, with a focus on hands-on training and development. By providing access to apprenticeships, nursery providers can develop their current team without disrupting the business. An excellent way to boost team morale, it can help to demonstrate a strong commitment to staff development.

Training providers work in close collaboration with nursery managers to ensure that all teaching can be applied directly to their employees’ day-to-day roles, ensuring maximum engagement and results. They can also offer guidance on available funding and grants to support the process.

As a trusted training provider, Shaping Lives builds on two decades of experience in the early years sector and the successful delivery of tens of thousands of apprenticeships. We’re also the first early years’ educator to introduce a SENDCo specialism available to all learners, after identifying this as a vital step forward to support children and families.

By offering apprenticeships to existing employees, nursery providers can support the professional development of their workforce, help future-proof the business, and, most importantly, foster a highly skilled team that can provide the best outcomes for young children.

**Mark Botha is CEO of Shaping Lives. To find out more, visit [shapinglives.co.uk](https://shapinglives.co.uk)**





GILL MCATEER IS DIRECTOR OF EMPLOYMENT LAW AT CITATION

## FUNDED PLACES:

# How can nurseries meet demand?

The 2024 expansion of funded childcare hours for eligible children aimed to assist a smoother return-to-work and was celebrated by working parents, employers and campaigners alike – but what about the impact on childcare providers? Gill McAteer, director of employment law at Citation, and Jonathan Broadbery, NDNA’s director of policy, explore the issues.

### BATTLING HEADWINDS

The new 15 hours funded childcare allowance for eligible nine-month to two-year-olds in England and the 30 hours of childcare for three to four-year-olds in all eligible families has provided a lifeline for many, but for nurseries, it has exacerbated already deep-rooted issues.

“Staff recruitment and retention has long been an issue within the sector,” comments Jonathan Broadbery. “With rising costs, nurseries have been battling to stay afloat due to business rates, utilities and food costs. With the impact of the most recent Budget announcement on changes to National Insurance, the National Minimum and Living Wages, a single nursery with 18 staff will have to find an extra £47,000 per year. These are expenses that are increasing while funding rates are not keeping up.”

“Nurseries must ensure they are well informed about the details of new funding, including eligibility criteria, so they can communicate this information to parents,” stresses Gill McAteer. “Recruitment is expensive, and attracting and retaining the right staff is key to running a successful nursery.”

### COUNTING COSTS

The expansion of funded childcare places a new onus on nurseries to keep up with increased demand from families. The National Audit Office found that 85,000 new places are needed by September 2025, which has put huge financial strain on providers. In a bid to help overcome this, the previous government pledged £100m of capital support to help providers expand their premises. The Childcare Expansion Capital Grant Scheme was to help deliver new places for children aged nine months to three years old, as well as support wraparound provision for primary school-aged children.

*“In the current landscape, retaining skilled employees is vital”*

Jonathan explains, “The fund was not even enough to deliver the expansions required, but the situation has been made worse still as, with one year to go, most local authorities had not decided on their plans or distributed the financial support.” An NDNA investigation showed that nine months after the Grant’s launch, 82.5% of local authorities hadn’t distributed additional funding, and nurseries aren’t getting the support they need, with less than 5% of the £100m distributed to date.

“Waiting lists are growing, and lots of nurseries told us that they would need to adapt or expand their

settings to offer the places needed for funded babies and two-year-olds,” he continues. “We even know of nurseries that have taken the financial risk to expand even before their council has decided how they want nurseries to bid for this support fund. The government has made a commitment to supporting parents and delivering on the expansion of funded hours, but this needs to be backed up with the resources required to ensure settings are the best possible learning environments for our youngest children.”

The minimum wage hike is adding further fuel to the fire. Government funding for the existing childcare offer is not keeping pace with rising costs, with wage bills up by 14.4% from April 2024 compared with a 4.6% rise in funding rates. In early 2024, 83% of nurseries said their costs were higher than the funding for three- and four-year-old places. Their average shortfall was a staggering £2.36 per hour per child or £1,345 over the year for a 15-hour place. As a result, nurseries continue to close at a time when society needs them most. The double whammy of increased NICs and above inflation increases to wages will make this situation worse.

### ALLEVIATING PRESSURES

Nurseries are seeking to manage these challenges by streamlining recruitment, compliance and workforce management. The priority is to attract staff through targeted strategies, enabling providers to focus on delivering quality childcare while meeting funding obligations and maintaining staff wellbeing.

“In order to tackle record-long



waiting lists and navigate the influx of children enrolling as seamlessly as possible, day nursery managers must implement robust recruitment and people management processes that help to attract the right type of staff through the door,” says Gill. “They could consider some training for new recruits once they have started employment, rather than requiring certain qualifications on application, to widen the pool of potential candidates. This would then also ensure that their employees have undertaken the training that’s needed to do the job well.

“However, part of the recruitment process includes lengthy DBS checks, which in some cases can take weeks to process – time that the sector just doesn’t have to spare. It is also imperative to carry out Right to Work checks, as there are severe legal consequences if these aren’t done correctly. Enlisting the help of a third-

party employment screening service such as uCheck.co.uk can help provide a stopgap in these instances, saving precious time to get staff onboarded as quickly and efficiently as possible. The rapid online platform allows you to request checks in a matter of minutes and guarantees quicker results than government checks.”

In the current landscape, retaining skilled employees is vital for nurseries to meet regulatory requirements and maintain service quality. Moreover, a stable workforce helps create a positive workplace culture that benefits both staff and the children they nurture. “Recruitment is not the only measure that’s needed – retention of staff is equally as important,” Gill explains. “Nurseries should engage staff from the beginning. A good induction process is key to ensuring that staff

feel engaged and understand their role and responsibilities – both the good and more challenging aspects – so they know what to expect and managers are sure they’ve got someone that’s up to the job. It’s good to create a clear induction timetable to ensure the employee meets the necessary people and gets a good understanding of the business from day one. The business could set up a buddy system so the new starter feels welcomed and has an easy point of contact too.

“Nurseries should also consider measures to foster engagement generally with its employees. Wellbeing initiatives are important, some of which can be achieved without great expense. For example, fostering open-door relationships with managers so that employees can easily raise any health or personal issues, and team initiatives such as a charity challenge. Measures such as timetabling breaktimes so that employees can bond with colleagues could also be considered.”

Jonathan adds, “When thinking about retention, we know that staff wellbeing and progression are key priorities for them. The newly established Institute of Early Years Education ([instituteofearlyyearseducation.org.uk](http://instituteofearlyyearseducation.org.uk)) provides great CPD opportunities, a way to measure and share professional development, as well as staff benefits such as wellbeing resources, for example, gym access and 24/7 GP advice.”

The expansion of funded childcare hours offers tremendous benefits to families and the economy, but it has placed nurseries under unprecedented strain. By focusing on attracting and retaining skilled staff and leveraging tools to improve efficiency, nurseries can navigate this demanding period. However, the government must also deliver on its promises of financial and operational support to ensure providers have the resources they need.

**Citation is a UK leading health and safety and HR and employment law provider. Visit [citation.co.uk](http://citation.co.uk). The National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA) is the national charity representing children’s nurseries across the UK. Visit [ndna.org.uk](http://ndna.org.uk)**

**14.4%**  
*Increase  
in nursery  
wage bill  
since April  
2024*

SOURCE: NDNA





# “It’s time to sharpen your pencils and plan”

It’s safe to say that 2025 will be another big year for anyone managing early years provision. Anyone in the sector could be forgiven for feeling browbeaten by challenges and changes, and it can be difficult to find the emotional resolve, time, and physical or financial resources to create advantages from them. We also need to have a little in reserve for when the unexpected happens.

There’ll be much to navigate as we move from previous government policies and work through new government ambitions. The most

place types) performing?

- Talk with existing parents and confirm how many will convert from 15 to 30 funded hours from September, and how that needs to be offered across term times and beyond.
- Ensure families know about Childcare Choices and government support to assist them to buy additional hours (Tax-Free Childcare or Universal Credit).
- Look at patterns and trends. Consider how these may affect spring and summer terms. What lessons are there for September 2025? This will all help inform place planning, budgeting and resourcing.
- Continue ongoing monitoring on an “as live” basis and layer on the local announcements of funding rates for 2025–2026 (due in February) and other changes such as guidance. Be aware there is interest from the DfE in

how charges should be levied or not, especially for disadvantaged families. New announcements may happen this term.

- Shadow budgets that consider various scenarios and trends can help here, as well as regular “checking in” to see how estimates are matching reality – or not.
- Engage with local authorities you contract with. Their information and survey requests are to support you strategically and sustainably. In return, you can ask what is happening in your catchment areas, e.g. supply and demand, school-based nurseries,

## 80% Estimated sector income from DfE funding

- and breakfast clubs.
- Keep a lookout for the further government Budget statements for 2026–2027 and 2027–2028, as this may or may not reveal longer-term ambitions for the reform of early years.

### The summer term

By now you will have an informed idea of how your setting has settled into the delivery of expanded entitlements and be better able to consider September 2025.

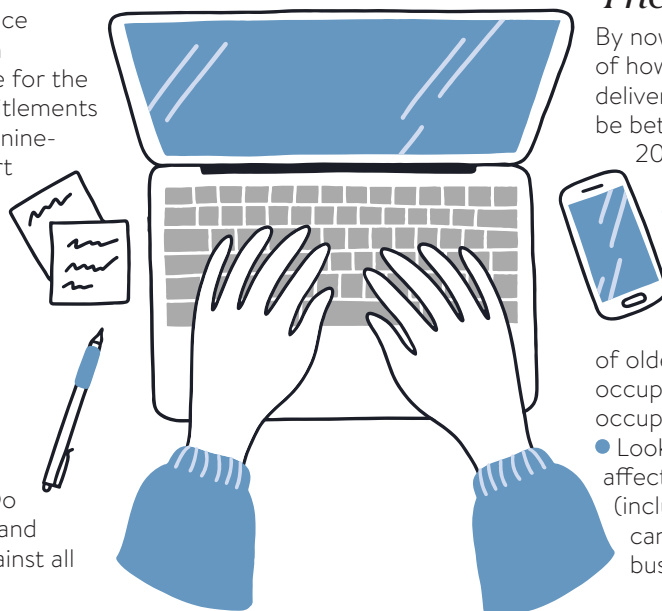
- Revisit what parents were saying last term and ask whether things have changed. Is your planning still accurate? How does the transition of older children to school affect occupancy? What are your plans if occupancy is lower than predicted?
- Look again at how entitlement has affected expenditure and revenue (including charging). This knowledge can be used to finesse your delivery business and staffing model, and

## “Confirm how many parents will convert from 15 to 30 funded hours”

significant shift will be further increases and influences of place funding. DfE funding will be an estimated 80% of total income for the sector as working families’ entitlements move from 15 to 30 hours for nine-plus-month-olds until they start school. That is huge, so it’s time to sharpen pencils and to plan.

### The spring term

- If you haven’t already, make time to review autumn term 2024. Look at the take-up of funded entitlements and how that affected expenditure and income (including charging). Do you need workforce capacity, and how is supply and demand (against all





how you can communicate with existing, new and potential families.

- Ensure all new-starter families know when their child(ren) may start and are aware of Childcare Choices and government support to assist them to buy additional hours (Tax-Free Childcare or Universal Credit).
- Be aware that breakfast clubs may be changing how they operate or opening as early-adopter schools start.
- Ensure you know if there will be a new school-based nursery in your area, and the implications or opportunities.

necessary changes informed by being on top of your facts and figures. To do that, your as-live monitoring of your predicted budget against actual will help you consider if, and how, entitlements have affected income (including charging) and expenditure and consider what changes may be required. The national average funding rates for 2026–2027 will also be announced.

For more information, visit [coramhempalls.org.uk](http://coramhempalls.org.uk)



## The autumn term

The 30 hours entitlement for children aged nine-plus months will come into effect for working families, and you should now be benefiting from your earlier consultation and resource planning. It is never too late to make

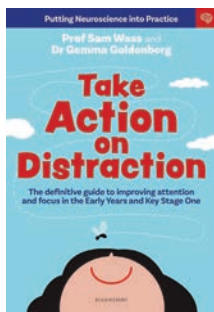
**£47K**  
Increase  
in nursery  
operating costs  
from April

SOURCE: NDNA

## CPD BOOKSHELF

THREE READS THAT WILL IMPROVE YOUR PRACTICE...

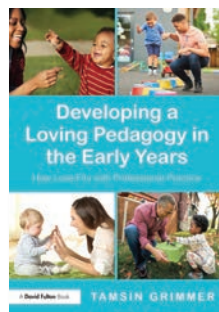
**Take Action on Distraction**  
(Bloomsbury Education, £18)



Written by Professor Sam Wass and Dr Gemma Goldenberg, both experts in psychology and neuroscience, this accessible look at how attention works is packed with clear explanations, practical tips, and reflective questions to discuss with children and colleagues, all aimed at helping you improve focus and concentration and create a calmer, happier, and more effective learning environment.

Visit [bloomsbury.com](http://bloomsbury.com)

**Loving Pedagogy Explained**  
(Routledge, £14.44)



Do we talk enough about love as it applies to education? Part of the Key Concepts in Early Childhood series, *Loving Pedagogy Explained* does exactly what the title promises, unpicking terms like advocacy, attachment, attunement, belonging, compassion, emotion coaching, empathy and empowerment, and setting out what a loving ethos can look like when applied to both our practice and policies.

Visit [routledge.com](http://routledge.com)

**1001 Days: How Our First Years Shape Our Lifelong Health**  
(Cornerstone Press, £22)



This new title from Sue Gerhardt, author of the critically acclaimed *Why Love Matters*, is another astonishingly powerful read for anyone with an interest in child development and wellbeing. Drawing on an incredible range of research, Gerhardt uses solid science to show what a profound impact early relationships can have on an individual's later health outcomes; it's eye-opening stuff.

Visit [penguin.co.uk](http://penguin.co.uk)

## A LETTER TO...

# *the Education Secretary*

*The government must provide expert training to make the new nursery initiative work, says the **Secret Practitioner**...*

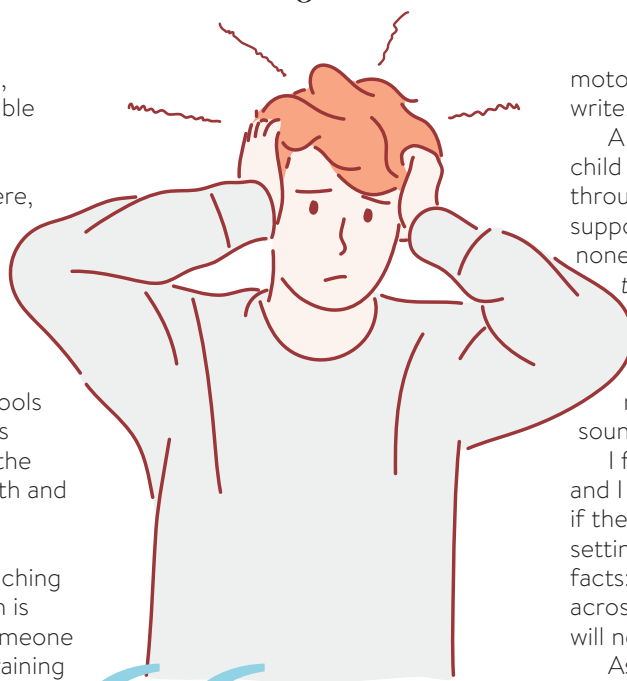
**D**ear Bridget Phillipson, There's a memorable scene in the Arnold Schwarzenegger film *Kindergarten Cop* where, after his first day in a nursery classroom, he collapses into bed, exhausted. During my first six weeks as a Reception teacher, that was me – every single day. The government's plan to open 3,000 early years settings in schools is a welcome step forward, but its success will depend on avoiding the mistakes I made in that first month and a half.

The early years experience is fundamentally different from teaching older children, yet this distinction is often misunderstood. Even as someone who had already adapted from training as a secondary teacher to teaching Year 4 in a large junior school, I was unprepared for the shift to EYFS. The challenge wasn't the children – it was me and my misunderstanding of what the role required.

In my previous jobs, I was used to being the teacher in the room. I planned when we'd tackle each topic, the approach I would take, and the outcomes I expected from each lesson. My class would sit at their tables, they would listen to what we all had to say, and then (mostly) get on with what they needed to do.

When I stepped into my first Reception classroom, I thought I was ready. I'd met the children, spoken with the team, and prepared for what we were going to do. But I hadn't planned for what I would experience – which at the time felt like complete chaos.

I'm embarrassed to admit it now, but during those first weeks I was not the best person for that classroom. Thankfully, I had incredible support, which kept things on track and ensured the children had a great start to their



*There is a mistaken view that teaching younger children is somehow easier*

first year at school.

And then, sometime during that first half term, something clicked. I realised that my role in early years wasn't to "teach" in the traditional sense. I was there to facilitate the children's learning. Most importantly, I was there to help them understand that *they were learners*.

### *The fundamentals*

The skills you need to teach in early years are not the same as those for teaching older children. I assumed they were. In early years, teachers focus on the fundamentals that need to be in place to ensure the next phase of learning can happen – like supporting the development of fine and gross

motor skills that will enable pupils to write.

A deep understanding of how a child learns is essential in EYFS. I'd sat through countless staff meetings on supporting children to read; however, none addressed how to teach them *to begin reading*. How do you help a four-year-old to recognise the shapes on a page as letters, understand how those letters represent sounds, and blend those sounds to make words?

I found my calling in early years, and I hope many others will, too. But if the plan to open 3,000 early years settings is to succeed, we need to face facts: asking teachers to work "flexibly" across Key Stages 1, 2 and early years will not work.

As with my own experience, there is a persistent, mistaken view that teaching younger children is somehow easier. Early years is often seen as the lightweight end of teaching. But the reality is that early years teachers require specialised knowledge, a deep understanding of child development, and a thorough grasp of the EYFS statutory framework.

Unlike Arnold Schwarzenegger in *Kindergarten Cop*, early years teachers don't need to be thrown into the deep end to learn the ropes. They need training, support, and time to observe effective practice. Teachers moving into early years should have opportunities to work alongside experienced teams, to understand how our youngest children learn, and to develop the skills required for this unique and rewarding role.

I urge you to ensure that the government's plans for early years settings take this into account. The future success of this initiative – and, more importantly, the future success of our youngest learners – depends on it.

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