



Follow THE Leader

follow leader follow leader follow leader follow leader follow leader follow leader

Quality care provision in early years settings has to start at the top, says **Sue Robb...**

Sound systems

Robust systems and structures need to be in place to promote the active engagement of mothers and fathers in their children's learning and development. Parents, guardians and carers should feel supported and involved. They also need to recognise the importance of the home learning environment they provide for their children. Again the reformed EYFS has set out to raise the bar of just how influential parents' role is in their child's learning and development. Effective leaders will respond to this by reviewing their setting's work with families to ensure strong engagement.

Positive relationships and the setting's enabling environment mean that practitioners will be confident in their interactions with children in order to further their learning. The expectations that are set by the leaders within a setting are the building blocks for staff being able to provide meaningful personal development plans for each child, tailored to that child's needs and interests. Indeed, good managers will always be mindful of identifying children's needs as early as possible, and putting detailed plans into place to support their next learning steps – this is critical. Children's progress must be a central objective, even if this is about detecting where there are problems and obstacles. Ensuring plans are in place to support these needs is an important aspect of the leadership role. Leaders in quality

settings enable their staff to give consideration not only to what children learn but also to how they learn, as in the characteristics of effective learning – again a core part of the reformed EYFS.

In addition to the positive practices that are set out, encouraged, and developed by leaders in early years settings, the enabling environment needs to be safe and stimulating. At the very heart of the practice is the requirement for staff to understand the principles of the EYFS – therefore, the most effective leaders are the most mindful of their workforce. Emphasising a strong sign-up to the understanding of child development for all staff and ensuring that staff members see themselves as lifelong learners is fundamental. Of course in supporting this, leaders should make CPD a priority in their planning – providing opportunities on identified needs such as working with two-year-olds; on a specific area of learning; on observational assessment; on working with fellow professionals such as health visitors; and around communicating with parents.

The value of CPD has been touched upon, but getting staff access to relevant training is made even more impactful if there are defined practices for sharing the learning and new ideas from staff that have undergone training with colleagues 'back at base'. Leaders can also foster learning from other settings through a 'buddying' approach, with settings working together on a common theme.

A question of support

As managers of people, leaders in early years settings have an overview of how staff performance is assessed and how areas for

The importance of strong, effective leadership is well known. It is not a new mantra but nevertheless it is always a highly relevant one in early years settings, as competent, committed, and adaptable leaders are vital for securing continuous quality improvement. Through leading by example, as well as via his or her guidance, it is the person in charge who sets the quality benchmark, tone and aspirations for a setting. Much has been documented about effective leadership and the National College is actively promoting the importance of this area through its system leadership work.

A core part of a leader's role is to ensure the quality of the setting's practice. He or she is responsible for setting the example in terms of how staff interact with the children they care for and teach. The reformed EYFS framework has refocused our attention on the importance of our interactions with our children in order to secure high-quality learning and teaching. Staff and children in the most effective settings have warm, inclusive and trusting relationships – another vital ingredient in children's emotional wellbeing and development.

Emphasising a strong sign-up to the understanding of child development for all staff and ensuring that staff members see themselves as lifelong learners is fundamental

findoutmore

Sue Robb is head of early years at 4Children, a national charity supporting children and their families. Visit foundationyears.org.uk for more information.

follow THE leader follow

development are identified.

It is important to aim for a system where there are clear performance management systems in place to support all staff. This is not just about ensuring that staff are on target, but also that they feel supported by the leadership in a setting – this is an important factor in ensuring that problems in practices can be identified and overcome, as well as being essential for overall morale.

Ideally, early years leaders need to encourage a continuous cycle of self-evaluation, improvement and reflection. Part of this is asking oneself, am I ensuring that I empower my practitioners to see themselves as learners, seeking to improve their practice? Ultimately staff need to be aware of the processes that are in place to support them as practitioners, and this awareness should be fostered at management level. Effective leaders have in place a cycle of: self-evaluation; identifying and agreeing improvement priorities; drawing up a plan to address the priorities; a sensible time to action the plans; and a schedule for reviewing

them to inform the next self-evaluation.

Quality provision at all levels within a setting is essential for improving children's outcomes and key to this is strong, effective leadership. There are a number of resources to support leaders and practitioners of all levels on the foundation years website foundationyears.org.uk, for example, 'The Early Years Quality Improvement Support Programme', and 'The Early Years Quality Wheel'.

With such leadership practices in place, and with the support of fellow managers and the resources mentioned, leaders will find themselves well placed when Ofsted comes calling – in fact, they should feel empowered to take control of the inspection to ensure an outcome that reflects the quality of the setting they lead.

Selection box

Securing members of staff who enjoy working with children and families, have ambitions for their own learning, can reflect on their own practice and have a passion for ensuring the very best for their children is a challenge that is absolutely key for the leader as a recruiter. One way of effectively selecting the most committed and motivated employees might involve observing would-be staff interacting with children as part of the selection process. New recruits into nursery settings should also have a named colleague who can support them in their developing role. This is all part of providing a structured recruitment and staff development process.