

Write your SEF

Sue Cowley offers tips on committing your self-evaluation to paper or screen, and explores the choice of quality assurance frameworks available for early years settings...

Your self-evaluation form (SEF) offers you a chance to highlight the great practice that goes on at your setting. It should also help you identify those areas where you know you need to improve, and show how you plan to improve them.

It works well to write your SEF using a mixture of narrative and bullet points as appropriate. This allows you to elaborate on any key points and also to give detailed evidence to support what you say. Use examples from your day-to-day practice to demonstrate your key strengths. Include enough detail so that someone coming into your setting can see exactly how you do what you say you do. Where you set targets for improvement, include information about who is responsible and when any planned improvements will take place.

You can use the three-step process, 'Statement, Evidence, Develop', to ensure that you include sufficient detail in your SEF about what you see as your strengths:

Give a statement: Make a statement of fact about one of your setting's strengths.

As a setting we have an ongoing commitment to helping children build their physical strength and stamina. We encourage them to enjoy regular participation in sports, and in other physical and creative movement activities.

Have a small **SEF notebook**, freely **available** to all staff, in which they can jot down a **note** when they **do** something **interesting**

Support it with evidence: Support the statement you have made by giving specific evidence. If you use lots of approaches, this can usefully be done in a bulleted list.

As part of this commitment, we:

- *have a weekly visit from a specialist children's yoga teacher, in which the children learn yoga movements based around children's stories;*
- *run an annual sports day, which is very well attended by parents and carers;*
- *have developed an outdoor area, with a space for playing on ride-on toys and room for growing plants;*
- *take the children to dig at our allotment area each week, where we grow our own crops.*

Develop the point: Make links to other aspects of your provision, or talk about how you will sustain this strength in the future.

We are keen to widen the variety of physical activities that we offer, to match each child's needs and interests. Following a discussion with children and parents about new sports they wanted to try, we are going to book a weekly visit from a qualified early years tennis coach for the summer term. A staff member will contact our local tennis club to identify a suitable coach (Action: SP to make contact by 21st March).

This process can also be used to write about what you see as your areas for improvement

Finding evidence

Evidence can take many different forms. It might be quantifiable data, for instance, responses from a parent questionnaire, in which parents grade your setting, or data measuring children's progress. It could also be examples of things you have done at your setting to enhance your provision such as a visit you have arranged from an outside group. You could also use comments from parents in a 'Comments Book' or responses posted by parents on your setting's website or blog.



In a busy early years setting, it is often tricky to remember all the great things you have done, so have a small SEF notebook, freely available to all staff, in which they can jot down a note when they do something interesting. If you don't have the space to include all this information in your SEF, highlight your notebook to the inspector as another source of evidence.

Frameworks for self-evaluation

It is not compulsory to use the Ofsted SEF as a framework for writing your self-evaluation. You simply need to show that you are using self-evaluation to reflect on your practice and to make improvements to your provision. Although it feels 'safe' to use the Ofsted framework, think carefully about which format is going to work best for your setting. Ideally, you want a framework that...

- encourages staff to participate in an ongoing process of reflection;
- gives a chance for all stakeholders to have an input;
- gives sufficient detail about your setting, but is still manageable;
- highlights your strengths;
- identifies your areas for improvement and helps you set targets.

The Ofsted SEF

The Ofsted SEF has recently been updated and is shorter and less detailed than the previous version. In the Ofsted SEF, you are asked to give information about:

- your setting and your staff;
- the views of those who use your setting;
- how well you meet your children's needs;
- how well you contribute to their wellbeing;
- how effective your leadership and management is;
- the overall quality and standards of your setting.

You can apply for a security token and log-in, which allows you to update your SEF online.

The Bristol Standard

The Bristol Standard is an alternative framework for evaluating your setting, which is now offered by a number of local authorities. The Standard was first developed in the 1990s by a working party of early years practitioners, and it is currently in its fourth edition. The Standard is based on a three-year cycle, with settings preparing a portfolio, which is submitted to a cross county panel for validation. One of the key benefits of the Standard is that the local authority allocates a mentor to the setting. The mentor helps to facilitate an initial staff meeting, and makes two more visits during the first year to 18 months of the process.

Case study: Bristol fashion

At our setting, we had completed our original Ofsted SEF in lots of detail. However, when the new shortened Ofsted SEF was published, we felt it was time to explore other quality assurance schemes. We are now in the process of completing the Bristol Standard, with support from our Local Authority Mentor.

Our setting mentor is Jane Southwell from Bath and North East Somerset. Jane describes the Standard as offering "a clearly structured, values-based

framework to support the reflective discussion which is at the heart of effective self-evaluation". Lynne Willmott, our Preschool Leader, has started completing the Standard with Jane's support. Lynne highlights the way that the Standard "encourages all staff members to really think about how we do things and why". She also likes the way that the Standard has given her and her staff "an opportunity to highlight what we do well".

The '10 dimensions' that the Standard asks settings to reflect on are as follows:

1. Values & Aims
2. Relationships & Interactions
3. Supporting Play, Learning & Development
4. The Physical Environment
5. Play & Learning Experiences
6. Observation, Planning & Assessment
7. Leadership, Management & Staffing
8. Equality, Diversity & Inclusion
9. Partnerships with Parents & the Local Community
10. Monitoring & Evaluation

For each of the dimensions, staff complete an evaluation which includes details of:

- Areas of strength
- Evidence
- Areas to focus on next (targets)
- Benefits for the children (of the targets)
- Tasks to be done in order to achieve targets

As well as the Ofsted SEF and the Bristol Standard, there are various other quality assurance schemes that you might like to consider. You can find web links to a number of such schemes below.

Web links

- Ofsted SEF - tinyurl.com/TNsef
- Bristol Standard - tinyurl.com/TNbristol

Charities and other organisations offering Quality Assurance Schemes:

- The National Quality Improvement Network - ncb.org.uk/nqin
- 4Children - tinyurl.com/TNaimhigh
- NCMA - tinyurl.com/TNquality1st
- NDNA - tinyurl.com/TNimprove
- Pre-school Learning Alliance - tinyurl.com/TNreflect



about the author

Sue Cowley is an educational author, trainer and presenter, and also helps to run her local preschool. Her latest early years book is *The Road to Writing: A step by step guide to mark making 3 to 7*. For more information, visit suecowley.co.uk