

HOW DO THEY DO THAT?



There's a wealth of early years expertise around the country, so why not use it? **Kirstine Beeley** explains how visiting other settings can benefit your practice...



With increasing pressures on already stretched budgets, managers need to look at cost-effective ways of ensuring their staff continue to develop professionally. When delivering training round the UK I'm often asked, "How do you think of all these ideas?" My answer is always the same: "I don't think of them - I just use other people's ideas and make them my own!" I strongly believe that the sharing of good practice is key to developing high-quality provision across the early years spectrum. There's much that we can learn from each other, hence this issue I will be looking at how you can

maximise the training potential of visiting other settings...

REFLECT FIRST

To make the most of any visit you need to be clear about what area of your practice you wish to develop. This could be something that has been identified by monitoring, SEF or general staff consensus and forms part of your long-term planning, or it could be developing the knowledge and understanding of individual members of staff and may have been identified via supervision

or appraisal processes.

Once you have a clear idea of the area of focus, you need to work out what the purpose of the visit will be. Do you want to observe routines and practices around a particular area of development? Do you want to get ideas for a specific area of learning, or see how others set their setting up? Or do you want your staff to benefit from working alongside more experienced practitioners? Only when you know what it is you need can you begin to think about where you'll be sending your staff.

WHERE TO GO

It's worth remembering when looking at settings to visit that 'outstanding' Ofsted ratings do not necessarily mean you will witness 'outstanding' practice on a given day. Over time practices can change and evolving staff and management teams can alter a setting's approach beyond all recognition. I would advise monitoring the Ofsted site for 'outstanding' ratings given in recent weeks. Make sure you read the reports to identify areas where each setting has excelled and hence will be able to help your own staff develop.

On the other hand, many settings will have moved their practice forward in leaps and bounds since their last inspection and may be providing 'outstanding' practice despite not having the Ofsted rating to back it up. This is where word of mouth comes into play. Ask your early years support team to recommend settings with a strength in a particular area; they visit settings weekly and will know which could really benefit you. They should also then be able to provide you with contact details so you can get in touch with the appropriate person in the setting.

Finally, keep your ears open and eyes peeled. When your staff are out on training courses make sure they make a note of any settings they hear good things about.

A VISIT TO ANOTHER SETTING CAN BE AS USEFUL AS A SESSION IN AN OFFICIAL TRAINING VENUE, IF NOT MORE SO



Practitioners are usually keen to share their experiences with colleagues, and having a contact 'on the inside' helps to build good working relationships.

BOOK YOUR VISIT

When you call to ask if you or your staff can visit a setting be clear about the reason for your visit. Explain the exact areas you wish to look at (many settings will pull out all the stops to help you see their practice in a particular area if they know that's what you're there to see!). Make sure you explain how you wish the visit to go. Do you just want a chance to observe the setting in action? Do you want to be able to talk to staff? Do you want your staff to work alongside theirs? Negotiate the exact format for the visit before it happens - that way everyone is clear about what to expect and you're less likely to be given the 'guided tour' when really you just want to watch how things work.

TWO HEADS ARE BETTER

The old adage that two heads work better than one applies brilliantly to training. By sending two or more of your staff together on a visit (or a course) they'll be able to share opinions and ideas as they go around, and are more likely to put these ideas into practice when they return if they have someone to support them in their vision. Being able to talk about your views, observations and ideas really helps to boost enthusiasm.

KNOW YOUR STRENGTHS

It's really important that any staff visiting another setting take the opportunity to not

find out more

Kirstine works as a consultant helping settings to develop best practice. Her Pinterest board has lots of photos of settings around the world to help excite and inspire your early years practice. Visit [pinterest.com/kirstinebeeley](https://www.pinterest.com/kirstinebeeley)

only note new ideas but reassure themselves about the good things they already do, too. One setting I work with sent two practitioners to visit another setting recently and they came back more enthused about the high standard of their provision than anything new they saw. They made a really valid point that without a chance to visit others, busy practitioners can forget about all the great stuff they're doing every day.

WHAT'S MINE IS YOURS

If your staff could benefit from working with more experienced practitioners, you could consider a staff swap. Let one of your practitioners work at another setting for a morning and invite someone to come to you. Make sure they're inducted in the same way as any volunteer helper, and that safeguarding policies are followed at all times.

Two preschools I work with are taking advantage of this approach. The first is sending its staff to work in the other to observe their best practice whilst the second is sending experienced staff over to support the staff in the other setting by working with them. A win-win situation!

A TWO-WAY STREET

At the end of your visit it's courteous to offer the chance of a return visit. Remember, every setting has something they do well and something to share with other practitioners. Be proud of what you do best while you strive to be better!

THE RIGHT TIME

THINK CAREFULLY ABOUT WHEN YOU CHOOSE TO VISIT...

If you want to look at ways of developing your physical environment, think about when will be the best time to visit, and how you're going to relay what you see. One solution is to take a camera with you, but this has obvious safeguarding implications. It may be worth arranging to arrive at the end of a day so you can agree to take photos after the children have left, or visiting a setting during an INSET closure or on a day when a session is not being delivered (many children's centres and preschools have a morning or afternoon when there are no children in). Make sure that you adhere to the setting's safeguarding practices at all times, and always ask before you take pictures of anything.

If you want to see how another setting's team deal with a specific routine, make sure that it will actually be

happening during your visit and that you're there in plenty of time to see the process from beginning to end. Don't be afraid to ask if you can have a copy of planning formats or documentation that you see in use. The worst anyone can say is no, and I've not met a setting yet whose ego isn't flattered by another team wanting to follow what they're doing!

If you're looking to observe children and adults in a specific area of learning and development, try to plan your visit to avoid busy times of day like drop-off or lunchtime. This will give you a chance to talk to busy staff without causing them undue stress. Always be considerate of others on a visit and never make a nuisance of yourself; think how you would feel if someone visited your setting and bugged you for answers while you were busy trying to get something done!