



Introduction to English Language Teaching (ELT)

Have you ever found yourself struggling to communicate with someone who doesn't speak English?

Whether you're a care worker, educator, or professional in any field, the ability to convey meaning effectively to Non-Native Speakers of English (NNS) is an invaluable skill.

This webinar will equip you with practical strategies to overcome language barriers and create meaningful connections.

In this session, you'll hear from Jane Maria Harding da Rosa, an ESOL/ EFL expert with over 30 years of experience in teaching.

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Editor's letter

Welcome to the Winter 2024 edition of Alumnate! As the days grow shorter and the festive season draws near, we're here with fresh insights, advice and updates to support you through this busy time of year.

With the New Year on the horizon, it's the perfect time to reflect on past learning and revisit valuable resources. Why not explore our previous events like '[Compassion in action: implementing trauma-informed approaches](#)' or catch up on POD-CACHE episodes from seasons 1-6, like '[Self-care strategies for caregivers](#)' to support your wellbeing in colder months, or the '[Power of reflection in early years](#)' to set meaningful goals for the year ahead.

Now, onto this issue's content!

Winter can take a toll on our wellbeing, so we've curated articles to help you and those in your care stay resilient. Ruth McGuire explores the causes and treatments for Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD), Stephen Mordue teaches us the art of saying 'no', and Kelly Hill shares strategies to build resilience in children and staff during seasonal changes.

As it's also recruitment season, Nikki Mears highlights the need to recognise unique talent and potential beyond traditional labels, while Claudio Sisera focuses on the importance and benefits of a

gender-balanced workforce in early years education.

We also reflect on best practices, with Dr Helen Bilton exploring how outdoor environments help children with personal, social and emotional development (PSED), while Cheryl Warren shares how we can be more neuroinclusive in our settings.

Finally, with the festive season in full swing, Clare Stead provides tips on making a sensory baby-friendly holiday, and Laura Lane tells us how we can look after our oral health while indulging in Christmas treats.

And as always, we answer your careers questions in 'Careers Corner' and have compiled the top sector stories in 'News in brief'.

Got ideas or feedback? We'd love to hear from you at alumni@cache.org.uk

Until next time!

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CACHE Alumni Editor

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The thinking practitioner and the thinking child

→ Annie Pendrey

Contributor bio

In today's world, we're overwhelmed with information and often have little time to stop and think (Cormier, 2024). In this short article, you'll be introduced to different types of thinking, with a focus on critical thinking and your role as an early years practitioner in nurturing and developing children's critical thinking skills.

What types of thinking are there?

There are many different types of thinking, which include:

Creative thinking

Creative thinkers are curious and risk takers. They can often see an answer to a problem in an unconventional way.

Reflective thinkers

Reflective thinkers take their time to ponder and reflect upon a problem, viewing it from more than one perspective.

Analytical thinkers

Analytical thinkers are methodical, processing information in a structured, step-by-step way to approach problems.

Critical thinkers

Critical thinkers question and examine situations fully before making a judgement. The term 'critical' derives from the Greek word 'kritikos', meaning 'to judge or discern'. In today's fast paced world, developing critical thinking is both challenging and essential.

The importance of critical thinking

Critical thinking is the ability to analyse, examine and evaluate information thoughtfully. It requires a level of curiosity and creativity – qualities we often see in two-year-olds who continuously ask 'why?'. Such curiosity should be nurtured

throughout childhood and into adulthood.

However, as Berlyne (1960) suggests, curiosity is often stifled in the education system, where abilities are measured against curriculum standards. This makes the role of educators in fostering curiosity and critical thinking crucial, as it helps children develop their independence, problem-solving skills and resilience for lifelong learning.

Creating critical thinking environments

An environment that sparks a child's curiosity is central to the development of critical thinking skills. Children need a relaxed space, where they don't feel rushed and can freely explore, play, learn and grow.

Key elements of a critical thinking environment include:

Spaces for reflection

Children need a space which provides time and opportunity to take risks in play and ask themselves questions such as 'why', 'how' and 'what if', naturally strengthening their critical thinking skills.

Opportunities that spark curiosity

Provide provocations – materials or scenarios that spark curiosity and encourage children to think, question and judge. These can include both individual reflection time and group activities where children collaborate and share ideas.

The role of the practitioner

As a practitioner, modelling curiosity and critical thinking



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is key to supporting children's development. You can do this by creating play opportunities that spark intrigue and build on a child's interests. In these rich play moments, why not try the following:

Prompt open discussions

Observe children engaged in an activity, and when they invite you in, engage in open-ended discussions. Ask questions such as, 'What do you think?' or 'Why do you think that happened?'

Pause, don't pounce

Allow children time to think during their play. Observe patiently and give them ample time to attempt tasks, problem-solve and to think before you intervene. Each child benefits from time to think independently.

Encourage prediction and hypothesis

Support children's ability to predict and hypothesise by asking questions such as, 'What do you think might happen?'

Build a thinking vocabulary

Think out loud and pose questions to yourself such as 'I wonder...', so children can observe your thought process and begin to mirror this thinking vocabulary themselves.

Let's all embrace Winnie the Pooh's wisdom and work together to build a world where we have time to, 'Think, think, think'.

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Saying 'no' to support your wellbeing

→ **Stephen Mordue**

Contributor bio

In a world that pushes for quick and immediate action, there is power in creating a mindset that instinctively says 'no' – and then works through the reasoning for a 'yes.' This helps us engage in more thoughtful and deliberate decision-making.

Our brains are wired to seek out new and exciting experiences. This dopamine-driven desire for novelty can make us say 'yes' far too easily, leading to overload and burnout. But as American CEO Ashley Fina puts it, if you don't say 'no' to other people, then they won't know the value of your 'yes'.

This begs the question: do **you** know the value of your 'yes'? Do you know what is important to you? We don't spend enough time reflecting on our personal identity and our 'why' in the workplace. We need to understand what truly resonates with our values and motivates us to say 'yes', so we know when to say 'no'.

Beyond this, we and our employers need to acknowledge that when we consistently work beyond our capacity, both we and the organisation suffer. We become less effective, and the quality of our work diminishes. As Keller and Papasan (2014) argue, *"In an effort to attend to all things, everything gets short-changed and nothing gets its due"* (p. 75).

Why do we find it difficult to say 'no'?

Our biological and neurological makeup often leads us to say 'yes' when we should say 'no'. This internal conflict stems from different parts of the brain controlling decision-making, motivation, and emotional regulation. The prefrontal cortex, responsible for planning and self-control, may recognise that saying 'no' aligns with our goals and values but other brain regions, like the amygdala and the reward centre, can often override logic.

The amygdala, which processes fear and anxiety, may drive us to say 'yes' to avoid social rejection or conflict. The brain's reward centre, activated by dopamine, encourages us to seek approval and pleasure, reinforcing the urge to say 'yes'. This conflict between rational decision-making and emotional responses creates cognitive dissonance – the discomfort that arises when our actions don't align with our beliefs.

This internal tension often leads us to prioritise others' needs at the expense of our own, resulting in long-term consequences like burnout.

Get into 'discover mode'

Caroline Webb, in her book *How to Have a Good Day*, suggests that saying 'yes' is a defensive position. She introduces the concept of the "discover-defend axis" to explain how our brain responds to different situations. When we are in defensive mode, our primary focus is on self-protection. This is how our brains react when we feel threatened, leading us to say 'yes' to make the threat go away, because we've learned that this is an effective short-term strategy.

In discover mode, however, we are more likely to be open, curious, and engaged with what is being asked of us. But, when we're caught off guard, it's difficult to feel safe enough to adopt this mindset. The threat of the situation drives us away from the discover mode and back into a defensive 'yes', simply to end the discomfort.

We can also avoid discover mode because we fear that engaging too much may make it seem like we're going to say 'yes', even when we might not. However, adopting a discover mindset, even in uncomfortable situations, can help us better understand what is being asked. This



Honesty is key. It's okay to say you don't want to do something or don't have the time."



avoids the knee-jerk 'yes' that stems from feeling threatened and we can make more thoughtful, informed decisions.

Effective strategies for saying 'no'

Learning how to say 'no' is a vital skill, yet it can feel uncomfortable. However, setting boundaries is essential for both your wellbeing and for maintaining healthy relationships. Here are some strategies:

Be clear and direct

While it may feel awkward, clarity is crucial when saying 'no'. Avoid using vague or ambiguous language that could be misinterpreted as a 'maybe'. A simple and direct 'no' ensures that your message is understood.

If necessary, provide a brief explanation, but don't over-justify your decision. Justifying your 'no' is born out of good self-management and an understanding of your workload. You need to know and be able to demonstrate the extent of your responsibilities.

Be honest

Honesty is key. It's okay to say you don't want to do something or don't have the time. Being truthful about your reasons not only sets clear boundaries but also builds trust. If you're uncomfortable with saying 'no' outright, you can acknowledge the importance of the request while expressing your limitations.

Use "I" statements

Framing your refusal with 'I' statements instead of 'you' statements helps avoid sounding accusatory. For instance, rather than saying, 'You're asking too much of me,' you could say, 'I'm unable to take this on right now.' This language keeps the focus on your needs without placing blame on the other person. It prevents the conversation from becoming confrontational while still communicating your limits. As I've just said though – you need to be able to describe your workload with clarity to be able to do this effectively.

Offer an alternative

If you can't fulfil the request but want to maintain the relationship, offer an alternative. For example, if someone invites you to a meeting but you're unavailable, suggest a different time that works better for you. This shows that while you're saying 'no' to the immediate request, you're still open to connecting under different circumstances.

Practice saying 'no'

If you're not used to saying 'no', practice can help you build confidence. Rehearse with a friend or in front of a mirror until it feels more natural. This practice builds congruence between your words and your emotions, ensuring that your 'no' feels authentic and consistent.

In *How to Have a Good Day*, Caroline Webb suggests that a "positive no" approach encourages setting

boundaries while maintaining positive relationships. It involves starting with warmth by acknowledging and appreciating the person's request, followed by explaining what you're currently focused on, positively highlighting your priorities. Then, expressing regret in saying 'no', and finally concluding with warmth by offering an alternative if you can – maybe connecting them with others, scheduling a later meeting, or simply wishing them success.

Wellbeing at work is founded on good, functional relationships that are realistic about workloads and boundaries. Being able to say 'no' when necessary is not only part of being in a healthy organisation, but also crucial for maintaining your own health and wellbeing.

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POD-CACHE

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The changing shape of childhood

→ Emma Davis

Contributor bio

In recent years, the shape of childhood has undergone significant changes – social, technological, economic and cultural. These have influenced family dynamics, parenting styles, expectations placed on children and the role of early education and schools.

A growing concern is the increasing number of children starting reception deemed to be unready for school. Although school readiness is a contentious subject, this article will focus on the attainment gap shaped by changing childhood factors.

Reasons for this could stem from various circumstances which have influenced how children experience childhood, including increased use of tech, reduced support from extended family, closure of Children's Centres, Covid, and a change in expectations. This article aims not to generalise about all children and all families, but to explore the key considerations in the discourse on the changing shape of childhood.

Evolving family structures

The concept of the nuclear family is no longer the universal norm. Traditionally, families often consisted of a two-parent household with typical gender roles – father as the breadwinner and mother as the caregiver. Today, we have multigenerational households, extended and blended families, single-parent homes, and other diverse structures. Also, as our ability to travel has increased over time, families began to disperse geographically, limiting close contact with other family members, vital for parental support and child rearing.

Changes in family structures and economic pressures have increased the need for childcare, with more parents working and with women making up a larger share of the workforce. This demand has led to more children attending breakfast and after school clubs, though many families rely on grandparents – with Age UK suggesting that there are '5 million grandparents over the age of 50 who provide

regular childcare, worth an estimated £7.7bn annually to the UK economy'.

Economic challenges

Economic influences, exacerbated by Covid and the cost-of-living crisis, have led to an increase in families falling into poverty. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2024) reports that 'over the past 20 years, very deep poverty has risen. Six million people were in very deep poverty in 2021/22, one and a half million more than two decades ago'.

This economic disparity lies in the attainment gap between children living in poverty and their wealthier peers. The Sutton Trust (2024) noted that 'just over half of children from the most income-deprived neighbourhoods reached the expected levels of attainment, compared with nearly three in four children from the least income-deprived areas.' Factors which link poverty and academic attainment in childhood could include physical health, material deprivation, poor nutrition, mental health and bullying (The Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, 2024).

Technology

The digital age has deeply impacted childhood experiences. Although technology offers us many valuable opportunities and educational benefits, its overuse can negatively affect us. Recent data has highlighted that a quarter of 3-to-4-year-olds own a smartphone, and UK Parliament reports a 52% increase in screen time use

between 2020 and 2022, with a significant number of children now having a behavioural addiction to tech. Shockingly, even children as young as six months are exposed to screen time.

Technology shapes children's views, values and ideas of social norms – all previously influenced by their families, neighbours and communities. Extended screen time can limit face to face social interactions and opportunities for verbal communication and affects physical development and attention span. It can also expose children to inappropriate content, including body shaming and distressing news.

Outdoors time

Excessive screen time also minimises the time spent outdoors, leading to a nature deficit. Save the Children (2024) reports that 'just 27% of children said they regularly play outside their homes, compared to 71% of the baby boomer generation. For those aged specifically between 55 – 64, it was 80%, showing that rates of play have declined steadily in just a few generations.'

This decline limits children's opportunities to experience awe and wonder and a curiosity about the natural world. Sensory experiences such as crunching through autumn leaves, jumping in puddles, and feeling the warmth of the sun on their faces are also missed.

Outdoor play provides opportunities to run, climb, balance and cycle, key



to burning off energy and maintaining physical health. NHS guidance recommends that children aged 3–4 should be physically active for three hours a day with at least one hour at moderate to vigorous intensity. Insufficient physical activity could affect children's school readiness, concentration, muscle strength, fine motor skills like holding a pencil, their wellbeing and social skills.

However, this issue isn't only tied to screen time. Changes in communities, such as fewer green spaces, increased traffic and heightened awareness have all contributed to limiting outdoor play.

The future of childhood

All these points can lead us to question the future of childhood. While it may be nostalgic to wish for a time without technology, when children played freely

outdoors, and mud-stained clothes were a sign of a good time, it's clear that addressing today's issues requires action.

Policymakers must prioritise limiting the harmful impact of technology, especially social media, and tackling child poverty. Bridging the attainment gap means looking beyond schools to broader societal factors, including reinstating family support services lost with the closure of Children's Centres.

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The sweet truth about Christmas treats and their impact on your oral health

→ **Laura Lane**

Contributor bio

Christmas – that magical time of year – is just around the corner, with twinkling lights, cozy nights by the fire, and, let's face it, a mountain of sugary treats. From gingerbread men to indulgent hot chocolates with cream and marshmallows; the festive season is a feast for the senses. But what about our teeth?

While these treats bring joy to our taste buds, they may not be as kind to our smiles. Let's look at how we can enjoy all these festive favourites while keeping our teeth off the naughty list!

What's hiding in your sugary treats?

During Christmas, sugars sneak into nearly everything we eat – from your granny's homemade cookies to those irresistible tins of Roses! While they may look festive, these sugars turn into powerful allies of cavity-causing bacteria once they reach our mouths.

Bacteria thrive on sugar. After we enjoy a Christmas treat, they throw their own Christmas party, feasting on the sugar left on our teeth. In return, they produce acids that attack the tooth enamel – the hard, protective layer that keeps our teeth strong. The more sugar we consume, the more acid we produce, weakening the enamel and increasing the risk of cavities.

Naughty or nice: how Christmas treats stack up for your teeth

Not all Christmas sweets and treats are equally mischievous. Let's take a closer look at some popular Christmas goodies and their impact on our oral health:

- **Candy canes:** Hard sugar on a stick. Sucking on them exposes our teeth to sugar for long periods of time and biting into them risks chips or cracks. The best place for these may be as decorations on the Christmas tree!

- **Tins of chocolates and other sticky sweets:** Caramels and toffees cling to teeth, providing a prolonged sugar source for bacteria. While delicious, these treats fuel cavity formation until we brush them away.

- **Gingerbread goodies:** Soft but sugary, gingerbread can spike acid levels in our mouths. Whether a gingerbread man or house, their sugar content fuels bacteria.

- **Christmas cake:** Dried fruits and added sugars stick to teeth, lingering in hard to reach places. Tasty, but tricky for oral hygiene.

- **Hot chocolate with marshmallows:** Sweet and comforting, but coats our teeth in sugar. Sipping it throughout the day prolongs exposure, increasing the risk of decay.

Tooth-friendly tips for enjoying your festive treats

The good news? You don't have to skip Christmas treats entirely! With a few clever strategies, you can protect your smile while still enjoying the season.

- **Limit sugary snacks to mealtimes:** Have your

Christmas desserts and sweet treats with meals rather than in-between meals. Mealtimes boost saliva production, which helps wash away food particles and neutralise acids.

- **Keep hydrated:** Sip water after indulging in sweet treats. Water rinses away sugary residue, prevents dry mouth and promotes saliva flow – a natural tooth cleanser! Think of it as a quick tooth spa.

- **Choose chocolate over sticky sweets:** Chocolate melts quickly and doesn't linger on teeth like caramels or toffees. Try dark chocolate which contains less sugar than milk chocolate and is gentler on your teeth.

- **Break candy canes into smaller pieces:** Reduce the time sugar spends on your teeth by breaking candy canes into smaller bites. Less time, less damage!

- **Brushing and flossing:** Wait at least 30 minutes after eating sugary treats before brushing your teeth. This gives enamel, softened by the acids, time to recover. Don't forget to floss too – it helps remove any sugar particles hiding between the teeth.

Post-Christmas dental care

Make sure to book a dental health check-up in the New Year. Get out your new diary or calendar and plan ahead to ensure your teeth are in top shape.

Also remember to brush your teeth twice a day – morning and night – and don't shy away from flossing or using interdental brushes to help in-between your teeth. A fluoride mouthwash can help strengthen your enamel too. Your teeth will thank you and will be ready for 2025!

Finally, get into the tooth friendly spirit

While sugar may be the 'baddie' for your smile, how you approach it makes all the difference. Moderation, mindful choices and good dental habits allow you to enjoy the flavours of the season without compromising your oral health. Even Santa indulges in milk and cookies once a year – and you can bet he keeps a toothbrush in his sleigh!

So, savour your favourite Christmas treats, stay tooth-conscious, and have a merry, bright, and tooth-friendly holiday season.

Happy Christmas, everyone!

Relational connection: a foundation for learning and wellbeing

→ Janet King

Contributor bio

This article is built around a case study to highlight the significance of relational connection and its impact on fostering healthy dispositions towards learning and holistic wellbeing. It serves as a reminder of the critical importance of sensitive intervention during any transition and shares a theoretical framework.

Case study

Mariam, 4 years old, has recently become an emotionally-based school refuser (EBSA). *Local authorities publish information and advice about EBSA and their approach online.*

Mariam's parents are increasingly anxious about the potential damaging impact of her absence from school on her holistic development,

particularly her personal, social and emotional development (PSED). Mariam appears to have a strong attachment with both parents and there are no reported changes to her social circumstances.

Upon closer investigation, we learn that Mariam initially struggled to settle into her early years setting, a local day nursery. However, after a period of 4–6 weeks, Mariam began to thrive. She formed strong peer relationships, met developmental milestones and became confident in her environment, participating in group activities with peers and familiar adults both indoors and outdoors.

Mariam attended three settling-in days at her new primary school, where she was accompanied by a parent. Despite being familiar with her

teacher and some classmates, Mariam was hesitant to go to school without a parent once the school term started. To ease her transition, Mariam was encouraged to bring a comfort item from home. While there was initially some progress, it was inconsistent.

The school subsequently applied its behavioural policy, discontinuing the item strategy as it was deemed ineffective. Without this support, Mariam's attendance declined further, and she has yet to complete a full week at school. She's also increasingly reluctant to leave the house, leaving her parents desperate to find a solution.

Theoretical framework: transitions and relational strength

Professionals interacting with young children understand the importance of responsive, personalised care, often grounded in attachment theory. This framework emphasises a child's need for safety provided by a special caretaker and a need to explore and gain knowledge about the environment (Ainsworth, et al, 19878, Bowlby, 1969/1982).

Building meaningful connections with children is crucial to nurturing their holistic development in both the immediate and long term. A child's awareness of being known and accepted lays the groundwork for emotional wholeness (Bettelheim, 1987, pp.146–65). Also, a positive, responsive and nurturing

environment is critical to their developing self-concept, confidence and disposition (Roberts, 2002, p. 11).

According to Tassoni, P., et al (2023) secure attachment supports several key developmental outcomes:

- forming and maintaining future relationships
- learning and developing more effectively
- taking risks
- promoting short- and long-term mental health
- ensuring social and emotional development and security
- developing the ability to self-regulate
- developing empathy for others.

Attachment is also closely linked to cognitive development. Hartmann's (1992) study on maternal tutoring demonstrated that positive feedback and encouragement of independence are strong predictors of cognitive attainment, highlighting the role of secure attachment in executive cognitive functioning.

For caregivers, establishing trust, acceptance, and a sense of safety are incredibly important. The importance of presence forms the foundation for positive outcomes. Laevers (1997) further explores the role of the environment, emphasising sensitivity, stimulation and autonomy in

fostering deep-level learning and wellbeing.

The [Early Years Foundation Stage statutory framework](#) reinforces the necessity of attachment for holistic development and learning to thrive.

Reflecting on Mariam's case

Mariam's reluctance to leave her caregivers highlights her struggle to establish a sense of connection within her new school environment. The school's response – removing her comfort item – demonstrates how impersonal, policy-driven approaches can undermine the relational foundations children need to thrive. This echoes the concept of 'corporate parenting', where system-driven actions take priority over child-centred care (Leeson, 2007). Leeson's work, although primarily focused on children in care, highlights the universal need for strong relational foundations as a basis for healthy development.

Mariam's case reminds us that each child's journey is unique and that insensitive interventions during transitions have far-reaching consequences.

A call to action

As many children begin their journey through education, we must do right by them. Recognising the potential stress of transitions, it's imperative to provide sensitive, personalised

support that prioritises meaningful connections. By investing in each child's relational wellbeing, we lay the groundwork for their confidence, emotional resilience and lifelong learning.

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NHS nursing shortage crisis in the UK: a focus on international nurse recruitment

→ Karen Barker

Contributor bio

Recent NHS figures suggest that, as of the end of March 2024, NHS nursing vacancies accounted for approximately 7.5% of the total nursing workforce (The Health Foundation).

High vacancy rates have resulted in additional pressure on existing nursing staff. The 2023 NHS staffing survey highlighted that only 29% of registered nurses agreed or strongly agreed that there were enough staff for them to do their job properly (The Health Foundation). This situation raises concerns for the safety of both nursing staff and patient care.

As part of the NHS Long Term Plan, the Government pledged to support the NHS with their nursing recruitment challenges and one of those ways is through international recruitment.

Nursing international recruitment programme

This programme aims to deliver an ethical and

sustainable recruitment model that supports NHS Trusts to increase and develop their international recruitment plans. The programme focuses on:

- supporting NHS trusts in marketing the NHS as 'the employer of choice' for internationally trained nurses
- supporting new, innovative and collaborative approaches to recruitment, ensuring that that Trusts are working in partnership rather than in competition with each other to increase the workforce nationally – not just in particular regions of the UK
- ensuring all international recruitment is 'nurse-centred' and includes effective induction, pastoral and professional support.

(Ref. NHS England)

Is there an over-reliance on international nursing recruitment?

England's Chief Nursing Officer (CNO), Dame Ruth May, speaking at the 'Celebrating Preceptorship' event, stated that the NHS Long Term Plan target of adding at least 50,000 full-time nurses by 31 March 2024, has been met – 90% of whom were nurses from overseas.

Since 2019, international nurse recruitment has increased from 5,000–6,000 a year to around 20,000 a year. Although this does show that the international recruitment has supported in the national shortfall of nurses, Dame Ruth May highlighted that relying on such a large number of international nurses every year is unsustainable.

She recognised that despite meeting recruitment targets, the persistent nursing vacancy figures indicate that there's still a long way to go before the NHS nursing shortage is resolved. She also emphasised the need to focus on boosting the domestic supply of nurses and retaining existing staff (Nursing Times).

The ethical concerns of international recruitment must also be considered. Literature suggests that the UK continues to recruit nurses from developing countries, where the need for trained nurses is even more urgent (British Journal of Nursing). This raises important questions about the morality of recruiting healthcare professionals from countries already facing their own workforce shortages.

There's also the challenge of retaining international nurses. A UK systematic review suggested that international nurses often face challenges integrating into their roles in the UK (NHS Employers). In response to this, the NHS has created an 'International Retention Toolkit' with information on actions employers can take to support the retention of international staff.

Further research should be commissioned to analyse how many international nurses are retained within the NHS for an agreed length of time. This data will provide a clearer picture of whether international nursing staff are contributing to a sustainable workforce and or just filling short-term gaps.

Summary

This article has highlighted the importance of international nurse recruitment in supporting the NHS nursing shortage crisis. However, to ensure a sustainable NHS workforce in the long term, the Government cannot rely solely on international recruitment. There needs to be more focus and investment in boosting the domestic supply of nurses and retaining existing staff, to ensure the future stability of the NHS.

References

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[NHS England](#)
[Nursing Times](#)
[British Journal of Nursing](#)
[NHS Employers](#)



The benefits of a gender-balanced workforce in early years education

→ **Claudio Sisera**

Contributor bio

When we think of early years education, we imagine a nurturing space where children begin their journey of discovery and learning. Educators play a vital role in shaping their development, and having a diverse, gender-balanced workforce can significantly enrich this experience. While early years settings have historically been female dominated, there is growing recognition of the importance of encouraging more men into these roles.

A gender-balanced workforce brings varied perspectives, skills, and teaching styles, positively impacting both children and staff. Diversity reflects the world children live in, helping to challenge stereotypes and promoting a more inclusive understanding of gender from an early age. It also fosters team cohesion and creates a richer, more dynamic learning environment.

In this article, we explore the benefits of a gender-balanced workforce in early years education, highlighting why it



matters and how it can lead to better outcomes for children, educators, and the wider community.

The positive impact on child development

In the early years, children constantly observe and mimic the behaviours of those around them. Exposure to a diverse range of role models is essential for their development, helping them see that anyone, regardless of gender, can be nurturing, patient, and

capable. When children interact with both male and female educators, they learn to associate these qualities with people rather than specific genders, encouraging a more inclusive outlook on the world.

A gender-balanced workforce also plays a crucial role in preventing gender-related radicalisation in young children. By exposing them to diverse role models, children learn to appreciate a wide spectrum of identities and

behaviours, reducing the likelihood of adopting rigid, extreme views on gender. This inclusivity supports the principles of the [Prevent Duty](#), which aims to safeguard children from radicalisation by promoting mutual respect and understanding from an early age.

Breaking down gender stereotypes

The presence of male educators in early years

settings plays a crucial role in challenging traditional gender roles. Historically, caregiving and teaching young children have been seen as "women's work", a perception that has reinforced stereotypes about what men and women can or should do. Increasing the visibility of men in early years education helps break down these outdated norms and shows children that nurturing, patience, and teaching are qualities that anyone can embody.

Teaching children about gender equality from an early age is vital for fostering a more inclusive society. When children see male educators leading circle time, comforting upset toddlers, or engaging in creative activities, it normalises the idea that men can be caregivers. This exposure helps broaden their understanding of gender roles, ensuring they grow up with fewer biases about what men and women are capable of. According to [research](#) published by the Department of Education on gender balance and diversity in early years education, children who see men in nurturing roles are more likely to develop open-minded attitudes toward gender equality.

Enhancing the learning environment

A gender-balanced workforce in early years education enriches the learning environment by bringing varied teaching styles, skills, and approaches. Male and female educators often approach activities differently, whether through the choice

of materials, communication styles, or how they engage children in play. This diversity allows children to experience multiple ways of thinking and problem-solving, helping them develop a more well-rounded set of skills.

Studies show that diversity among teaching staff can lead to better educational outcomes for children. [Resources from the National Education Association \(NEA\)](#) highlight that diverse teams tend to be more creative and effective in addressing the needs of a wide range of learners. By having a balanced team, early years settings can provide a more comprehensive and inclusive learning experience, helping children thrive both socially and academically.

Improving staff dynamics and team cohesion

Diversity within the workforce benefits children and leads to more balanced and cohesive team dynamics. When male and female educators work together, they bring a range of perspectives and skills that enhance problem-solving and collaboration. Diverse teams are often better at approaching challenges creatively, drawing on different strengths to find effective solutions. This collaborative spirit fosters a supportive, harmonious work environment where team members learn from one another.

Having men and women in early years settings helps create a balanced workplace culture. For example, one of



Exposure to a diverse range of role models is essential for their development, helping them see that anyone, regardless of gender, can be nurturing, patient, and capable."



our member nurseries found that their team became more communicative and cooperative after hiring more male staff members. The blend of perspectives reduced misunderstandings and encouraged open dialogue, improving how staff collaborated on planning activities and managing day-to-day responsibilities. This cohesion extended to interactions with parents, demonstrating a unified, inclusive approach to childcare.

Improves engagement with diverse family backgrounds

A gender-balanced workforce can also enhance engagement with families from diverse backgrounds. For instance, single fathers might feel more comfortable discussing concerns or seeking advice from male educators, finding it easier to relate to someone who shares their experiences. Similarly, same-gender parent families may value the added perspective and diversity male educators bring. This helps create a more inclusive environment where all families feel represented and supported. By fostering open communication and understanding between educators and parents,

early years settings can build stronger, more trusting relationships with the families they serve, ultimately benefiting the children's development.

Attracting and retaining talent

Promoting a gender-diverse workforce in early years education can attract a broader range of talent to the profession. When men see that they are welcomed and valued, it challenges the misconception that early childhood education is only for women. This shift encourages more men to consider a career in early years and broadens the overall pool of qualified, passionate educators.

Retaining male educators requires fostering an inclusive environment where they feel supported. Initiatives such as same-gender mentorship programmes provide male staff with guidance and encouragement. Equal parental leave policies are vital, sending a clear message that caregiving responsibilities are not determined by gender. Targeted recruitment campaigns highlighting the successes of male educators can also help normalise their presence in early years settings.

Conclusion

A gender-balanced workforce in early years education brings numerous benefits, from enriching children's learning experiences to improving team dynamics and fostering a more inclusive society. Diverse teams help break down gender stereotypes, create supportive work environments, and attract a broader range of talent. By promoting equality and providing targeted support, we can ensure that male educators feel valued, welcomed, and empowered.

It's time for stakeholders – policymakers, early years leaders, and educators – to advocate for a gender-diverse workforce. Implementing inclusive policies, launching mentorship programmes, and celebrating male educators' achievements are steps we can take to create a brighter, more equitable future for early years education.

References

[GOV.UK – Prevent duty guidance: England and Wales \(2023\)](#)
[Department for Education – Improving Gender Balance and Increasing Diversity in England's Early Years Education \(EYE\) Workforce](#)
[National Education Association – Inclusive Teaching is Effective Teaching](#)



Careers corner

Mark McDonagh, NCFE's Digital Marketing and Advertising Manager and Coach, answers career questions sent in by our members.

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Email our team at careers@cachealumni.org.uk. We'll answer all questions directly and feature an anonymised selection in our next issue.

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I'm not sure what I want to do with my life. How can I figure out my career path?

It's completely normal to feel unsure about your career path. Whether you're at the start of your career or have been working for years and want to review where you currently are in your career, many people go through this same experience. Sometimes it's hard to think "Where do I start?"

Here are a few ideas to help you get going:

- **Explore your interests and passions.** What are you passionate about? For example, helping people, being outdoors, or perhaps technology. What are you curious about? What do you enjoy doing in your free time? It's important to explore these questions to create a list of interests and passions you have, which can support developing a career path.
- **Consider your skills and strengths.** What are you good at? What comes easily to you? Think about the skills and strengths you already have. If you don't have a skill or strength you need, how can you develop it? Take stock of what you enjoy doing and where your strengths lie. You can do this by reviewing past roles and projects you've worked on. Ask yourself, "When was I happiest in my work, and what was I doing?"
- **Talk to people in different fields, including your family and friends.** Ask them about their jobs and what they like and dislike about them. Many people are happy to talk about their job. This is an excellent way of gaining insight into what a job in a certain field can be.
- **Take career assessments.** Many online assessments can help you identify your interests and strengths. Take a look around.
- **Try out different things.** Don't be afraid to experiment with different jobs and industries. The more you try, the better you'll be able to figure out what you want to do.

Careers corner continued

- **Look around for opportunities to learn and develop with your current employer.** Explore what your current employer can offer. Do they have career opportunities or career pathways that could support your growth?
- **Attend career fairs, workshops, and networking events.** This will help you to learn about different industries and connect with professionals.

I'm worried that I'm not qualified enough for the jobs I want.

Feeling like you're not qualified enough for the jobs you want can be very disheartening and can hold you back. However, it's important to remember that qualifications are just one part of the equation when it comes to a job. Many employers are looking for more than just qualifications.

Here are a few things you can do to increase your chances of getting hired:

- **Highlight your transferable skills.** Even if you don't have all the specific qualifications listed in a job posting, you may have transferable skills that are relevant to the position. Many skills – including communication, leadership, project management, and problem-solving – are valuable across industries. Ensure you list these skills and how you have used them in the past to support your application.
- **Network with people in the field.** Networking can help you learn about new job opportunities and make valuable connections.
- **Take online courses or workshops.** Online courses and workshops can help you acquire new skills and knowledge.
- **Explore the qualifications you need.** Look into the qualifications you need. Speak to the college or training provider who delivers

the qualification to find out more. Assess if this is something you could achieve. A lot of qualifications are funded or part-funded (depending on the field of study), so explore if any costs will be involved.

- **Volunteer your time.** Volunteering can help you gain experience in your desired field and build your network.
- **Don't be afraid to apply.** Even if you don't think you are a perfect fit for a job, it's still worth applying. Most people won't have all the skills and experience specified in a job description when they apply for a role. You never know what might happen. Good luck!

What steps should I take to advance in my current career?

If you want to move up in your current career, a proactive approach is key to success!

To stand out and move up, it's essential to continually build your skills and knowledge. This could be through formal education (like qualifications, workshops, or courses), as well as informal learning (reading industry reports, joining webinars, watching videos or listening to podcasts). Stay ahead of trends in your industry and develop both hard and soft skills.

Networking within your organisation can significantly impact your career advancement. Develop relationships with key decision-makers and colleagues from different departments. Being visible and having a strong professional network can increase your opportunities for mentorship, coaching, recommendations or internal job opportunities.

Regular feedback helps you understand where you stand and what you need to improve. Seek feedback not only from your line manager, but also from peers and those you line manage. Act on the feedback you

receive. This shows that you are committed to personal growth and development.

Don't wait for promotion opportunities to come your way – create them. Volunteer for high-visibility projects, propose new ideas or solutions, and demonstrate leadership qualities even if you're not in a leadership role yet. Initiative shows that you're ready for more responsibility.

Often, managers aren't aware of your long-term aspirations unless you tell them. Have a conversation with your line manager about your career goals. Express your desire for growth and ask for guidance on how to achieve it. A good manager will appreciate your ambition and might provide resources or mentorship.

If you have a learning and development department within your organisation, talk to them. See how they can support your goals to advance your career.

Advancing your career takes time and effort, but with consistent action, you can position yourself for growth and promotion opportunities.

Looking for more careers advice?

Send in your questions to careers@cachealumni.org.uk and we'll feature our answers to your questions in the next issue of Aluminate.

PUZZLE PUZZLE PUZZLE

Try our puzzles

Keep your brain active and give them a go! Find the answers on page 28.

Cracker Jokes

Prepare to be underwhelmed with some classic cracker jokes!

What do you get if you eat Christmas decorations?

What do snowmen wear on their head?

Why are Christmas trees such bad sewers?



Word Sudoku

Fill in the grid so that each column, row and box contains each of the letters in the word CHRISTMAS.

	S	C			T			H
	H		M	A		S		
	A		C		H			I
	C		R	T	I			
	I	S	H			A		
T			A		C	I		
S	T				R	H		
				I	A		R	S
	R	I	S		M			

→ Ruth McGuire

Contributor bio

It's the season to be merry, according to one Christmas carol – and for many people, this is true. The festivities of the winter months often bring joy as families and friends get together for various celebrations. However, for an estimated one in 20 people in the UK, the season may not be so merry as they are affected by a condition known as Seasonal Affective Disorder, also known by the acronym SAD. The term is appropriate, too – because people who live with the condition feel sad and depressed during the winter months.

Seasonal Affective Disorder

Signs and symptoms of SAD

According to the NHS, symptoms of SAD include:

- a persistent low mood
- a loss of pleasure or interest in normal everyday activities
- irritability
- feelings of despair
- guilt and worthlessness
- feeling lethargic (lacking in energy) and sleepy during the day
- sleeping for longer than normal and finding it hard to get up in the morning
- craving carbohydrates and gaining weight
- difficulty concentrating
- decreased sex drive.

Although these symptoms may be associated with depression, when the symptoms appear only during the winter season, it's quite likely that the change in seasons has led to a significant mood change.

Writing for the charity MIND, Sarah Merriman who has lived with SAD for many years describes how it affects her. She says:

"For me, probably the best way of describing SAD is like the Eeyore character in Winnie the Pooh who walks around with that rain cloud over his head all the time and, you know, the grumpy kind of face. When that time of year comes around, the October/November time of year, that is how I feel. I feel like, all of a sudden, I've got this cloud hanging over me and that wherever I go it's like that and I'm desperate to blow that cloud away and to see the sun."

Ref. Mind podcast - Living with SAD

Causes and treatments

Scientists are constantly researching the causes of SAD. However, the general consensus is that reduced sunlight during winter affects the production of serotonin and melatonin. Serotonin is sometimes called the 'happy' hormone as it generates feelings of happiness. Melatonin is linked to sleep and an increased production of this hormone during winter can lead to the sleepiness that people with SAD often experience. The impact of reduced sunlight on the body's natural circadian rhythms is also linked to SAD.

The first port of call for anyone feeling depressed for more than just a few days, is always to seek medical help from a GP. Once the condition is properly diagnosed and the severity of symptoms determined, doctors can recommend an appropriate treatment. In relation to SAD, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) suggests that it should be treated the same way as other types of depression. This could include treatments such as talking therapies, cognitive behavioural therapy or medication.

One common treatment that is often recommended for SAD is light therapy. *"What light therapy does is compensate for the lack of exposure that we get from natural sunlight"* says psychologist Dr Adrian Borland from the Cleveland Clinic in the US. This is confirmed by the NHS as follows: *"The light produced by the light box simulates the*

sunlight that's missing during the darker winter months. It's thought the light may improve SAD by encouraging your brain to reduce the production of melatonin (a hormone that makes you sleepy) and increase the production of serotonin (a hormone that affects your mood)."

Ref. NHS - Treatment - Seasonal affective disorder (SAD)

The Royal College of Psychiatrists recommends the following when using light therapy: *"A light box is usually used for 30 minutes to an hour each day. It is most helpful if you use it at breakfast time. Light therapy works quite quickly. If it is going to help, most people will notice some improvement in the first week."*

Ref. Royal College of Psychiatrists - Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD)

Self-help treatments

Sarah, who was mentioned at the outset of the article, outlines the strategies she uses to deal with SAD:

"The kind of things that help me deal with SAD are, firstly, getting outside into the fresh air, taking some physical exercise, even if it's just a stroll but the more I'm out in the fresh air during daylight hours in the winter months the better. It always lifts my mood."

Ref. Mind podcast - Living with SAD

Sarah's response to SAD is consistent with recommendations from the NHS. In addition to spending more time outdoors to gain more exposure to natural sunlight, the NHS also suggests the following:

- make your work and home environments as light and airy as possible
- sit near windows when you're indoors
- take plenty of regular exercise, particularly outdoors and in daylight
- eat a healthy, balanced diet
- if possible, avoid stressful situations and take steps to manage stress.

As research into SAD continues, options for treating the condition will also develop. However, unlike other forms of depression, every day of winter that passes is one day closer to the brighter, lighter days of spring, and to nature's own way of treating SAD.

Further information and reading

[Mind - Seasonal affective disorder \(SAD\)](#)

[Mind podcast - Living with SAD](#)

[NHS - Seasonal affective disorder \(SAD\)](#)

[Cleveland Clinic - How Light Therapy Can Help With Seasonal Affective Disorder \(SAD\)](#)

[Royal College of Psychiatrists - Seasonal Affective Disorder \(SAD\)](#)

Creating a sensory and baby-friendly holiday season in the baby room

→ Clare Stead

Contributor bio

Christmas and the whole holiday season are SO magical – flashy lights, shiny decorations, scented candles, and the songs we all know and love playing everywhere. As adults, we LOVE creating as much magic as possible for the children and babies in our lives. But have you ever stopped to think about the holidays from their point of view?

During a baby's first 1,000 days—from conception to age two—the brain develops faster than at any other time in life, developing through every experience and interaction. In the earliest days, babies learn through their senses, which, like their brains, are new and still developing, meaning they're more likely to become overwhelmed.

One of the most important things for a baby is to have consistency – a safe, responsive, nurturing presence that helps them feel secure, able to regulate

their emotions, and explore their world. The holiday season, however, often disrupts this consistency – the routines, the environment and the interactions. For a new baby, this can be totally overwhelming and incredibly difficult to process – they may cry more, have trouble sleeping, and may even withdraw from activities. And while we may try to calm them with jiggling, dancing, and singing, this can actually add to their sensory overload.

So, does this mean that the holidays are cancelled in our early years settings? No, not at all! We can embrace the season in a way that brings the babies along with us and creates an environment of calm, love, nurture, and support.

How do we do that?

A low-sensory festive environment sets the stage for success. It ensures that babies are not overstimulated and provides them with the calmness and consistency they need to thrive. This

means they can use the new experiences to learn and even use this time to meet their next developmental milestones.

Benefits of a low-sensory environment:

- **Enhances focus and engagement:** Babies are better able to focus on their surroundings and engage in activities without becoming overwhelmed by external stimuli.
- **Promotes developmental milestones:** Sensory-friendly environments allow babies to continue progressing in key areas such as motor skills, visual tracking, and early communication.
- **Provides comfort and predictability:** Maintaining routine and reducing sensory stressors help babies feel secure, even during the excitement of Christmas and the holidays.
- **Supports emotional regulation:** Babies in low-sensory environments show better self-regulation and

are less likely to experience emotional outbursts.

Ways you can create a low-sensory Christmas and still enjoy the festive spirit

Limit decorations

By all means, have decorations, but choose them carefully. The aim is to create a calm and visually peaceful atmosphere.

- Use soft gold glow lights instead of harsh white ones and avoid flashing or flickering lights.
- Use battery-operated candles and turn off the overhead lights for a cosy feeling and gentle glow that excites the baby's visual senses without overwhelming them.
- Opt for natural materials for decorations—wood, wool, felt, and cotton fabrics instead of shiny or reflective materials. If you want a bit of sparkle, add one or two reflective items, but make them the exception rather than the rule.
- Enable exploration by making decorations interactive. Create sensory bottles that babies can handle, giving off a Christmas vibe without being overwhelming.

Manage music

Loud music can be overwhelming and invasive for an overloaded sensory system.

- Try turning the music down. You can enjoy Christmas music, but choose instrumental versions most of the time. If the mood allows, crank it up for a





dance party, but turn it down again after one or two songs.

- Set up a quiet area in the baby room—a place where babies can reset if they become overstimulated. Remember, Christmas fun isn't just happening in the nursery; it's happening at home and in shops too!
- Incorporate calming sounds. Silent times, white noise, or natural sounds like rain or waves can help babies' auditory systems regulate, especially during nap times.

Maintain routine and predictability

One of the biggest stressors during the holiday season is the disruption to usual routines.

- Stick to regular feeding and sleeping times as much as possible. Babies will eat and sleep better, which in turn ensures they enjoy the new sensations and experiences far more.

Create sensory-friendly play

Now that the environment is calm, you can get into the Christmas spirit through play.

- Make sensory bottles that captivate little brains—this is where you can add glitter and sparkles.
- Share bells with the babies and sing Christmas songs.
- Use Christmas ornaments and decorations as playthings, ensuring they are baby-safe. Allow babies to explore these new "toys" and sensations in a controlled way, helping them process all the new experiences without being overwhelmed.
- Introduce the smells of Christmas, such as fir cones and pine branches, in their play spaces. Add ginger and cinnamon to playdough so babies can enjoy these festive scents without being continuously exposed to them.
- Sing Christmas songs and read holiday books! It's not about eliminating Christmas but ensuring our babies are included in the magic in a way that allows them to benefit and learn from it.

By doing this, you'll not only have a brilliant Christmas and holiday season, but your babies will too!



PUZZLE PUZZLE PUZZLE

Here are the answers to all of the puzzles on page 23.

Did you get them right?

Cracker Jokes

What do you get if you eat Christmas decorations?
Tinsel-itis

What do snowmen wear on their head?
Ice caps

Why are Christmas trees such bad sewers?
They keep dropping their needles!

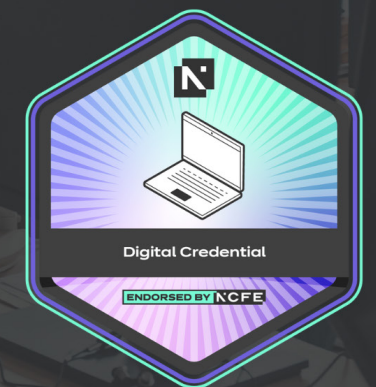
Word Sudoku

M	S	C	I	S	T	R	A	H
I	H	R	M	A	S	S	C	T
S	A	T	C	R	H	S	M	I
A	C	H	R	T	I	M	S	S
R	I	S	H	M	S	A	T	C
T	S	M	A	S	C	I	H	R
S	T	A	S	C	R	H	I	M
H	M	S	T	I	A	C	R	S
C	R	I	S	H	M	T	S	A

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Why we need a new approach to recognising talent and potential

→ **Nikki Mears**

Contributor bio

A fresh approach is needed to better understand talent and potential that builds confidence in self-belief, changes mindsets and widens aspirations around employability for all.

A personal journey of self-belief

I've been very fortunate in my career journey, despite my struggles at school and the limited opportunities available to me. The skills I developed and enjoyed became stepping stones to demonstrate my ability to learn and grow. However, what truly made a difference was one exceptional recruiter who saw the best in me, helping to ignite my self-belief and shape my career path.

At the same time, my lived experience has shown me how the world perceives individuals with personal challenges and how damaging these perceptions can be. Bias and labels influence attitudes which

shape mental health and limit opportunities. I've experienced firsthand how important it is for young people to really understand their unique talents and abilities – regardless of their circumstances or label. It's equally critical for educators and employers to appreciate what makes individuals different and to recognise the value they can bring to society.

Untapped talent in our communities

Unfortunately, many in our communities do not share the opportunities I was lucky to have. From the start of our education journey, our view of the world is shaped by our environment – families, carers, friends and media. However, this often doesn't provide us with the skills to identify our own strengths and potential. In some cases, family dynamics and under-resourced environments create barriers to hope and opportunity. Hidden within these landscapes, however,

is an untapped wealth of talent that society continues to overlook.

Our employers – whether SMEs, start-ups or large corporations – continue to beat the drum of talent shortages across many disciplines such as construction, care, education, hospitality, retail and more. The demand for new skills in emerging sectors like sustainability, AI, cybersecurity and green industries will only deepen these gaps, leaving us behind other future-focused nations.

Rethinking how we identify talent

To address this, we must rethink how we identify, nurture and grow talent. Mechanisms and initiatives need to bring hope and opportunity to all communities – regardless of their postcode or background. Programmes such as Skills England must adapt and embrace innovation in different guises.

This also requires open dialogue between educators and employers to define what foundational skills businesses need to succeed and grow. By fostering potential earlier, we can help individuals unlock their capabilities and fulfil their aspirations – whatever form that may take.

Challenging narrow definitions of success

The current focus on academic achievement, whilst important, neglects those who don't thrive and flourish in the traditionally assessed disciplines. It overlooks the different thinkers, fresh perspectives, creatives and the practical problem-solvers. It bypasses the SEND community through dated assessments that don't accommodate different needs or recognise alternative potential. It judges past

behaviour (for example, ex-offenders) without recognising future potential. It also applies narrow definitions of value, ignoring older workers, ex-military, refugees and others with lived experiences.

We can – and must – do better! Talent isn't just a set of grades or qualifications. It's lived experiences, passions, dedication to hobbies, and untapped potential. There isn't a talent shortage – we have an untreated 'talent cataract' that prevents us from seeing all that lies in front of us and how it can help shape our businesses, our solutions and our economy.

A new way forward

As Co-Founder of 'Naturally Talented Me', we're committed to exploring new ways to assess and recognise potential. Through research

and developing person-centred digital solutions, we aim to help individuals connect their natural talents with meaningful work opportunities and long-term sustainable careers. We're working closely aligned to the Labour Government's new Skills England Agenda, the rigours and focus of a revised Ofsted, the metrics of the Gatsby benchmarks, and the ongoing challenges faced by educators, employers and wider society.

This isn't just about what we do – it's about all of us working together to reimagine a future where everyone has the chance to be seen for their true value. Whether you're a parent, educator, employer or simply someone who believes in making a more inclusive and hopeful future, there's a role for you in this change.



Neuroinclusive practice – what does it mean and why is it important?

→ Cheryl Warren

Contributor bio

Neuroinclusion is the inclusion of individuals who have neurocognitive differences – differences in how they process information, how they learn or how they respond to experiences and situations. These are differences, not deficits.

By seeing differences as just that – differences – and by ensuring that we provide effectively for these differences, we're not only ensuring equality for all, but we're also focusing on equity. We're enabling ALL children to thrive, to experience success, and to spend their time in safe and supportive early years environments.

The current picture

The early years sector is facing numerous challenges: funding issues, a staffing crisis, a lack of support in some areas, and an increase in children with

developmental, play and behavioural differences. This is having an impact on our children, their families and educators alike. However, making a few small changes, shifting our mindset and changing the lens through which we view our children, can make a huge difference.

The environment

Reflecting on the sensory environment is key to providing a safe space for children. It plays a key role in our children's learning, and as educators, we have a responsibility to provide safe sensory spaces for all children that provide calm and predictability and reduce stress and overwhelm.

Dr Rebecca Wood's book (2022) highlights stories from autistic teachers, including one describing, *"I now became consciously and acutely aware of the impact of the sensory*

environments around me. Little things like the sensation of the school glue on my fingers made me sick to the stomach, the smell of the kitchen and the dining hall...I hadn't realised how much the sensory environment within the building had been overwhelming me".

We've all seen how children can respond to sensory environments; covering their ears when it gets too loud, being unable to engage in messy play as they don't like the feel of it, or struggling with different food textures and smells during lunchtime. For these children, it's not simply a case of 'getting used to it'. By recognising that the sensory environment can be overwhelming, we as educators need to ensure we reduce the impact of the sensory space through careful observation, review and reflection.

Take a moment to reflect on your current environment. Where could the current sensory triggers be? How does it look, smell, feel like, how does it sound? An environmental audit is a great tool to start this review process.

Neurodivergent play

There's a common misconception that neurodivergent children don't know how to play or that they don't play 'properly'. By directing children to play a certain way, by stopping play or 'forcing children' to play differently, we're informing them through our actions that their play is 'wrong'.

Our neurodivergent children DO play; they just explore and play differently to the dominant neurotype. Many of our children like to organise or categorise in their play, seek repetition and the safety and reliability of the familiar, and engage in their preferred schema or special interests – all of which needs to be supported, enabled and understood.

Being a neurodiversity affirming educator

Reflect for a moment on your current early years space, and ask yourself:

- How does it promote neuroinclusive practice?
- Does the narrative reflect the term 'difference' over 'deficit'?

- Does it allow the child to be their true authentic self?
- Does provision and practice promote the 'fixing' or 'curing' of neurodivergent children?
- Does your policy aim to create an enabling, supportive, strength-based environment?
- Do you enable ALL children to feel a true sense of belonging?

Being a neuroaffirming educator is about seeing each child as unique and capable, supporting their autonomy over their own learning, helping them learn strategies for self-regulation and prioritising connection over compliance.



Getting to know each child

Before we can effectively support each child, we need to know our children. We need to understand what makes them who they are. Consider what you currently know about your neurodivergent children and see if you can answer the questions below:

- What are their emerging needs?
- How does the confirmation of their neurotype look and feel like for them?
- How does the environment impact them?
- What is their sensory profile?
- Are they a sensory seeker or avoider?
- What are their triggers?
- What does dysregulation look like for them?
- What support do they need from you when they are dysregulated?
- What are their stims and their self-soothing behaviours?
- What is their communication preference?
- How do they like to play?

Once you know the answers, you'll be able to support them within your early years space. You'll have the foundation of knowledge that will enable you to provide effective support and an environment where they feel emotionally safe – because only once we feel safe can we engage, explore, be curious, interact, develop and learn.

The importance of connection

Connection and trust create a sense of belonging and belonging is vitally important for emotional wellbeing and psychological safety. For our neurodivergent children, it means providing a space where they feel heard, seen and accepted as their true selves and enabled to be their true selves. Remember to:

- connect with your children right where they are
- connect through your positive interactions
- connect through play, joining them right where they are and not placing your agenda onto them
- connect as a wonderful co-regulator in times of stress and distress
- connect through their preferred communication style.

Final reflections

Whether you're new to neuroinclusive practice or are a seasoned neurodiversity affirming educator, our learning on this subject should never stop. We need to listen more to neurodivergent adults, and we need to listen to the lived experiences of those willing to share them. Because once we know more, we can do more.

Remember:

- ✓ Be brave in your knowledge of child-centred neurodiversity-affirming practice.
- ✓ Share the need to make it better.

- ✓ Be the advocate families need you to be.
- ✓ Start to plan to make the change.
- ✓ Start knocking down all the barriers that stand in the way of our neurodivergent children.
- ✓ Become advocates for neuroinclusion. Be the change you want to see.

News in brief

Welcome to our round up of the latest news from social care, health, early years and education.

Lucy Nichol

Contributor bio

SOCIAL CARE

King's Fund warns that NI hike could put fair pay plan at risk

Simon Bottery, Senior Fellow at the King's Fund, has warned that the recent increase in employer NI contributions could put the Government's ambition for a fair pay agreement in social care at risk. In a piece published in Community Care, Simon Bottery states that 'one large voluntary sector provider, employing 6,000 staff, said the increase in NICs would add £5m to its costs, against a budgeted surplus of just £2.7m'. Simon outlined how, 'The Budget has added to a strong sense that the Government doesn't 'get' social care – or, if it does, that it doesn't see it as in any sense a priority.'

Inquiry delves into the cost of inaction of social care reform

The Health and Social Care Committee has launched an inquiry looking at the costs of not reforming adult social care – something that has been a major challenge for successive governments. The inquiry will examine the cost of inaction in relation to individuals, the NHS and local authorities, as well as the cost to the Treasury and wider economy. To inform the report, the committee is accepting written evidence submissions up to 11 December 2024. For further information, see the UK Parliament website.

Adult social care spend hits £564m

An article on [localgov.co.uk](https://www.localgov.co.uk) says eight out of ten councils (81%) are on course to overspend their adult social care budget this financial year – a jump from 72% in the previous year. Cllr David Fothegill, chair of the Local Government Association, is quoted as saying: "At its best, adult social care supports adults of all ages to live the life they want to lead. But as this vital report highlights, a range of serious concerns that councils have been raising for years remain and a vast majority of councils are now struggling to balance the books."



EDUCATION

Education Secretary faces legal action over free speech laws

An article in The Telegraph states that the Education Secretary, Bridget Phillipson, will face legal action over her decision to pause new free speech laws designed to protect academics from cancel culture. The Education Secretary shelved the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act just days before it was due to come into force in August. The act would offer people who feel they have been 'no-platformed' by universities or student groups a legal avenue to seek financial compensation. Bridget Phillipson said the legislation was 'not fit for purpose and risked imposing heavy burdens on institutions.' In an earlier Guardian article, a Russell Group spokesperson welcomed the move to halt the Act, saying it was a 'sensible and proportionate step.'



Government announces rise in tuition fees

The Government has announced that tuition fees will rise in line with inflation. It says that this will help put universities 'on a secure footing alongside inflation-linked lift to maintenance loans.' The Government website says that students facing cost of living pressures will be supported with an inflation-linked increase to maintenance loans, alongside new steps to boost access for disadvantaged learners. The changes will take effect at the start of the 2025–26 academic year, with maximum fees rising by 3.1% to £9,535.

90% of teachers say financial education should be taught outside of maths

The FT Adviser has published an article exploring the outcome of a poll commissioned by Young Enterprise. The poll showed that teachers 'overwhelmingly agreed' that financial education should be embedded across a range of subjects – and not be taught exclusively within maths. Three quarters of respondents thought it should be embedded in PHSE, while 40% said it should be included in Citizenship lessons.

HEALTH

The worsening state of local government finances could have negative impact on the NHS

A piece published on the NHS Confederation website outlines the organisation's response to the ADASS Autumn Survey, acknowledging the impact that a pressured social care system can have on the NHS. Sarah Walter, director of the NHS Confederation's Integrated Care Systems network, said: "NHS leaders understand they cannot improve performance or achieve some of the government's key ambitions without a functioning social care system." She added that: "Social care is also a critical part of getting patients out of hospital and keeping patients well at home. So any worsening of council budgets could lead to further bottlenecks at the back door of hospitals."



Reform of Mental Health Act to improve treatment of patients

The Government says new laws will give patients who have been sectioned under the Mental Health Act more dignity and say over their care in long-awaited updates that were introduced in Parliament on 6 November. Some of the changes introduced include making it a legal requirement for each patient to have care and treatment plans tailored and shaped by their individual needs that make clear what is needed to progress towards discharge. The bill also gives patients the right to elect a person to represent their interests and greater access to advocacy when they are detained.

New study shows text message reminders can help improve tooth brushing habits in teenagers

A study from the University of Leeds, in collaboration with the Universities of Sheffield, Cardiff, York and Dundee, has found that text message reminders designed to encourage better brushing habits and reduce tooth decay in secondary school pupils is proving effective. The BRIGHT trial, funded by the NIHR, included a classroom lesson and twice daily reminders about tooth brushing. The research involved 4,680 students from 42 secondary schools across England, Scotland and Wales. Pupils taking part reported brushing their teeth more often after six months.

EARLY YEARS

New early years curriculum programme launches

'Bee Curious' is a new early years programme created by industry experts to prepare children to develop a love of learning and give them a head start in life. According to Derbyshire Times, the programme, launched by the UK's largest childcare provider Busy Bees, will be rolled out at centres across Derby, providing more than 500 children with access to a rich and holistic early education. The curriculum incorporates a sequenced progression model meaning that practitioners will be able to ensure a child understands each stage of learning before progressing to the next.



More detail to be provided on how tax changes will impact early years providers

An article in Nursery World says the Education Secretary will look to provide more detail into what the new tax changes will mean for early years providers. Responding to concerns raised by the newly appointed Shadow Education Secretary Laura Trott, the Education Secretary Bridget Phillipson said the government was looking in more detail at what the changes mean, but that alongside the tax changes, they are also increasing the employment allowance to £10,500 and expanding this to all eligible employers.

Ofsted launches new childminding category for those without domestic premises

Ofsted is now accepting applications for a new category of childcare provider according to an article in Nursery World. The new category allows childminders to work solely from somewhere other than a home, such as a village hall. This is a change to previous regulations, which stated that childminders had to register on domestic premises and spend at least half their working time from their home address.

Observations from 25 years of counselling children

→ Christine Bennett

Contributor bio

Further reading

"Friendship in Childhood and Adolescence" Phil Erwin, Routledge 1998

"The Company They Keep: Friendships in Childhood and Adolescence" William Bukowski, Andrea Newcomb and others, Cambridge University Press, 1996

"Friendships in Childhood and Adolescence" Catherine Baywell and Michelle Schmidt, The Guildford Press, 2013

"Putting Children First; Proven Parenting Strategies For Helping Children Through Divorce" JoAnne Pedro-Carroll, Avery 2010

"Help Your Child Cope with Your Divorce: A Relate Guide" Paula Hall, Vermillion 2007

"Healing Your Traumatized Child; A Parents Guide to Children's Natural Recovery Processes" Aletha Jauch Solter, Shining Star Press 2022

"Has Your Child Been Traumatized? How to Know and What to Do to Promote Healing and Recovery" Dr. Melissa Goldberg Mintz, The Guildford Press 2022

"A Straight Talking Introduction to Psychiatric Diagnosis" Lucy Johnstone, PCCS Books 2022"

"A Straight Talking Introduction to Children's Mental Health Problems" Sami Timmi, PCCS Books 2021"

Drawing on my 25 years of experience as a counsellor, I've noted down five observations that may be useful to families, caregivers, educators, and anyone else concerned with the wellbeing of children and young people.

1. The impact of parents' WhatsApp groups

A common theme I see in counselling, particularly with adolescent girls, is the impact of WhatsApp groups formed by their parents/caregivers. Often started in primary school to organise events, outings and travel arrangements, these groups frequently stay active as their children transition into high school. However, this can lead to caregiver friendships groups becoming 'locked in', limiting the natural changes in relationships that typically occur in adolescence.

Moreover, parents/caregivers in these groups can sometimes become too involved in their children's conflicts, attempting to smooth things over and intervene. This well-meaning involvement can complicate things further, depriving children of valuable learning opportunities and causing hesitation about confiding in their parents/caregivers.

Instead, during this crucial developmental time, children should be learning to negotiate, express their thinking and feelings and be able to end relationships that no longer work.

2. Limited opportunities for spontaneous play

Busy parents/caregivers often have limited time to engage in unstructured, spontaneous

activities with their children. They might bring their child to a dance class or judo practice but spend the waiting time working on their mobile phone or laptop. Even birthday celebrations, such as go-karting, are highly organised and structured.

As a result, children have little opportunity to simply talk and play freely with their friends. These moments are key to developing children's social skills and their ability to entertain themselves without adult guidance and supervision.

Unstructured time with parents/caregivers is just as important as free time with friends. I often hear child clients say things such as "I like football because my dad takes me, and I talk to him in the car" or "I love going to grandma's because I get to help in the kitchen and she listens to me and she's not always on her phone". These simple interactions enable children to feel heard, valued and connected to their families/caregivers.

3. "My child is my best friend"

In one activity counselling course activity, I ask learners to choose a shell that best represents them and another that represents someone they have a relationship with. They then explain their choices to another learner and, if they wish, with the whole group. The activity provides practice in developing self-awareness and interpersonal skills.

However, during this exercise, I've noticed a pattern where some single parents/caregivers select a large shell and a matching smaller one, explaining "That's me and my daughter - we're like peas in a pod" or "My son's my mini me". While this pride in sameness reflects a strong bond with a child, it can sometimes raise questions about whether the child's unique traits and interests are being encouraged to flourish.

I also wondered, in some cases, if the child has taken on the role of a confidante or 'best friend' of the parent/caregiver, which can sometimes happen in single-caregiver families. I've sometimes observed child clients who know too much about the strained relationships between their divorced parents, and who may develop a sense of responsibility that goes beyond their years.

A close bond between child and caregiver is valuable, however encouraging a child's individuality makes it even stronger, helping them grow into their own person.

4. "My child had a difficult life experience - do they need counselling?"

Sometimes parents/caregivers are surprised when their child's behaviour changes after a major life experience, such as a move or an end of a relationship: "We're in a new house, in a great new school - why are they so unhappy?". It can be hard for parents/caregivers to recognise that their children are feeling more strongly about life changes and events.

The reverse of this can also happen, for example a family friend's death may deeply affect the parents, but not the child, or the child may have experienced a life-threatening medical event but it's the parents who are having nightmares about it.

Just as with adults, not every child who experiences a difficult or frightening event will be traumatised or develop enough trauma symptoms to be diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Counselling isn't always necessary if the child has a safe space to talk to their family, to express their feelings, ask questions freely and be accepted and acknowledged.

5. A growing awareness of mental health among young people

Today's teenagers are more familiar than ever with mental health terminology and diagnoses. Topics like anxiety or depression are frequently being discussed on social media, where young people openly share their experiences, which help to spread awareness and reduce stigma. However, as with much online information, some of what's shared isn't always accurate or helpful and can lead to misunderstandings or self-diagnosing without a professional's input.

While this greater awareness is a positive step, it's crucial that we support young people in understanding the difference between everyday emotions - such as sadness and worry - and conditions that require professional attention. With balanced guidance, we can help them develop a healthy and informed approach to mental wellbeing.

Building resilience in children and staff during seasonal changes

→ Kelly Hill

Contributor bio

References:

[NHS Website: Seasonal Affective Disorder \(SAD\)](#)

[Journal of School Health: Research on physical activity in early childhood](#)

[Centre on the Developing Child, Harvard University: The Science of Resilience](#)

[Psychological Science Journal: Study on mindfulness and emotional regulation in children](#)

[British Journal of Educational Psychology: Studies on learning environments and children's well-being](#)

[Mental Health First Aid England: Articles on mental health during winter](#)

[Environmental Health Perspectives: Studies on exposure to nature and mental health](#)

How can the winter months affect mood and energy levels, and what can early years settings do to build resilience, improve engagement, and maintain a positive atmosphere?

As the cold months roll in, early years settings face a unique challenge: maintaining energy, enthusiasm, and positivity among both children and staff. Winter brings shorter days, colder weather, and a noticeable shift in mood and energy levels. This seasonal change can impact everything from physical wellbeing to emotional resilience. Early years leaders and educators are in a crucial position to help their teams and the children in their care to navigate these changes and build resilience to thrive during this time.

The impact of seasonal changes on mood and energy levels

Winter often brings a natural dip in energy and mood, linked to the decreased sunlight and colder temperatures. Research shows that seasonal changes, particularly the transition to winter, can lead to Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) or the "winter blues", affecting about 2-8% of people in Europe, according to the NHS. For those working in early years settings, these effects can be even more pronounced due to the demands of caregiving and the emotional energy required to manage groups of young children.

Children, too, are not immune to these changes. While

young children may not articulate a dip in their mood, they can still feel the effects of shorter days and less time outdoors. Reduced access to outdoor activities can lead to higher energy levels indoors, creating challenges for maintaining focus and engagement. According to a study published in the Journal of School Health, physical activity is crucial for both mental and physical development in early childhood, and the winter months often limit access to outdoor play, both at home and in settings.

Understanding resilience in early years

Resilience is the ability to bounce back from challenges, adapt to change, and keep going in the face of adversity. In early childhood, building resilience is a vital part of development, helping children develop strong coping mechanisms and emotional regulation. It's not only important for children but for educators as well, as they face the dual pressures of maintaining a positive environment while dealing with their own seasonal changes in mood and energy.

According to the Centre on the Developing Child at Harvard University, resilience is not a trait that some children have and others don't – it's something that can be developed with the right support. Educators can play a pivotal role in nurturing this in young children, particularly during times when seasonal changes may make this more challenging.



One of the key impacts of the winter months in early years settings is a reduction in both staff and child engagement. The colder, darker days can lead to sluggishness, reduced creativity, and difficulty staying motivated. Children may become restless or irritable due to decreased outdoor activity, and educators might find it harder to bring their usual energy and enthusiasm to their work.

For staff, these feelings can be compounded by the demands of their personal lives, as the pressures of the festive season and darker days make it harder to maintain their wellbeing. According to Mental Health

First Aid England, nearly 20% of people experience mental health challenges more acutely during the winter months, with professionals in caregiving roles particularly vulnerable to burnout.

Strategies for building resilience and improving engagement

- **Encourage indoor physical activity.** Creating opportunities for physical activity indoors can help counteract the lack of natural sunlight and movement. Setting up obstacle courses, dance sessions, or yoga routines in the classroom not only helps children burn off excess energy but also boosts

mood. A study published in the Journal of Physical Activity and Health shows that even short bursts of movement can improve focus and reduce anxiety in young children.

- **Introduce mindfulness techniques.** Introducing such techniques into the daily routine can be beneficial for both staff and children. Short meditation sessions, breathing exercises, or even guided imagery can help everyone calm their minds and refocus. Encouraging children to talk about their feelings, through emotional check-ins or visual aids like emotion charts, allows

them to express their experiences and feel more in control of their emotions during difficult times. A study in Psychological Science highlights that mindfulness practices are linked to improvements in emotional regulation and resilience in children.

- **Enhance the physical environment.** Changes to the physical environment can make a big difference. Adding cozy, warm lighting, soft textures, and calming music can create a comforting atmosphere that counters the harshness of winter. These small touches help to develop a sense of safety and wellbeing in the setting. The British Journal of Education Psychology emphasises the importance of the learning environment in influencing children's emotional wellbeing.

- **Support staff wellbeing.** Resilient staff create resilient environments. Providing support for educators during the winter months is crucial. This could include flexible working arrangements, team-building activities, or simply creating time for staff to unwind and recharge. Encouraging open conversations about mental health and providing access to resources, such as counselling or support groups, can help staff feel supported. Research from the European Journal of Work and Organisational Psychology suggests that well-supported staff are more engaged and less likely to experience burnout.

- **Bring nature indoors.** With limited access to the outdoors, consider bringing elements of nature into the classroom. Studies show that natural elements, even in the form of indoor plants or nature-based crafts, can improve mood and decrease stress levels. A review published in Environmental Health Perspectives found that exposure to natural elements, even indoors, can positively affect mental health and wellbeing.

A year-round commitment

Building resilience in early years settings is not a seasonal task – it's a year-round commitment. However, the winter months present a unique opportunity to focus on creating an environment that supports emotional and physical wellbeing. By being proactive in addressing the challenges that come with seasonal changes, early years leaders and educators can ensure that both staff and children continue to thrive, no matter the time of year.

As we approach the colder months, remember that resilience is built through connection, creativity, and a commitment to wellbeing. By encouraging a positive, nurturing environment, early years settings can make winter a time of growth, warmth, and community.

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→ Ruth McGuire

Contributor bio

Workplace justice and Employment Tribunals

In an ideal world, employees and employers would enjoy happy and productive relationships. They would resolve workplace problems without any need for intervention from outside agencies. The reality, however, is quite different. Although trade unions exist to protect the rights of workers, sometimes problems escalate to the point where a serious breach of the law is involved. When this happens, employees can seek justice from an Employment Tribunal.

What is an Employment Tribunal?

Employment Tribunals (ETs) were originally set up in 1964 and were previously known as Industrial Tribunals. They exist to help resolve

problems that have crossed the boundary from being just a workplace issue between employers and employees to being a problem that involves some kind of breach of the law. This could be a breach of the Equality Act in cases where employees have been discriminated against because of their race, gender, disability or some other 'protected characteristic' defined in law.

Alternatively, the breach could be related to the Employment Rights Act. Recent cases published on the ET website include claims for disability discrimination, unlawful deduction from wages, and failure to pay holiday entitlement. Decisions to either uphold a claim against an employer or to dismiss one are often published in full and give

some indication as to the evidence presented by both employers and employees in relation to a dispute.

[Ref. GOV.UK - Employment tribunal decisions](#)

ET judgements are made by an employment judge who presides over hearings where cases are heard. The judge may make decisions on their own or may chair a panel of other decision makers who are not legally qualified but are usually experts in human resources or industrial relations.

Making a claim

Prior to submitting a claim to a tribunal, employees are expected to have exhausted all options for resolving their dispute internally with their employer. For example, they will be expected to have used their employer's policies and procedures

to try and resolve the problem. These could be disciplinary/grievance, equality or anti-harassment/bullying policies.

If the problem cannot be resolved, before submitting a claim to an ET, in most cases, employees have to contact ACAS (Advisory, Conciliation and Arbitration Service) and inform them about the intention to make a claim. ACAS provides advice but also offers an early conciliation service. This is a procedure that brings employers and employees together to try and resolve issues without having to go to an ET.

If no agreement can be reached between an employee and their employer through the early conciliation process, the next stage is to complete a claim form known as an ET1 form. Time limits are strict and failure to meet the time limits means that the claim cannot proceed. The usual time limit for bringing a claim is three months minus one day from the date of the incident or problem. Employees considering making a claim should always check with ACAS for guidance on time limits that apply to their particular claim.

In addition to providing details about the complaint, claimants (the employee making the claim against their employer) are asked to indicate the remedy and/or compensation they would

like, if they are successful. For example, someone claiming unfair dismissal may indicate they want both compensation and their job back or they may just want compensation. Copies of claim forms are available at [GOV.UK - Make a claim to an employment tribunal: Form ET1](#)

The hearing

The ET hearing is the setting for disputes between the two parties – employer and employee to be decided. As with other court and tribunal hearings, decisions and judgements are based on evidence. To have a chance of success, employees should be confident that they can provide evidence to substantiate their complaint. This could include evidence such as reports, emails, text messages, letters, and so on. It could also include witness statements and/or witnesses who attend the hearing to present evidence.

Both the employer and employees have to disclose evidence prior to the hearing. This prevents either party being 'ambushed' and being presented with unexpected evidence during the hearing. Employers and employees can also ask representatives to speak on their behalf during hearings. Both sides can also bring witnesses and pose questions to witnesses or challenge evidence presented during the hearing. For more information, visit: [Citizens Advice - Preparing](#)

[for your employment tribunal hearing.](#)

ET decisions

In some cases, a preliminary hearing may determine that a complaint has no chance of success at all, and a judge may decide to 'strike out' the claim and stop it from proceeding to a full hearing. In other cases, evidence presented at the hearing either supports the employee or employer. If an employee wins their case, the tribunal will decide on the remedy or compensation they should receive.

As with any dispute that reaches a court or tribunal, the emotional cost of bringing a claim to a tribunal has to be factored into any decision about whether or not to make a claim in the first instance. Both the process of collecting evidence and the hearing can be very stressful, particularly if the relationship with an employer has become volatile. This is why it's important to always seek advice before submitting a claim. Citizens Advice, ACAS and solicitors that specialise in employment law offer helpful guidance to ensure employees make a fully informed decision before seeking justice from an employment tribunal.

Further information and guidance

[Citizens Advice website](#)

[GOV.UK - Employment tribunal](#)

[ACAS - About us](#)

Nurturing children's personal, social, and emotional development (PSED) through outdoor play

→ Dr. Helen Bilton

Contributor bio

In the whirlwind of a young's child educational day, we often focus on the physical, linguistic and mathematical skills. Meanwhile, personal, social and emotional development (PSED) may be relegated to brief circle times or dismissed as something that happens naturally. However, a quality, well-designed outdoor environment – even in colder months – is somewhere children can learn about themselves, build relationships, and regulate their feelings.

Personal development – discovering 'me' and 'my place in the world'

The outdoor environment offers children the opportunity to explore their strengths, develop new skills and grow confidence. Climbing, running or balancing – all physical milestones help children feel capable and proud of themselves. Remember the moment you first rode a two-wheeler bike? How good did you feel when you didn't need help? It's this same sense of pride and independence that children experience when they try new things during outdoor play.

For example, look at Figure 1, where a child beams with pride after successfully walking unaided across a balance bar.



[Fig. 1]

How can practitioners facilitate personal development outdoors?

Praise the effort, not just outcomes. Focus on comments like 'You worked really hard on that!' or 'That took a lot of perseverance!'. This helps children value their own effort and motivates them to try harder next time.

Provide tools for self-observation. A large outdoor mirror enables children to watch themselves in action, encouraging self-awareness and pride in their progress.

Social development – how do I relate to others?

Learning to empathise, collaborate, and build relationships takes time and practice. Outdoor spaces can facilitate all styles of play – both independent and collaborative play. Unlike indoors, there's less clutter outside which allows

children to move more freely and be creative. For instance, in Figure 2, two children are enjoying each other's company in a wooden outdoor shelter, which feels more organic than the indoors would allow.



[Fig. 2]

Outdoor settings also inspire role-play and imaginative play – pretending to be a superhero, running a café, or working a builder's yard. For example, I recently witnessed a scene of children pretending to be milkmen – enacting an elaborate storyline involving deliveries, thieves and even a police chase! Despite the dull weather, the outdoors space allowed the children to step into their new roles and practice their social skills.

How can practitioners facilitate social development outdoors?

Provide imaginative play props. Items like capes, umbrellas, bags, maps, baskets, or gardening tools encourage imaginative play.

Embrace the mess. Don't worry about props getting muddy or damp, the experience and skills children gain from outdoor play are much more valuable.

Emotional development – understanding and managing feelings

Outdoor spaces offer children immediate ways to self-regulate. If a child is feeling overwhelmed, the fresh air, natural light and open space can help them calm down and relax. For example, I recall a child in nursery who routinely began their Mondays by sitting alone on the climbing frame, come rain or shine. This ritual gave them the space to decompress from a challenging weekend at home.

Outdoors also provide safe opportunities to manage frustrations and setbacks. For instance, constructing a shelter out of wood and rope, only for it to collapse, provides a way for children to practice resilience and emotional regulation. In Figure 3, a child upset indoors is taken outside to explore the texture of a spikey plant, which helps calm his emotions.



[Fig. 3]

How can practitioners facilitate emotional development outdoors?

Encourage experimentation. Create an environment where mistakes are opportunities to learn. Ask open-ended questions like 'What could you try next?' instead of solving problems for them.

Be mindful of individual needs: Recognise when a child needs space or a calming activity and provide opportunities for quiet reflection or sensory engagement.

Year-round benefits of outdoor play

Children's developmental needs don't pause for bad weather. In fact, during the colder months, when indoor spaces are often artificially lit, with doors and windows closed off, outdoor play becomes even more essential. Fresh air, natural light, and the freedom to move can transform pent-up frustration into contentment.

By prioritising outdoor play, especially during winter, we can support children's personal growth, nurture their relationships, and help them develop the emotional tools they need to thrive.

Image references

Figure 1 from 'Physical Development outdoors'. To be published.

Figure 2 from 'PSED outdoors'. To be published.

Figure 3 from 'First steps outside. Under threes learning and developing in the natural environment'. 2017

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