Getting it right first time – Ofsted early years good practice report

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Summary

Ofsted’s good practice report Getting it right first time: Achieving and maintaining high-quality early years provision identifies key features of high quality early years provision, drawing on evidence from visits to providers, case studies, Ofsted reports and research findings. This briefing will be of interest to local authority who manage early years provision.

Overview

The report, aimed to support those early years settings not improving at a fast enough rate, identifies the key features of settings providing good or outstanding early years provision. Strong and effective leadership is key, with leaders having a clear vision of what they are trying to achieve. Leaders are well qualified and experienced, they know what good teaching looks like and how young children develop, and have high expectations for both staff and children. They know the strengths and weaknesses of their settings and value external challenge. Strong leaders build teams of well-qualified and skilled practitioners and use performance management to hold staff to account for the quality of their teaching and children’s progress. Staff receive appropriate professional development and the settings seek out, and share, examples of good practice.

Briefing in full

The report notes that although the proportion of good or better providers of Early Years education has risen from 64% in 2008 to 74% in 2012, with a concomitant increase in children’s achievement, nevertheless 20% of all early years settings are not improving fast enough. The report, based on visits to 11 settings rated as good or outstanding on at least two consecutive visits and supplemented by case studies, Ofsted reports and research findings, is aimed at helping those settings improve their provision.

What makes a setting good or outstanding?

The report notes that strong and effective leadership makes a setting good or outstanding, and identifies some common features shared by these leaders.

Strong leaders had high expectations. This included high aspirations for children’s achievement, irrespective of their starting point, and high expectations of the quality of teaching, by which the report means adults’ interactions with children.

The leaders of the visited settings were highly qualified and experienced. The strong combination of relevant qualifications, relevant experience and accredited training meant that the leaders understood what good and outstanding teaching looks like and knew how young children learn best.
The strong leaders were effective communicators who led by example. The leaders in the survey were persuasive, passionate communicators who inspired their staff. They were able to explain why certain strategies worked and others did not, and were able to demonstrate effective teaching.

Leaders at the settings visited made the right changes possible. They had overcome challenges such as low levels of staff knowledge by investing time and effort in implementing gradual change to ways of working, starting with the thing that would make most difference to children’s learning. Staff were empowered through learning communities.

**How do leaders and staff bring about positive change?**

The leaders in the survey were able to identify the strengths and weaknesses in their settings through effective use of self-evaluation. They had a clear understanding of the direct link between good quality teaching and children’s development and, through encouraging self-evaluation for all staff, had introduced a self-improvement cycle of observation, improvement, further observation and evaluation. Strategies that the settings used for staff to reflect on the quality and impact of their practice included:

- frequent team meetings focused on improving the quality of learning and teaching
- staff given time to reflect on their practice and record their reflections in learning journals
- research opportunities
- performance management discussions and professional development meetings

The process of self-evaluation also included taking the views of parents and children, as exemplified by the setting that had a children’s committee that met every six weeks and the childminder who examined her practice from the children’s perspective.

Alongside self-evaluation, the strong leaders valued external challenge and advice. Ten of the 11 settings sought external scrutiny of their practice, for example, from advisers, from network or cluster co-ordinators, or through quality assurance schemes. Furthermore, those settings that were accountable to a governing body believed that the challenge and support provided by that body contributed to their success.

**How do leaders build an effective team?**

Research and inspection evidence has demonstrated that the higher the level of qualification, the better the quality of provision. The leaders in the settings visited tended to have higher qualification levels than generally (eight out of 11 had degree level qualifications, compared to 11% nationally). Furthermore, five of the settings employed at least one teacher and a further two had regular access to or input from one. Six employed at least one Early Years Professional and another had done so in the recent past.

The leaders strongly believed that teaching should come from a secure knowledge of how young children learn best. One nursery leader commented that staff having knowledge of early childhood development is crucial if a setting wants to improve the quality of its provision.

The leaders were clear that the quality of an adult’s interaction with children had the greatest impact on learning and were also clear about which aspects of teaching needed improvement. They wanted to ensure that staff were:
prioritising children’s communication and language skills, personal, social and emotional development, mathematics and early literacy, and working with parents to help them support their children's development in these areas

planning activities based on assessment of children’s learning, knowledge and skills and adjusting activities to meet the needs of those at risk of falling behind

taking every opportunity when children were initiating their own play to extend learning, develop language skills, feed in new vocabulary and challenge their thinking

developing high-quality questioning skills

listening carefully to children and being able to judge when the appropriate time for intervention

Strategies to improve the quality of teaching included:

planned activities which had a strong focus on what children were learning and which ensured that staff thought about the quality of their input

checking the accuracy of staff’s assessments to ensure that activities were matched to children’s learning needs and that children’s progress was tracked precisely

sharing assessment information with parents, so that staff and parents could work together to help children achieve as much as they could

demonstrating good teaching themselves, or have others model what was expected, enhanced by their ability to explain the theories behind their practice

adopting proven initiatives or schemes such as Every Child a Talker to enhance children’s speech and language

tackling misunderstandings swiftly and supporting staff to understand good practice

encouraging staff to further their professional knowledge through membership of national early years organisations and professional associations

The leaders in the survey built strong teams based on a shared sense of responsibility for improvement. Staff had targets linked to the setting’s priorities for improvement and, through individual, key worker and team meetings staff were held to account for their contribution to improvements in the setting and for the progress of children in their groups.

Eight of the 11 settings visited had regular formal observations of teaching and its impact on children’s learning. Settings used feedback from in-house and external observations to develop teaching and learning. In one setting staff are regularly filmed while teaching and the leader uses the recording with individual staff to analyse and improve practice. In pre-schools, leaders who worked alongside staff were able to use their informal observations to provide constructive feedback.

The strong leaders always tackled poor performance including challenging staff’s attitudes and ways of working.

Many enter the early years workforce with limited skills and experience, however, the strong leaders ensured that staff became excellent educators as well as carers. Leaders in the settings visited would analyse an individual’s training and development needs and match training and development opportunities to the specific needs of the individual, the team and the current cohort of children. Leaders found group and joint training to be most effective as it could be customised to
the specific needs of the setting, maximised attendance and stimulated group discussion and reflection.

**How do settings share good practice?**

The leaders visited understood the importance of learning from and sharing good practice. For example, eight of the 11 leaders had organised visits to highly successful early years settings in order to share good practice and to observe good quality teaching and its impact on children’s learning and development. Examples of ways in which settings have sought to learn from and share good practice include observational visits, meetings and shared training systems with other settings.

**How do the best settings work with parents and carers?**

Leaders at the visited settings recognised that strong partnerships with parents and carers help to provide children with the best start and the settings worked to build partnerships with parents through, for example, social events or on-site visits. The settings used regular drop-in days, open evenings and formal parents’ evenings or curriculum meetings to share information about children’s progress and to help parents to make good any gaps in their child’s learning and development, by promoting key areas of learning. Settings also provided workshops on particular topics, and one setting ran sessions in which a speech and language therapist shared I CAN principles with parents to help them to support their child’s communication and language skills. Settings provided guidance for parents so that they can continue to support their children’s learning at home, through discussion or displays. Some settings used their website to share curriculum plans.

**Comment**

The report provides a useful insight into what makes an early years setting good or outstanding. Strong leadership is seen as key, with such leaders having the vision and commitment to “get it right first time”. Their focus is on the quality of the interaction between adults and children as the main factor in children’s development. Consequently, it is also clear that well qualified staff and continued staff development are also crucial in securing improvement within a setting. External challenge and advice were welcomed by these successful settings, and it is interesting that settings with a formal governance believed that the challenge and support provided by that arrangement contributed to their achievement.

**External links**

Ofsted [Getting it right first time: Achieving and maintaining high-quality early years provision](http://www.gov.uk)

**Related briefings**

Local authority role in early education and childcare: DfE consultation (April 2013)

*Good early years provision for all* (April 2013)

*More Great Childcare* (January 2013)


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