



A quality improvement framework for the early learning and childcare sectors:

School age childcare quality indicators

September 2025



The structure of the quality indicators

These quality indicators apply to school age childcare settings only.

Childminders who provide care for school age children should self-evaluate their service using the [quality indicators for childminding](#).

For all other provision types please refer to the [early learning and childcare quality indicators](#).

Heading	Quality Indicator
Leadership	Leadership and management of staff and resources
	Staff skills, knowledge, values and deployment
Children thrive and develop in quality spaces	Children experience high quality spaces
Children play and learn	Playing, learning and developing
Children are supported to achieve	Nurturing care and support
	Safeguarding and child protection

This table shows the quality indicators for childminding across the four headings of the framework.

Illustrations of practice

All quality indicators have themes to support your self-evaluation. There are illustrations of practice for each theme. These describe what we might see in a setting where the quality of provision is 'very good' or 'weak'.

Leadership and management of staff and resources

Leadership and management of staff and resources is a 'leadership' quality indicator. There are illustrations of practice and challenge questions below. These can help you to evaluate your current practice and identify areas for growth.

Illustrations of leadership and management of staff and resources are also available for [early learning and childcare settings](#) and [childminding settings](#).

Themes for leadership and management of staff and resources

The themes for this quality indicator are:

- vision, values and aims
- self-evaluation, quality assurance and implementing change
- staff recruitment and induction

About leadership and management of staff and resources

This indicator highlights the need for leaders to ensure they have an ambitious, shared vision that focuses on improvements and positive outcomes for all. There should be a strong ethos of continuous improvement which enhances the delivery of high-quality practice. It focuses on accountability, responsibility and shared values as important features of building and sustaining a highly professional team.

The importance of partnership approaches to self-evaluation and continuous improvement are highlighted. There is an emphasis on the need for strong leadership and a shared understanding of strengths and areas for development. The impact of self-evaluation and quality assurance leads to improved and sustained positive outcomes for children and families.

This indicator focuses on the management of staffing decisions and the importance of this on the quality of children's overall experiences and outcomes. It supports values-based, safe recruitment procedures that ensure trained, competent and skilled staff are employed to promote positive outcomes for children. This includes a comprehensive induction programme to support and guide staff in their roles and responsibilities.

There is a clear focus on aligning practice with national policy, legislation and rights-based frameworks and standards.

This includes the [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child \(UNCRC\)](#) and the [Health and Social Care Standards](#) which can support staff in delivering safe, nurturing and responsive care that meets the individual needs of children.

Illustrations of vision, values and aims

'Very good' vision, values and aims

We promote, sustain and are highly committed to a shared vision that reflects the highest possible standards for children, families, partners and the wider community. Children and families are actively included in the design and review of our vision, values and aims. These reflect the high aspirations of our children and families. This ensures that any planned developments or improvements take due account of children's rights, interests, curiosities, needs and preferences.

Leaders create conditions where all people feel confident to initiate well-informed change and share responsibility for the process. This helps us know what is important when meeting the needs of children and families. Effective communication ensures a clear view of our vision, values and aims so that the wider staff team, children and families are included in achieving them.

Our values are embedded in the everyday life of the service and inform our practice. Leadership is clearly founded on principles of high-quality childcare, play and active engagement with children and their families.

'Weak' vision, values and aims

Our vision, values and aims are unclear or are not effectively created with or communicated to children, families, partners and the wider community. We have a limited focus on the importance of improvement. Children and families do not experience a service which reflects their shared aspirations. Not everyone involved in the service is aware of our vision, values and aims, or their role in promoting these. We are not supported to reflect on the vision, values and aims in a meaningful way, and therefore these are not reflected in their practice.

Changes made to our practice and the service have little impact on children and families. There is a resistance to change which negatively impacts our ability to deliver improved outcomes. Opportunities to reflect and bring about positive change for children, families and each other are missed.

Illustrations of self-evaluation, quality assurance and implementing change

'Very good' self-evaluation, quality assurance and implementing change

Well-considered, purposeful self-evaluation enables us to deliver high-quality care and play experiences tailored to children's and families' needs and choices. We ensure the views of children, families and partners inform improvement and are central to our self-evaluation process. Leaders evidence where these views inform change, secure improvement and positive outcomes for all children and families. We reflect well together and use these reflections to bring about positive change.

Our quality assurance processes have agreed standards and expectations that are understood by all staff. Processes, which include well-timed monitoring and data gathering, enable us to consistently identify areas for improvement. Sustainable change is achieved because there is an appropriate pace of change.

Highly effective practice is identified and shared within and beyond our service to promote improvements which have led to positive outcomes for children. Leaders ensure children experience high-quality care and that enriching play experiences are at the heart of improvement planning.

'Weak' self-evaluation, quality assurance and implementing change

Self-evaluation for improvement is at an early stage of development or has not resulted in sustained improvements. Children and families are not meaningfully involved in the process of self-evaluation. As a result, they do not feel well informed about changes or why they are happening.

Children and families do not experience quality care, as improvement planning is not used consistently or effectively. Insufficient skills and capacity within our team hinder our ability to support effective improvement.

We do not effectively enable staff or families to confidently highlight complaints or suggest improvements. Leaders fail to respond promptly to feedback, and therefore positive change is too slow to make improvements.

Opportunities to engage a range of partners have not been taken or used to inform our improvement planning. Our experience is isolated and may be out of touch with national perspectives as a result. There are significant gaps in the areas covered by our quality

assurance systems. Children's experiences and outcomes are poor, as inconsistencies in practice are not fully identified and do not highlight areas for improvement.

Illustrations for recruitment and induction

'Very good' recruitment and induction

The importance of recruiting and retaining a stable and skilled team is recognised by leaders as essential to the wellbeing of children and staff in the service. Staff are recruited in a way that has been informed by all aspects of [safer recruitment practices](#).

Leaders ensure new staff are safely recruited and that they understand their responsibilities within the team. We prioritise values-based recruitment by clearly communicating the values that matter most to us and assessing whether candidates' values align. Children and families have opportunities to be involved in the process in a meaningful way. They are kept informed and introduced to any new or temporary staff.

We have induction programmes that are thorough and personalised to meet the different roles in the service. We utilise a range of resources to equip newly recruited staff with the knowledge and skills necessary for providing high quality care for children. This means they feel confident to meet the needs of individual children.

We have clear processes for mentoring and supporting staff, with time allocated to take this forward. Mentors are clear about their roles and responsibilities, and they have written information they can refer to. Together these approaches support high-quality outcomes for all children in our service.

'Weak' recruitment and induction

The recruitment procedures may compromise the welfare or safety of children. Important elements of the process may be ignored. For example, exploring gaps in employment history or disciplinary records; or allowing staff to start working before all the required checks have been undertaken or received.

Our induction approach is limited to a one-off event focused on policies and procedures. Little consideration is given to the care and support needs of children. As a result, new staff do not have all the information they need to safely care for and support children.

Mentoring arrangements, where these exist, are not well considered and do not support our staff to better understand their role. Staff undertaking mentoring roles have insufficient time allocated to do this well.

Challenge questions of leadership and management of staff and resources

The following challenge questions can support your self-evaluation:

- How effectively do we engage others to develop a shared vision and purpose for our setting?
- How well do our vision, values and aims inform our daily practice?
- How do we know our quality assurance processes improve outcomes for children and families?
- How are staff empowered to use self-evaluation to make improvements for children and families?
- How has the use of best practice documents and guidance led to improvement in children's experiences and outcomes?
- How do our approaches support children, families and partners to evaluate and inform our practice and improvements?
- How do we ensure staff recruitment processes reflect current best practice and national guidance?
- In what ways do we ensure our recruitment process attracts people with the right values, skills and knowledge for their role?
- How do we ensure that our induction processes are tailored to meet the needs of different staff roles and responsibilities?

Staff skills, knowledge, values and staff deployment

Staff skills, knowledge, values and deployment is a 'leadership' quality indicator. There are illustrations of practice and challenge questions below. These can help you to evaluate your current practices and identify areas for growth.

Illustrations of staff skills, knowledge, values and deployment are also available for [early learning and childcare settings](#) and [childminding settings](#).

Themes for staff skills, knowledge, values and deployment

The themes for this quality indicator are:

- staff skills, knowledge and values
- staff deployment

About staff skills, knowledge, values and deployment

This indicator focuses on the importance of skilled interactions to promote children's confidence and to have a positive influence on their lives as they grow and develop. It highlights the importance of continuous development for staff being promoted through highly effective use of reflective practice, feedback and support. Professional learning is well planned and informed by local, national and international evidence and research. It is reviewed and matched to identified needs of individual staff members.

There is an awareness that staff should have appropriate professional registration and should understand and adhere to the relevant codes of practice. Recognition is given to the need for a positive, compassionate and responsive culture where children thrive.

This indicator focuses on ensuring that staffing levels and deployment take account of the range of staff skills, as well as the routines and activities of the session. It recognises the need for responsive staff deployment and the importance of ensuring that the service is appropriately staffed throughout the session, to provide a safe, high-quality service and ensure the best outcomes for children.

Illustrations of staff skills, knowledge and values

'Very good' staff skills, knowledge and values

We have a clear understanding of how children play and develop, having high aspirations for children's achievements. We have opportunities to draw on our own skills and knowledge to facilitate a wide variety of experiences and play opportunities. Our staff make very good use of professional development opportunities that link directly to enhanced outcomes for children and the setting's improvement plan. Research, best practice, national and local policy, underpinning legislation, the [United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child \(UNCRC\)](#) and the [Health and Social Care Standards](#) are used in this process.

A wide range of opportunities is available for staff to hold professional discussions and use these to inform practice. We are highly reflective and engage in these work-based discussions to build individual and team knowledge and effectiveness. We maintain meaningful records of the impact of our learning and development and have a clear learning action plan.

Highly effective supervision enables us to be clear about our responsibilities. Celebrating success and learning from mistakes is an integral part of the ethos in the service. This leads to a culture of openness, where we feel proud to work in the service and safe to discuss practice when errors occur. Shared values guide our work and result in improved outcomes for children. Where required, staff maintain registration with a professional body and follow the codes of practice.

'Weak' staff skills, knowledge and values

The quality of our service for children and families is negatively impacted as we fail to, or are not enabled to, engage in professional learning to improve our practice. Staff learning needs are not identified and we have limited access to suitable training. This results in gaps in professional knowledge and skills, which impacts negatively on the quality of children's experiences. We are not empowered to share appropriate knowledge across the team. There is an absence of professional discussion to support each other's development and learning.

We do not fully understand our responsibility to maintain a professional registration. Where registration with professional bodies is required, this is incomplete or may have lapsed. Staff may not take sufficient account of the codes of practice in their work. This adversely impacts the quality of children's experiences, increases risk and reduces trust in the service we provide.

Illustrations of staff deployment

'Very good' staff deployment

Our leaders are open and honest about decisions on staffing. They make highly effective use of the differing experience, knowledge and skills of the staff group to ensure children experience safe and responsive care.

Arrangements are in place to promote continuity of care across each session and ensure positive transitions and communication with families. To ensure this is consistent, breaks are planned to minimise impact on children while enabling staff to rest and be refreshed.

Staff communicate well, are flexible and support each other. We work as a team to ensure deployment is effective in ensuring high-quality experiences and outcomes for children. Approaches to staff deployment ensure staff have the appropriate level of support from experienced colleagues. This allows us to share skills and knowledge across the team and to feel confident that we are working well together.

Arrangements for absence, both planned and unplanned, support minimum disruption to children's routines. If children have a key worker, they are prepared in advance for their key worker's absence, wherever possible.

'Weak' staff deployment

We do not feel able to raise issues or concerns about the safety and wellbeing of children as a result of decisions about staff deployment. We do not take responsibility for any gaps in staffing, and opportunities to improve are missed.

Communication and team working between us is limited, leading to gaps in interactions and the supervision of children across the session. Our lack of flexibility and support across the staff team significantly compromises the quality of experiences and outcomes for children. We lack confidence to talk about mistakes, which has the potential to lead to harm to children.

Arrangements for busier times of the session are ineffective in ensuring that we can fully meet children's needs. Activities become task orientated rather than an opportunity for high-quality engagement and interaction. We do not always receive sufficient breaks and take breaks at a time when higher levels of supervision are required.

Children's routines and experiences are disrupted as arrangements for planned absence are poorly managed. Children and families are not always advised when staff will be absent and are not prepared for, or introduced to, temporary staff.

Challenge questions for skills, knowledge, values and deployment

The following challenge questions can support your self-evaluation:

- How do we use self-evaluation to ensure that staff have the appropriate knowledge and skills to support children to be the best that they can be?
- How well does professional learning impact positively on outcomes for children and in what ways?
- How do we build on individual skills and interests which lead to improvements for children?
- How do we engage and encourage leadership at all levels?
- In what ways are we maximising opportunities for staff to work and learn together?
- What approaches do we take to tasks in the service to ensure children are supported across the session?
- How does staff deployment meet the individual care and support needs of all children throughout the session?
- How do we promote a positive staff ethos and support staff wellbeing in our service?
- How do we know staff enjoy working here and feel involved and part of an effective team?
- How do we consider staff wellbeing to ensure we provide safe and high-quality care and the best outcomes for children?

Children experience high-quality spaces

Children experience high quality spaces is the 'children thrive and develop in quality spaces' quality indicator. There are illustrations of practice and challenge questions below. These can help you to evaluate your current practice and identify areas for growth.

Illustrations of children experience high quality spaces are also available for [early learning and childcare settings](#) and [childminding settings](#).

Themes for children experience high quality spaces

The themes for this quality indicator are:

- quality, safety and maintenance of spaces
- children influence and affect change
- information management

About children experience high quality spaces

This indicator highlights the importance of having a safe, secure and inspiring physical environment, whether delivered indoors, outdoors or a blend of both. It demonstrates the need for physical spaces that reflect children's needs, interests and differing stages of development. The environment should be inclusive and celebrate diversity including differences in speech, language and communication. When designing and evaluating spaces for children, careful consideration should be given to current research and best practices. [Space to grow and thrive](#) should be used as a key resource.

There is a recognition of [the right to daily outdoor play](#), indicating that this should be valued and provided well. The importance of staff understanding the impact outdoor play can have on children's overall development is highlighted, as well as the opportunities it provides for learning about the wider world.

This indicator recognises the importance of a well-maintained physical environment for children. It highlights the need for regular maintenance of the building, resources and equipment used. There is recognition that whilst [children must be kept safe](#), children's play provides an opportunity to take and learn from measured risk. All aspects of security should be considered, including the security of buildings and the storage of confidential records and information.

Illustrations of quality, safety and maintenance of spaces

Very good' quality, safety and maintenance of spaces

Our physical environment, whether offered indoors or outdoors, is welcoming, fully meets children's needs, and is well equipped. It gives a strong message to children that they matter.

We make best use of available resources to create, sustain and enhance a motivating physical environment. As a result, our physical environment ensures children experience high quality play experiences which are centred on their needs and interests. We recognise the importance of [daily outdoor play](#) and the benefits of this for enhancing wellbeing. Children are supported to actively explore and learn about the wider world.

We take prompt action to ensure the safety and security of children, visitors and each other. We undertake, understand and share appropriate risk assessments. We keep children accounted for by remaining vigilant to risk. We always know who is in our care, whether they are indoors, outdoors or in the wider community. As a result, children are safe and their opportunities to enjoy challenging and fun play experiences are not compromised.

Whilst we prioritise children's safety, we embrace a positive, balanced approach to risk in children's play. Children engage in a broad range of challenging and interesting play experiences. Through these experiences, children build self-confidence and learn to assess and manage risks, developing essential skills and resilience.

We have received robust training on infection prevention and control measures. This means they have a clear understanding and confidence to provide and promote a high-quality, clean and safe environment. This includes understanding of the arrangements for cleaning as well as in practicing food safety. Where children require personal care, arrangements are effectively planned and staff maintain high levels of infection prevention and control. Children's privacy, dignity and preferences are fully respected and there are appropriate changing facilities.

Arrangements for monitoring, maintenance and repair of the setting, equipment, and any vehicles function well and are consistently implemented. Damaged items are promptly replaced.

'Weak' quality, safety and maintenance of spaces

The physical environment is neglected rather than warm and welcoming for children. There is limited attention to detail such as homely touches, decoration, and the quality of furniture and resources is poor. There may be unpleasant smells or intrusive noise levels. The physical environment, furniture and fittings are generally inadequate, with limited opportunities to display interesting materials and children's work.

The layout of the physical environment does not enable children to lead their own play. The resources provided by staff do not support children's engagement and do not reflect their stage of development.

Staff demonstrate limited understanding of the benefits of the outdoors to children. Children are not sufficiently supported to access the outdoor environment. Current best practice or research is not used effectively to inform our knowledge in this area. We do not always recognise when children need more energetic experiences. Potential barriers to outdoor play and engagement have not been recognised or given adequate consideration. This means that the physical environment does not meet children's needs.

We do not always work well together to promote a safe environment for children. We may have limited understanding of children's development and may not recognise when everyday items can pose risk. As a result, children may be at risk from avoidable harm.

We may unnecessarily limit children's experiences and children's confidence may be affected. Excessive restrictions may be placed on their play opportunities, compromising the quality of children's experiences. Our procedures for infection prevention and control are not robust and heighten the risk of infection.

Arrangements for security within the setting, outdoors and in the wider community may not be well considered. There is the potential for children to exit the setting or environment without staffs' knowledge, exposing them to risk of harm.

Illustrations of children influence and affect change

Very good' children influence and affect change

Children have high levels of involvement in influencing the design and use of spaces, which gives them a strong, clear message that they matter. We actively engage with children to enable them to direct their play and experiences in the way they choose. Children are listened to and know that their views matter. We understand the capabilities of all children. We adapt our practices to meet their needs and enable their voices.

Our environment provides opportunities for children to make decisions and act independently within the safe boundaries of our setting. They are encouraged to lead most aspects of their play, and we guide them to take on responsibilities at times like snack or when they are in the outdoors. Through outdoor play, children are learning about sustainability, gaining a deeper understanding of how to care for and preserve their natural environment. Our approach keeps children engaged and increases their confidence.

We have an inclusive environment where children have a belief in their abilities. Carefully selected and well positioned furniture and resources support all children to make choices and freely play. Resources and materials available to children are varied, adaptive and responsive, catering to children's individual abilities, needs and interests. We understand the positive impact that rich, multi-sensory play has on children's engagement, resilience and wellbeing.

We have a supportive environment where children are valued and celebrated. High-quality resources and spaces promote diversity, equity and inclusion. Children, their families and wider communities are positively reflected in the resources, spaces and experiences available. Children feel seen and included. Our enriching setting fully supports children to develop their knowledge, respect and understanding of their community and wider world.

'Weak' children influence and affect change

Children's needs and views are not consistently sought or taken into consideration when designing the physical environment or when planning experiences and daily routines. Children's independence is not supported, and they are unable to lead their own care routines, play and activities. The experiences we offer fail to engage and motivate children. We contribute little to their development into thriving young people.

Our practice in the service related to caring for resources, including the natural environment, does not take account of sustainability. We provide very few, if any, opportunities for children to learn about sustainability and caring for their natural environment, encouraging poor habits in respect of reducing waste and the impact of our use of natural resources.

Our provision of play resources and equipment is limited and, in some cases, outdated and inappropriate. Children lack motivation and interest due to the lack of stimulating resources and activities to choose from. The resources available lack breadth and balance and do not sufficiently meet children's development needs.

In some cases, children and their families may experience discrimination as a result of outdated or inappropriate resources. This has the potential to negatively influence children's self-esteem and their knowledge and understanding of the world around them.

We may demonstrate an approach to risk that is either risk averse or not well considered. This is evident in the layout of spaces indoors and outdoors. This may result in the potential for harm. We may not engage effectively with families to deepen their understanding of the benefits of riskier outdoor play and learning experiences.

Illustrations of information management

'Very good' information management

Our physical environment provides a secure and safe setting for children while respecting their rights and reflecting our overarching aims and objectives. Any use of CCTV is lawful, fair and proportionate and protects their dignity. It is only used for purposes that support the delivery of safe, effective and compassionate care for children.

Protection of children's personal information is paramount and complies with relevant best practice and legal requirements. Our leaders and staff are well informed about their responsibilities and have the skills to carry these out robustly. Efficient and effective record keeping systems are in place. This includes the management of electronic information which is in line with general data protection requirements and advice on cyber threats. Our staff fully understand and implement their roles and responsibilities in relation to information management.

'Weak' information management

The use of CCTV is not well understood by staff. Our leaders and staff are not well informed about their responsibilities and infringements of rights of children, families and staff may occur as a result. Families may not have been consulted about any CCTV or informed of their rights. The arrangements for CCTV do not meet the requirements of current legislation.

Arrangements for the storage of and processing of children's personal information are poorly managed and do not comply with relevant legislation and best practice. Our staff do not have an awareness or understanding of their role in using information appropriately or storing it securely. Where electronic systems are in place they are not secure or suitable.

Challenge questions for children experience high quality spaces

The following challenge questions can support your self-evaluation:

- How can we be confident that our physical environment maximises opportunities for children to be challenged, creative and engaged in their play?
- To what extent does our environment support different types of play?
- How can we be confident that our physical environment is maintained to the highest standards ensuring a safe and healthy environment for children?
- How do we ensure our service is secure, and that no child can leave unsupervised without staff knowledge?
- How do we ensure children's privacy, dignity and preferences are fully respected?
- How well are children enabled to select and make use of high-quality resources appropriate to their needs, wishes and development?
- How inclusive is our setting for all children and families? Does it accommodate and promote emotional safety?
- How do we promote diversity, equity and inclusion and how are these positively reflected in the resources, spaces, and experiences available?
- How do we know our setting provides a wide range of challenging outdoor play and learning experiences that promote children's health and wellbeing?
- How are children's files and information stored to ensure they are secure?
- Do we demonstrate an understanding of how data protection laws operate?

Playing, learning and developing

Playing, learning and developing is a 'children play and learn' quality indicator. There are illustrations of practice and challenge questions below. These can help you to evaluate your current practices and identify areas for growth.

Illustrations of playing, learning and developing are also available for [early learning and childcare settings](#) and [childminding settings](#).

Themes for playing, learning and developing

The themes for this QI are:

- children's engagement
- quality of interactions
- child-centred planning

About playing, learning and developing

This quality indicator focuses on children's right to play, emphasising that they should have fun, experience joy and have high-quality play experiences indoors and outdoors. It is essential that children are meaningfully and actively involved in leading their own play, shaping their development.

There is an expectation that staff understand how [playing helps children develop skills for life and learning](#). Interactions, experiences and spaces should successfully enrich play, taking into account the individual needs, interests and development of each child. Children make sustained progress in playful environments and benefit from responsive planning approaches.

Staff should skilfully engage in quality, child-led interactions. They spend time interacting and conversing with children, listening and responding sensitively as they express their ideas and needs. Children are supported to recognise, enjoy and celebrate their successes.

Illustrations of children's engagement

'Very good' children's engagement

We have a strong understanding of how children develop and progress. Our staff skilfully use relevant theory and practice to deliver high-quality play experiences that excite and empower children. We offer opportunities for play and leisure activities that support children in building confidence, learning about themselves and developing their social skills. Children are highly motivated and fully engaged by the rich, challenging, planned and responsive experiences available both indoors and outdoors.

Well-considered innovations and creative approaches successfully engage children's imagination and enrich their play experiences. Skills for life are developed and enhanced through a playful, engaging environment. This includes the appropriate use of digital technology to enhance experiences.

We work effectively with families to support their understanding of the benefits to children of play-based experiences which challenge and delight them. This collaborative approach fosters the development of trust and cooperation, which supports children's wellbeing and development and gives them opportunities to flourish.

Children make informed choices about their play within our creative, challenging and enabling environment. We give them the time, space and support they need to make decisions and use their voice. We are skilled at using high-quality interactions, spaces and experiences to extend and sustain children's interests.

'Weak' children's engagement

Children have limited opportunities to follow their own ideas and interests, in their own way for their own reasons. Our play environment overall lacks inspiration. There is little to challenge or ignite children's imagination and curiosity, or to encourage them to explore their ideas.

Our understanding of child-led play is underdeveloped. Children's individual development needs and their interests are not reflected within interactions, experiences and spaces. As a result, children are not engaged. They miss opportunities to build confidence and to develop their leadership and social skills. Children therefore lack interest and motivation and may experience boredom, upset or frustration.

Illustrations of quality of interactions

'Very good' quality of interactions

Careful observation allows us to interpret children's interests and provide opportunities to extend their thinking without directing their play. We use a variety of approaches to respond to children's cues to support development of self-regulation, empathy, confidence, creativity and curiosity.

We support children as they grow and develop. We understand that interacting and exploring with children is a valuable way to foster understanding, and a sense of wonder and excitement about the world. We enable next steps and give praise for trying things out.

Children pursue their interests at a pace that is right for them, having fun as they explore the world around them. We take time to understand children's verbal and nonverbal communication which helps us to judge when to interact and when to wait and observe. We encourage children's interactions with each other, recognising the important role other children have in enriching play. This enables children to make the most of their interactions and experiences.

Our children have frequent, appropriate opportunities to develop their thinking and problem-solving skills through imaginative play and storytelling. This helps children to extend their own thinking, practice new skills and consolidate their learning in ways which are meaningful to them.

'Weak' quality of interactions

Conversations and interactions with children lack structure and challenge and miss opportunities to build on their interests. We lack understanding around children's communication and language needs or their preferred ways of communicating. This results in missed opportunities for children to make progress and can mean children become passive, upset or frustrated.

We are not child focused during our interactions and fail to recognise and value children's thoughts, interests and processes during play. Children's play is often interrupted by adult led routines and interactions that are task oriented. As a result, children lack opportunities to become absorbed in their play, solve problems and follow their own interests.

Illustrations of child-centred planning

'Very good' child-centred planning

Children are at the centre of our planning. We are skilled at recognising and responding to children's individual interests, stages of development and play preferences. These insights are thoroughly considered when we plan new experiences and opportunities. We use observations of each child's play to plan, support, challenge and extend their interests.

Children are highly motivated and fully engaged by the range of rich, challenging play opportunities, offered through a balance of intentional and responsive planning. Experiences reflect children's ideas, aspirations, curiosities and meaningful next steps in their development.

Through careful observations of play, we can recognise and promote children's interests and are able to plan for and implement any additional supports needed. Our highly responsive approach ensures children are included and developing a broad range of skills for life and learning.

We work together with children, families and partners to support children to enjoy their successes and share their achievements.

'Weak' child-centred planning

We miss important opportunities to observe children during their play. This leads to gaps in our understanding of what they can do, their interests and how they are developing.

We also fail to use the information that families and partners share with us. This makes it difficult to plan effectively to meet each child's unique needs and interests, including any additional support required. As a result, some children are not getting the right opportunities through play and are not being challenged at the right level.

Families are not involved or given high-quality information on their children's experiences, which results in a lack of consistency and continuity for children.

Challenge questions for play, learning and development

The following challenge questions can support your self-evaluation:

- How well do we support and encourage children's natural curiosity, creativity and problem solving in our service?
- What approaches are we using to promote children's developing skills?
- How do our approaches support emotional, social, and physical development?
- How can children be supported to have confidence in leading their own play?
- How do we ensure we keep up to date with relevant theory?
- How do we apply our knowledge to support high-quality play experiences?
- How do we ensure our approach to children's needs recognises the independent thoughts and feelings of children as individuals?
- How does our service approach support for children to develop their thinking and problem-solving skills?
- How well do we support staff in undertaking their role in planning for and evaluating children's experiences?
- How effective are our processes to evaluate children's development and achievements?
- How well does information gathered about children's needs and interests inform our planning?
- How do we maximise opportunities for children to be challenged, creative and engaged in their play and experiences?

Nurturing care and support

Nurturing care and support is a quality indicator for 'children are supported to achieve'. There are illustrations of practice and challenge questions below. These can help you to evaluate your current practices and identify areas for growth.

Illustrations of nurturing care and support are also available for [early learning and childcare settings](#) and [childminding settings](#).

Themes for nurturing care and support

The themes for this QI are:

- nurturing care
- personal planning
- connections with families

About nurturing care and support

This indicator focuses on how well children are nurtured, cared for and supported. Children's care and support routines are individualised to meet their needs and should be delivered with kindness and compassion.

There is a focus on [personal planning](#) that reflects the holistic needs of each child, promotes their wellbeing and supports positive outcomes. The indicator highlights the need to involve children and their families in making decisions about their care and support. Children transitioning between different spaces and settings require thoughtful consideration to ensure safe and supportive care.

This indicator highlights the importance of [connecting with children and their families](#). Staff should create a welcoming environment and consider each child's unique circumstances to ensure smooth transitions and positive experiences. Fostering strong connections with children's families can have a significantly positive impact on a child's wellbeing.

Illustrations of nurturing care

‘Very good’ nurturing care

Our practice is built on the understanding that nurturing relationships, including supporting the development of children’s friendships, are essential for healthy growth and development. Our children experience warm, consistent and responsive care that fosters their wellbeing. They are safe, sensitively cared for and skilfully helped to express their needs.

We recognise the importance of supportive transitions and understand that their significance can vary for each child. We regularly assess each child's individual needs and evaluate the effectiveness of our transition strategies. We ensure consistent relationships to support smooth transitions and minimise disruptions to children's experiences. Guided by best practice, we evaluate our approaches and continually strive to improve our practice. The varied age groups in the setting positively impact transitions because older children are encouraged to welcome, support and guide younger or newer children.

Children's privacy and dignity are respected. We balance promoting children's independence with providing support where it is needed. We continually reflect on our practice to ensure it adapts to children's evolving needs and development. We create diverse spaces that support children to socialise, play in small groups or alone if they wish. This positively impacts our children's ability to regulate their emotions and build social skills.

Children's food choices are nutritious, culturally appropriate and safely prepared to account for any specific dietary needs, allergies or intolerances. They are aligned with current dietary guidelines including [Food Matters](#) and [Healthy Eating in Schools: guidance 2020](#). Fresh water is readily available throughout the day. We consider daily routines, such as mealtimes, as valuable opportunities to promote children's involvement, independence and enhance their experiences.

We ensure consistency in who provides a child’s care and support and how it is provided. Consistent care and routines provide our children with a sense of safety and security. We recognise daily routines, such as snack time, provide rich opportunities to connect with children and support their growth and development.

We work closely with families, and where appropriate children, to [administer medication safely](#). We are committed to the safety of all children and ensure our care and support approaches align with current best practice, guidance and policy.

‘Weak’ nurturing care

We do not respond appropriately to children's verbal and nonverbal communication. The rushed nature of interactions can lead to a tone and manner that conflicts with children's needs. This often results in children not seeking comfort or support from our staff, compromising their wellbeing.

Our rigid approach to daily routines limits children's opportunities to build confidence and grow through their own experiences. They are not actively involved in planning routines or the experiences we offer, and their preferences and needs are often overlooked.

Continual changes to staffing arrangements disrupt children's routines and create a sense of instability. The frequent changes are challenging for some children, and we do not have the time or resources to support them. This often results in children being unsettled or distressed for long periods of time.

Food choices are not healthy. We do not plan meals and snacks in line with current nutritional guidance. We have limited understanding of children's individual cultural and dietary needs, making it challenging to keep them safe and respected. During mealtimes, we are focused on tasks, resulting in children receiving limited supervision and interaction to enhance their experience and keep them safe.

We limit children's access to water. We fail to recognise signs indicating a child might need a drink of water. Staff do not understand the importance of supporting children to stay hydrated.

Illustrations of personal planning

‘Very good’ personal planning

Children’s wellbeing is supported through effective personal planning. All children, regardless of their personal characteristics, are recognised as capable individuals who are listened to, valued and respected. Personal plans promote children’s rights and value the individuality of each child and their family.

Personal plans are tailored to each child’s individual strengths, needs and interests. We create meaningful plans with children and regularly review these to ensure plans are suitable and supportive.

We work proactively with children, families and other professionals to identify support needs and have clear strategies in place to ensure that children’s wellbeing is sustained. When a child requires support from multiple agencies, other professionals contribute to children’s personal plans. Each child’s personal plan is achievable, adaptable and includes strategies for care, support and protection, as necessary.

Our approach to personal planning considers best practice guidelines and is grounded in the [Getting it Right for Every Child \(GIRFEC\) framework](#), utilising wellbeing indicators to assess and plan for children’s overall wellbeing. The indicators provide us with a common language for assessing and discussing children’s strengths, needs and progress with families and other professionals.

A child-centred approach guides our strategies for transitions. We place children and families at the heart of any decision-making process. This includes when a child starts in our service or moves between services. Key information to support continuity and progression in a child’s care and support is shared appropriately, securely, and in good time. Our staff use well-planned and flexible approaches to enable children to feel safe and secure with any changes.

‘Weak’ personal planning

Personal plans are not individualised or meaningful and do not effectively support us to meet the needs of each child. Children requiring additional support, whether short or long term, are not receiving adequate care. This has the potential to adversely impact children’s development.

We place an overemphasis on what children cannot do and have limited consideration of their strengths and interests, leading to unrealistic and ineffective goals and strategies of support.

Opportunities to work collaboratively with other professionals to achieve positive outcomes for children are missed. When we do collaborate, we do not effectively share information, update children’s written plans or improve their care. This adversely impacts on the consistency and quality of care and support provided.

Personal plans do not comply with national guidance or legislation. We do not have opportunities to reflect on personal plans to help develop interactions, experiences and spaces to meet children’s needs. This means opportunities to make children feel comfortable, safe and appropriately challenged are missed.

Approaches to transition do not consider the needs and views of individual children and families. This means we miss key information to help planning for any changes to care, support or experiences, resulting in distress and/or a sense of insecurity for some children.

We do not include the voices of children and families. This means their views have not been valued or used to plan for children. This contributes to a lack of continuity and consistency in children’s care and support.

Serious inconsistencies in information sharing and record-keeping have put our children’s safety at risk. Staff do not always have the information or knowledge needed to keep children safe, nurtured and supported. This has resulted in oversights, such as frequent errors in the timing or dosage of medication administration, jeopardising children’s wellbeing.

Illustrations of connections with families

‘Very good’ connections with families

We know our children and families very well. We strive to create a warm and welcoming environment where [children and families feel valued and supported](#). The care we provide children is deeply influenced by the insights gained from their family. This supports us to create spaces which are culturally sensitive, accessible and inclusive for all.

Our connections with families increase their engagement in our service, positively impacting the quality of children's experiences. We recognise, learn from, and build upon the strengths that families bring, while sensitively responding to individual needs and circumstances. This collaborative approach enables us to learn from families, support children's growing sense of self, and ensure our setting remains responsive to their unique needs.

Families have regular opportunities to discuss their child's care and development, both informally and formally. We have systems in place to support communication with families, both verbally and in writing. We recognise and address many of the potential barriers that can make it difficult for families to be involved in our setting.

We understand that each child's development is shaped by their family, friends, community and experiences. We warmly welcome families into our setting to share in their child's experiences and encourage updates about children's hobbies and interests outside of our setting. This impacts positively on the quality of children's care and support, both at home and in the setting.

‘Weak’ connections with families

Engagement with families is not planned or purposeful. As a result, there is little evidence of the impact on, or benefits to, children’s care or development.

Our consultations with families fail to gather their views on what matters to them or their children. We rarely provide follow up responses to requests for further information. As a result, many families feel unheard.

We place little value on building trusting relationships with families to improve children’s wellbeing. Early opportunities to respond effectively to the needs of children and families are missed. This means that families are not always understood and treated with dignity and respect. Families tell us they do not feel welcome in our service.

We have limited understanding of the strengths and knowledge that families bring to our setting. We do not use the information they share with us to inform our care and support of children. This contributes to children feeling unsettled and can restrict their experiences.

There is a lack of quality feedback given to families across all aspects of their child’s care and support. We have few informal interactions with families during key times such as, drop-off and pick-up of children. Opportunities for regular information exchanges are limited. By not actively seeking to build strong relationships with children’s families, we miss opportunities to keep children safe and to enhance their experiences.

Challenge questions for nurturing care and support

The following challenge questions can support your self-evaluation:

- What best practices, theories and guidance underpin our care and support of children?
- How do our observations and knowledge of a child influence the routine of the day?
- Does our approach to transitions help children to feel safe and secure? How do we know our approach is effective?
- What systems, processes and approaches do we have in place to keep children safe? How do we know they are effective?
- What do we need to do to ensure that the voices of all children, both verbal and nonverbal are heard and responded to?
- How do we know that all staff fully understand and implement our approaches to inclusion, diversity and equity?
- How well do staff understand and champion the rights of care experienced children and families?
- What do we do to promote sociable and healthy eating experiences?
- In what ways do we communicate with children, families and/or other professionals to jointly plan children's care and support?
- When children and their families arrive at our setting, how do we know they feel welcomed?

Safeguarding and child protection

Safeguarding and child protection is a Care Inspectorate and Education Scotland quality indicator. There are illustrations for practice and challenge questions below. As part of your self-evaluation, these themes can help you reflect on your current practice and identify areas for growth.

Illustrations are also available for [early learning and childcare settings](#) and [childminding settings](#).

Themes for safeguarding and child protection

The themes for this quality indicator are:

- culture of safety and wellbeing
- legislation, policy and guidance in practice
- empowerment of staff and children

About safeguarding and child protection

This indicator relates to the range of responsibilities of leaders, staff and partners to ensure that children are [safe, well cared for and protected from harm](#). It highlights the need for everyone to foster a culture that values, upholds, realises and promotes children's rights. There is an emphasis on the need to establish and maintain a shared commitment to promoting children's welfare and protection that is woven into the culture of safety, security and wellbeing.

It highlights the need for careful attention to children's wellbeing and safety as part of robust approaches to self-evaluation. It emphasises the need for a current understanding and implementation of relevant legislation, [policy and guidance](#) that is informed by high-quality, evidence-based professional learning. The indicator recognises the crucial importance of robust processes that underpin and direct staff to recognise, respond to, record and report wellbeing, child protection or safeguarding concerns appropriately.

This indicator focuses on the significance of building positive relationships and effective partnerships to safeguard children. It recognises the importance of supporting staff, children and families sensitively to learn about children's wellbeing and right to be safe and heard. It emphasises the need to ensure all children and staff are supported well to access the support they need, at the right time, to ensure children are protected.

Illustrations of a culture of safety and wellbeing

‘Very Good’ culture of safety and wellbeing

Our ethos sensitively and effectively promotes children’s rights and equality. This is supported by strong leadership that empowers all staff to continuously improve safeguarding and child protection practice across the setting. We understand our shared responsibility in ensuring that children live safely and are supported to thrive.

Our leaders effectively support all staff to ensure we have a deep understanding of our shared responsibilities. We ensure any volunteers or covering staff are fully aware of our arrangements for safeguarding and child protection. We have a culture of accountability and continuous learning, driven by robust reflective practice. We understand that transitions for children, as part of daily routines or periods of significant change, can affect children in different ways. Our strong rights-based and trauma-informed practice ensures we anticipate and respond promptly and sensitively to safeguard children.

We understand the needs and experiences of children and families are varied. We prioritise fostering partnerships within our community and with families to ensure that we work well together to keep children safe. We proactively share information about available family supports that can offer early help in a sensitive way, to prevent escalating needs and risks to children.

‘Weak’ culture of safety and wellbeing

Our ethos does not effectively uphold or promote children’s rights. Approaches which enable staff to actively listen to children and develop trusting relationships are not embedded. Children’s views are not taken into consideration or respected. Children and families do not feel listened to.

Our leaders have not appropriately identified or addressed staff training needs related to wellbeing, safeguarding or child protection. Shared responsibility for continuous professional learning and self-reflection is not in place. When training is provided, we do not effectively apply new learning or update practice.

Concerns that arise may not always be recognised or responded to in a timely or sensitive manner. We have not yet established consistent approaches to uphold children’s rights to safety and protection.

Illustrations of legislation, policy and guidance in practice

‘Very good’ legislation, policy and guidance in practice

We have a comprehensive understanding of our safeguarding policies, which we apply consistently across our practice. Our team work closely to identify, record and respond to concerns effectively. Safeguarding arrangements are well implemented and monitored. We use our knowledge of best practice and internal procedures in areas such as recruitment and whistleblowing to keep children safe.

We are committed to protecting children from harm. We have well established and clear procedures that enable staff and volunteers to report concerns about a colleague or leader if they pose a risk to a child. Our policy and procedures empower everyone to escalate child protection issues that are not being handled appropriately.

Our robust approach to self-evaluation fully informs our arrangements for recognising, responding to, recording and reporting concerns about children’s wellbeing or safety. We use legislation, national guidance and policies to support our self-evaluation. We proactively take account of new information, policy developments and emerging issues to improve our practice.

We have highly effective safeguarding and child protection processes to support our communication with other agencies. Our staff are confident in using these procedures. We have a clear understanding of our role and responsibility to keep children safe and when to share information with others.

Our proactive approach carefully considers the strengths, needs, risks and protective factors for individual children and their families. We pay particular attention to the unique needs of individual children, including those with additional support needs or who are care experienced. Our consistent application of clear procedures supports us very well in developing and sustaining effective partnerships. Children’s and families’ views fully inform our well-judged decisions and actions.

‘Weak’ legislation, policy and guidance in practice

Our limited understanding and ineffective implementation of national guidance mean that policies and legislation are not applied effectively. A lack of clearly defined roles and shared responsibilities in safeguarding and child protection has the potential to compromise children’s safety and care.

Our safeguarding and child protection policies do not clearly outline how to escalate concerns when someone in our team, including someone in a leadership role, may pose a risk to children. They are also unclear about what to do if a child protection issue is not being handled appropriately.

Our record-keeping practices are inconsistent and fail to adequately capture how different types of harm can create or heighten risk to a child. Opportunities to ensure support is in place, or appropriate action is taken, are missed. Agreed next steps are not consistently followed through, which limits improvements to children’s wellbeing. Information required to keep children safe is not available to relevant staff or shared appropriately with partner agencies. These gaps may place children’s safety and care at risk.

Illustrations of empowering children and staff

‘Very good’ empowering children and staff

We apply a trauma-informed lens to all of our practice and interactions with children, their families and people within and outside of our team. We nurture trusting and respectful relationships with children, families and the local community.

Our interactions are underpinned by children’s rights. We know individual children very well. We communicate respectfully with families and one another to develop a holistic knowledge of children and their wellbeing needs. This enables us to identify children and families who may be at risk of harm and respond appropriately.

We are a highly skilled team with a deep understanding of safeguarding and child protection practice, which we use to create a safe and trusting environments for all. Children feel secure in expressing their views, sharing worries and asking for help. We prioritise listening with sensitivity and responding with care. This is supported by an empowering and empathetic leadership team that values staff wellbeing and encourages openness.

We regularly provide motivating opportunities where children assess and manage appropriate risk and learn about how to keep safe. Through our responsive interactions and well-judged support, we help children build skills and learn to keep themselves safe. Children develop their resilience and their understanding of physical and emotional safety very well.

Our thoughtful approaches support families well to learn about safeguarding and children's rights within our setting. This includes high quality opportunities for children and parents/carers to develop their cyber resilience and internet safety skills.

'Weak' empowering children and staff

Our team lack a consistent approach to understanding and respecting the different ways children communicate their views and experiences. We rarely notice what children express through their actions, as well as their words. As a result, important signs that a child may need protection or support may not be identified or acted upon.

We do not recognise our role in supporting children to build resilience. Stable, consistent routines are undervalued. Frequent staff changes and inconsistent approaches can make it difficult for children to form secure, trusting relationships with staff.

We do not consistently demonstrate a working knowledge of safeguarding or child protection practices. We are not encouraged or supported to be proactive in recognising, responding to, reducing, or removing potential harm to children. Processes for escalating concerns are unclear or not consistently implemented.

Challenge questions for safeguarding and child protection

The following challenge questions can support your self-evaluation:

- How effectively do leaders and staff implement national guidance and take account of legislation to keep children safe, secure and protected from harm?
- To what extent do our relationships with children, staff, families, partners and the local community promote children's welfare and safety?
- How well do our self-evaluation and quality assurance processes support improvements in safeguarding? To what extent do they strengthen areas such as staff and volunteer recruitment, personal planning, and practice in place to keep children safe during play and learning?
- To what extent does regular, high-quality, professional learning improve our practice?
- What changes have we made as a result of professional learning? How do we know practice changes have had a positive impact for children and/or staff?
- How effectively do we identify and support children at risk of harm, including those who are on, or were previously on, the child protection register?
- How effectively do we identify and support children who are care experienced and living with kinship, foster or adoptive families or in residential care?
- How well do we use risk assessment tools, such as chronologies, to inform our actions and improve outcomes for children and families?
- What evidence tells us that we are effectively using a trauma-informed approach?
- How effectively do staff support children, parents/carers and one another to develop their cyber resilience and internet safety skills?
- How well do our child protection policies and procedures support us to keep children safe from harm?
- How effectively do staff support children to learn how to recognise and manage risk as they play and learn?
- How well are staff wellbeing needs recognised and supported within our child protection practice?

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[The quality improvement framework for the early learning and childcare sectors](#) is also available online.

