

Formal early years settings are legally required to keep children safe while they are not in the care of their parents or guardians.

The research into how children's experiences in the early years goes on to affect the long-term health and development has led to the national Minimum standards being enacted, these standards will ensure that children in education or childcare settings will receive the minimum they need in relation to care, experience and learning to be able to make progress while attending their setting.

In the following reflective paper, I will look into 2 forms of assessment that Early years workers can use to reflect on their own practice and deployment of resources in learning environments and use them to improve on existing good practice while looking forward to plan for even better practice in the future and strive for high quality provision to ensure that the child remains paramount and has the best possible chance to succeed in life.

Ishimine and Taylor describe quality as a concept, influenced by the values and the theoretical and philosophical viewpoints of researchers and practitioners. Perlman,

Etal. (2016) go on to say that quality can be defined by structural factors such as the ratio of staff to children and the education of those staff members, meaning that more staff to attend the needs of children will result in more frequent opportunities for sustained shared thinking. Therefore, tools for formally accessing quality are useful for early years practitioners to be able to provide tangible evidence that their contributions to children's holistic development goes above and beyond the minimum standard.

Early ears settings in Wales can look to the national minimum standards for guidance on how to make sure that all provision being used by children is at the very least, safe and fit for purpose (UK Government, 2020). Meeting minimum standards will satisfy some of the criteria The Care and Social Services Inspectorate Wales will be looking for in regards to ensuring staff have valid DBS certificates and the basic qualifications needed to keep children safe, but high quality settings will need to provide service that goes beyond the minimum, as of April 2016, CCSIW are assessing services based around the themes of Well-being , Care and development, Leadership and management and Environment (CCSIW, 2016).

To work towards a higher result in inspections, early years practitioners can refer to research, like that of Tayler (2015) and understand that the children in their care are going through a

phase of rapid growth where they are particularly sensitive to learning, and if given adequate stimulation, the environments and interactions you provide a child during these sensitive periods can have an impact on that child's future learning and development, therefore, striving to improve practice and provision in early years settings can capitalise on these periods. Sustained Shared Thinking is one concept been proven to improve outcomes dramatically for children as they grow and can be a useful skill for practitioners to reflect on and develop as part of their ongoing professional development under the guidance set out in the Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Wellbeing Scale.

Siraj-Blatchford *et al.* (2020) describe Sustained Shared Thinking as a period where two or more individuals collaborate to solve problems, extend a narrative, or understand a concept that leads to a development in understanding. Buck and Deutsch (2014). Researched the effects of poverty on children's educational attainment, the complex issues that arise from living in low-income households, such as, lack of toys, opportunities and basic needs sometimes not being met, can accumulate into children beginning their education at a lower level than children from more affluent households. Research from Perkins, Finegood, Swain (2013) has shown that children from lower income households are exposed to less spoken language and have fewer interactions with adults, they describe 'The family stress model' that connects the factors of poverty discussed by Buck and Deutsch (2014). with parental emotional distress and lack of investment in the basic needs that affect the child's acquisition of language.

To improve on the minimum and give all children the flying start to life they deserve, early years workers can refer to the Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Wellbeing Scale assessment tool to gain insights into their provision, and practice, identifying areas for improvement and the need for further staff training and professional development. professional development, was described Elmore (2002) as an investment that legitimises the practice of educators.

Howard *et al.* (2020) recommend the Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Wellbeing Scale to access the quality of interactions between children and staff in early years settings, The Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Wellbeing Scale has a focus on practitioners' interactions with children in settings. It centres around the knowledge that children who feel

safe, secure because their social and emotional development is being supported, have better learning outcomes (Watch me Grow, 2023).

The Well-Being of Future Generations (Wales) Act (2015), which was instated by the Welsh Government to improve the social, economic, environmental, and cultural well-being of children in Wales. Similarly to the underpinning of the Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Wellbeing Scale, this policy recognises the importance of a child's wellbeing on their holistic development. Ivinson and Thompson (2020) note that Wales is progressive in its action against child poverty and praises the New curriculum for acknowledging that children's abilities across all areas of development, including wellbeing, must be supported in order for all children to have opportunities to succeed.

Purdon (2016) agrees that practitioners should feel empowered to engage in Sustained Shared Thinking and enhance environments to facilitate the flow of interactions and opportunities to scaffold development and understanding through valuable engagement with the adults and peers, and continued training and reflection is a suitable method to gain that empowerment.

Using the SSTEWS can make it possible to identify whether settings are following Welsh Government policy, to ensure the Seven Core Aims based on the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, are being worked towards. The aims help to protect children from abuse, and the effects of poverty, and support healthy mental and physical development through access to education and leisure because practitioners who are confident in engaging in Sustained Shared Thinking will be more in tune with the children they engage with, forming secure attachments and being more responsive to their needs so these children thrive in their care and are able to engage with the opportunities that have been tailored to suit their individual needs by the enabling adults in the setting.

The early years outcomes framework top priority is securing a good quality of life for children in the early years, this means they feel safe, supported, and valued as individuals. They are healthy and not suffering the effects of poverty, they are also resilient and are able to learn and develop (Welsh Government, 2019). The framework was established to assist in coordinating the efforts of different departments concerning early years to support practitioners in identifying areas that need to be developed and act in accordance with

policies and early years programmes to ensure they are making a positive difference to children's lives, one of these policies is The Childcare Act (2006), which aims to improve effective collaboration between local agencies to safeguard and promote children's well-being.

The statutory framework outlines the duty of care of all agencies involved with children up to the age of seven, the importance of these duties was laid out in Building a Brighter Future: Early Years and Childcare Plan (2013). Bronfenbrenner's theory shows us how each sector of childcare will be influenced by the other, aligning these different sectors will help build a better understanding of how each providers contribution can meet the needs of children more effectively and identify areas that need further improvement (Crawford, 2020). Gillani (2022) supports this theory and highlights the positive impact of quality relationships between the child, and the adults who support them. Prioritising these multi-disciplinary relationships plays a role in the safeguarding of children, which is a legal obligation under Section 20 of the National Minimum Standards (Welsh Government, 2023).

The Welsh Government, acting under the Education Act (2022) detail how all in educational settings must protect and promote the wellbeing of children by working in partnership with other agencies, develop children's understanding and resilience through the curriculum and to challenge poor practice and take action to keep children safe when necessary.

The Frameworks measure outcomes for children in the Early Years in the following areas;

"Are and feel safe.

Are cared for, supported, and valued.

Are resilient, capable, and coping.

Are healthy.

Learn and develop.

Do not live in and are not disadvantaged by poverty" (Early years outcome framework).

The early years framework assessment tool can help practitioners comply with the legal obligation to children in their care by clearly identifying outcomes that children should be able to meet while attending their educational setting. If children are not meeting the desired outcomes because of an additional learning need, the framework makes clear how practitioners need to differentiate resources and practice to suit the developing needs of children with additional learning needs to be wholly inclusive.

The National Mission Update (2020) reported on efforts to reduce learning loss among children in Wales, by addressing issues children living in poverty in Wales face that has been associated with lower attainment.

One of the strategies was to invest £31 million in professional learning, using quality driving assessment tools will identify the areas that practitioners need to develop to improve their practice and, in turn, raise aspirations for children and fulfil the outcomes required by the Early years outcomes framework (Education in Wales, 2020).

These aims are similar to those protected under the Childcare Act and are also reflected in the Welsh Governments Seven Core Aims (Save the Children, no date), using this assessment tool makes sure settings are in compliance with the law as well as improving outcomes for the children under their care.

In Early years settings, the Framework can enable staff to meet children's needs by respecting their rights under the law, following the guidelines means that children will be safe, valued, and respected as members of the community who have access to education and leisure activities to develop their personal and social skills as well as stay healthy (UNCRC 1989). The seven core aims- to enjoy health, play and access sporting activities could be met in early years settings if staff have a child led approach and understand that children need physical, play based learning activities to learn and develop holistically. Assessment tools can assist practitioners in ensuring they are providing beneficial play-based opportunities for children, which Irvin (2017) tell us is integral for developing language and social skills and supports growth and development in all areas that translate into lifelong skills.

The Early years outcome framework seeks to provide constructive challenge and scrutiny of the programme's emerging policies and proposals, Schachter (2015) recommends developing a learning community for early years professionals in response to constructive scrutiny, this method of professional is fitting with the ethos of The Early years outcome framework that requires collaboration between agencies in all other areas regarding the care of children.

Burnham (2016) describes the policies leaders in early years settings must follow to safeguard children from unnecessary harm by abuse or neglect, by ensuring all staff members are qualified to perform their role and are subject to a Disclosure and Barring check to show they have no prior criminal history that would make them unsuitable for roles with vulnerable

people. This also ensures that the setting is in accordance with section 142 of the Education Act (2002) Thorough risk assessments will help settings meet the needs of children and the criteria for a positive outcome from the Early Years Framework assessment.

Quality assessment tools are a pragmatic approach to improving staff performance and, in turn, outcomes for children, settings that score well on the quality assessment can prove they are doing their best to meet the needs of the children in their care which is reassuring to the parents and carers and the community whose future contributors are attending.

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