

The Baby Effective Early Learning Programme

Improving Quality in Early
Childhood Settings for Children
from Birth to Three Years

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Improving Quality in Early Childhood Settings

This handbook, together with the training which normally accompanies it, is a programme for developing early childhood settings by providing:

- a mechanism for systematic and rigorous self evaluation and evidence gathering;
- a means of prioritising action planning for improvement;
- a stimulus for deeper staff self-reflection;
- a contribution to a culture of self evaluation, openness and professionalism;
- improvement in adult's educational interaction within children's learning;
- a quality assurance scheme;
- an opportunity to enhance the training of staff/volunteers;
- a mechanism to prepare for, or follow up, registration and OfSTED inspection.

The handbook arises from the substantial experience the authors and the team at the Centre for Research in Early Childhood have of working with early childhood education and care settings. Whilst accepting full responsibility for its format and statements, the authors acknowledge the substantial support and scholarship of their colleague Maureen Saunders.



CONTENTS

Part 1: Rationale	7–40
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Part 2: Procedures	41–115
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PART 1: RATIONALE

Background	7
What is BEEL and what are its aims?	9
How is quality defined?	10
How is quality identified in practice?	10
What are the BEEL 10 Dimensions of Quality?	12
What evidence supports the BEEL Quality Framework?	17
How does BEEL link with the National Standards and OfSTED Inspection Framework?	25
How does the BEEL Quality Framework link with the OfSTED Inspection Schedule for Children's Services?	26
How might the effectiveness of an ECEC setting be assessed?	28
What kind of evaluation questions do we need to ask?	31
How can quality be improved?	33
What strategies for action are needed?	34
What are the BEEL principles of operation?	34
How is the evaluation carried out?	34
What reading will help?	38

PART 2: PROCEDURES

Role of the BEEL Support Worker	41
Role of the BEEL External Adviser	41
Timetable of Action Undertaken within a Setting	42
Supporting Evidence Checklist	44

EVALUATION

Ethical Considerations and Guarantees	48
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Quality Documentation	49
-----------------------------	----

STEP 1 Setting Orientation	49
Documents used in Step 1	49
Partnership Agreement Form	50
An Example of a Letter to Parents/Carers	51

STEP 2	Initial Fact Finding	52
	Documents used in Step 2	52
	Background Information Form	53
	National Standards Documentation Form	55
	Physical Environment Form	57
	Professional Biography Questionnaire	61
STEP 3	Discussion Framework	63
	Documents used in Step 3	63
	Discussion Framework Personnel	64
	Discussion Framework	65
STEP 4	Child Tracking Observation	67
	Document used in Step 4	67
	Rationale of Child Tracking	67
	How to conduct the observations	67
	How to complete the Child Tracking Observation Sheet	68
	Example of Child Tracking Observation Sheet	69
	Instructions for data analysis	70
	Quality Assessment	73
STEP 5/6	Child/Adult Engagement Observation Scale	73
	Document used in Step 5/6	73
	Rationale for the Child Engagement Scale	74
	Child Engagement Schedule: Connectedness	75
	Child Engagement Schedule: Exploration	77
	Child Engagement Schedule: Meaning Making	79
	Rationale for the Adult Engagement Scale	81
	Adult Engagement Observation/Action Categories	82
	The Adult Engagement Scale	83
	How to conduct productive peer reviews	83
	Adult Engagement Scale	85
	How to carry out the observations	87
	How to complete the Child/Adult Engagement Observation Sheet	87
	BEEL Child/Adult Engagement Observation Sheet	88
	Instructions for data analysis	89
STEP 7	Compilation and presentation of Evaluation Report	91
	Documents used in Step 7	91
	Notes of Guidance for writing the Evaluation Report	91
	Evaluation Report Requirements	92
	Example of Evaluation Report	93

ACTION PLANNING 103

STEP 8	Developing the Action Plan	103
	Identify resources and support for implementing the Action Plan	103
	Documents used in Step 8	104
	Guidelines for writing the Action Plan	104
	Action Plan Form	105

IMPROVEMENT 107

STEP 9	Document and support the Action	107
STEP 10/11	Child/Adult Engagement Observation Scale	107

REFLECTION 108

STEP 12	Reflecting on the impact of the BEEL process and looking ahead	108
STEP 13	Reflective Summary Report	108
	Document used in Step 13	108
	Reflective Summary Report Form	109
STEP 14	Setting Quality Assurance	114
STEP 15	Complaints and Appeals	114

Tables

Table 1:	Supportive Evidence and Statements of Performance for the BEEL 10 Dimensions of Quality	18
Table 2:	Links between the BEEL Quality Framework and the National Standards	25
Table 3:	Links between the OfSTED Framework for the Inspection of Children's Services and the BEEL 10 Dimensions of Quality	27
Table 4:	Evaluative Questions for the 10 Dimensions of Quality	31
Table 5:	Supporting Evidence Checklist	44

Figures

Figure 1:	Pascal and Bertram Quality Framework	11
Figure 2:	A Conceptual Framework for Developing Effectiveness in Early Learning Settings	30
Figure 3:	The BEEL Quality Evaluation and Improvement Model	35

PART 1: RATIONALE

Background

The legal requirements introduced in England in 2004 and 2006 – Children Act (2004) and Childcare Act (2006) – demand the rapid expansion and transformation of services for children and their families. This legislation requires local authorities to develop high-quality, integrated education, care, health and family support services which are to be delivered within newly designated Children's Centres and Extended Schools. This revolution in service delivery provides a substantial challenge to early childhood providers and practitioners. In particular, the consequent huge growth in services for under-threes is changing the landscape of the early childhood sector. The evidence is also clear that, if these services are to be beneficial to children, and contribute positively towards the agreed outcomes for children's learning and development, services for under-threes should be of the highest quality (Sylva et al. 2005).

The pursuit of quality in the expansion of integrated early childhood education and care services (ECEC), for children from birth, is now high on the political and social agenda in the UK. Government policy statements stress the importance of quality in this expansion and also specify in some detail what this should entail, at both a policy and a practical level (OfSTED, 2005; DfES, 2006). These statements also highlight the statutory duty of local authorities to put in place a strategy of evaluation and quality improvement in all early childhood settings. The Baby Effective Early Learning (BEEL) Programme has been especially developed to evaluate, support and develop quality improvement in settings involved with children under three years of age.



Government policy fully recognises the large body of international evidence showing that high-quality early education and care can:

- have significant and long-term effects on children's educational achievement (Schweinhart and Weikart, 1993; Sylva et al. 2005);
- provide a window of opportunity for laying down some of the basic mathematical and literacy competencies, a window which narrows after the age of eight (Wylie, 2001);
- lead to better social behaviour, more productive citizenship and a reduction in juvenile arrest (Schweinhart and Weikart, 1993);
- have psychological and behavioural benefits for children which will lead to economic benefits later (Feinstein, 2000);
- be a more cost effective investment than primary, secondary or tertiary education (Heckman and Lochner, 2001).

The significant investment in ECEC services is politically justifiable not only for these effects on children's life chances but because of its beneficial effects on changing social and family patterns. The past two decades have seen a rapid expansion in levels of female employment in the UK, but provision of affordable and accessible childcare has not expanded as rapidly. This impacts as much on parents/carers needing two incomes to pay a mortgage as on those on state benefits struggling to make ends meet. One of the main determinants of child poverty in the UK has been the large number of benefit-dependent lone parents/carers. UK society has the highest child poverty and the greatest differences in income levels in the European Union. The gap between the comfortable and the poor creates unacceptable levels of child poverty and, associated with it, poor health and social exclusion. So as well as being a mechanism for early intervention and improving a child's life chances, high-quality, integrated ECEC services help the process of community capacity building.

The growing body of international evidence on the potential of quality services to transform children's lives (OECD, 2006) has added weight to the national strategy to raise standards and improve the quality of provision across the sector. It has also highlighted the central importance of the quality of learning and development offered to children from birth. 'Learning and development' (or education) for the youngest children is seen as providing appropriate cognitive, social, emotional, physical and moral enrichment in settings which are stimulating, safe and secure. Whilst opportunities for extending children's exploratory drive and curiosity should always be encouraged, these settings should not adopt inappropriate attempts at a watered-down, formal schooling.

The Government strategy is therefore to target improvement in all ECEC settings and ensure they achieve adequate quality standards through:

- a national system of registration;
- a national system of inspection;
- a national system to accredit quality assurance schemes;
- incentives for ECEC settings to incorporate self evaluation and quality improvement systems;
- a training strategy for increasing qualifications of the early years practitioners.

All these strategies acknowledge the importance of developing a competent and professional ECEC workforce, where the recruitment and retention of well-trained, motivated and professional staff/volunteers throughout the sector is seen as a priority (DfES, 2005). The intention is to encourage the development of a sector in which all ECEC settings offer a quality service with:

- highly trained staff/volunteers;
- high standards of performance;
- systematic and rigorous quality evaluation and improvement systems.

BEEL offers a rigorous, accessible and manageable quality improvement and assurance scheme in which ECEC settings are encouraged to participate. It is a scheme which not only puts in place quality criteria, with agreed minimum standards of performance for all settings, but also over time, has the capacity to develop in ECEC staff and leaders the competence to carry out systematic self evaluation which leads to planned and continuous quality improvement. BEEL was endorsed by the Sure Start unit as an 'Investors in Children' (IiC) scheme in 2003.

In summary, the clear intention of Government policy is to provide incentives for both the expansion and the improvement of quality ECEC services for under-threes in the UK. The BEEL Programme is ideal for supporting this national commitment to quality improvement and transformation. The BEEL Programme is a time-efficient, quality improvement strategy which offers within one programme:

- a quality improvement strategy that takes ECEC settings up to, and beyond, minimum regulatory standards and supports them in a process of sustained and long-term development;
- professional and theoretical practitioner training which creates a much-needed common, sector-wide language;
- preparation for, and assessment of, registration readiness;
- preparation and support for OfSTED inspection;
- accredited quality assurance.

As such, 'Baby EEL' or BEEL provides a comprehensive, coherent and cost-effective approach to quality improvement in all its aspects for all settings that cater for children from birth to three.

Finally, it should be noted that BEEL is a developmental strategy. It provides training and support for ECEC settings to move beyond the achievement of the baseline national standards. The intention of the BEEL Programme is to provide a supported development strategy for all ECEC providers, with well-tested systems for ongoing quality improvement. The process is led by staff/volunteer teams who, through the training BEEL offers, become accredited researchers of their own practice, seeking and using evidence continually to ensure the delivery of high-quality services for all children and families within their setting.

What is BEEL and what are its aims?

BEEL is a programme of supported self evaluation and improvement for all settings that provide early education and care for children from birth to three years. It has three key aims:

1. To offer a manageable strategy to evaluate and improve the quality of early learning and development and the effectiveness of outcomes for young children in a wide range of settings;
2. To achieve this through a collaborative, systematic and rigorous process of self evaluation, which is supported and validated externally;
3. To generate evidence which feeds directly into national quality assurance and inspection schemes.

- BEEL begins with an intensive training programme, followed by an extended process of setting-led, but well-supported, self evaluation.
- The self evaluation involves the systematic collection of evidence which demonstrates how the setting meets the Early Years Foundation Stage Framework, the national standards and the new inspection framework, and, in addition, assesses the quality of learning and development experiences offered to and experienced by the very young child.

- The self evaluation is carried out by the team of practitioners within the setting, and also involves parents/carers and children.
- The further evidence gathered allows the identification of good practice and highlights what might be needed to raise the quality of provision.
- The portfolio of evidence is put together into an Evaluation Report, which provides the basis of an agreed Action Plan to improve the quality of services.
- Settings are then supported in the implementation of an Action Plan for quality improvement.
- The success of the Action Plan is reviewed through reflection and further evaluation, leading to the next cycle of action and improvement.



The portfolio of evidence gathered through the BEEL self evaluation process not only provides settings with the information required to demonstrate compliance with the Early Years Foundation Stage Framework, the National Standards, OfSTED inspection and quality assurance requirements, but also encourages settings to undertake a process of deep level, and longer-term, organisational development. In this way the BEEL Programme provides a clear and targeted strategy for change, which builds upon, and extends, the existing skills and expertise of those who work with young children in a range of early childhood settings.

The whole BEEL process centres around the application of a comprehensive and well-founded model of Quality Evaluation and Improvement, which is outlined below.

How is quality defined?

The BEEL programme acknowledges that quality ultimately is a value-laden, subjective concept which has a dynamic aspect to it. Quality varies with perspective, with time and with place (Pascal, 1993; Pascal and Bertram, 1994; Moss and Pence, 1989). While it is important to set out national minimum standards or expectations to which all providers should comply, there is a need for improvement processes that take settings beyond this, and promote a culture of continuous quality improvement. The intention of the BEEL Programme is therefore to provide all settings with the means to:

- capture, accurately and rigorously, the essence of quality as it is reflected in practice;
- explore how the individuals in each setting, including parents/carers and children, perceive and experience the quality of learning and development provided;
- plan, after reflection, for specific and achievable improvements in that perceived quality.

We see the national standards as a baseline from which settings begin their quality journey. Achieving these standards is a necessary but not a sufficient condition for establishing a climate of quality improvement. The intention of the BEEL Programme is to establish the baseline of the National Standards as the starting point, not the finishing line, in quality improvement. BEEL identifies the minimum regulatory standards but, from that threshold, takes every setting forward, improving on their 'previous best' by systematically and rigorously undertaking a prolonged period of self evaluation which, through externally moderated action planning, leads to improvement. Quality is not therefore a ceiling which is reached, or a line which is crossed, but is a continuous and ongoing journey of improvement. This is the essence of the BEEL approach to quality.

How is quality identified in practice?

The 'Pascal and Bertram Quality Evaluation Framework' has drawn extensively on the views of practitioners, parents/carers and children in a range of settings across sectors and on an informed understanding of research about how young children develop and learn.

Figure 1 diagrammatically suggests that settings can view quality by collective responses to six broad questions: 'why?', 'where?', 'when?', 'what?', 'who?', 'how?' The emphasis on the 'who?' question reflects the social and emotional nature of learning.

