

Introduction

Quality above statutory requirements refers to practices in early year settings that surpass the minimum legal standards (Department for Education, 2025b). While statutory requirements ensure child safety, staffing ratios, and basic curriculum guidelines, quality above these expectations aims to provide enhanced care and education, leading to better outcomes for children (Welsh Government, 2023a). Examples include personalised learning, a stimulating environment, continuous professional development for staff, and fostering a positive, inclusive culture (Teager and Bonetti, 2018). It also encompasses innovative pedagogical approaches, such as mindfulness practices to support emotional regulation and advanced digital tools to enhance learning experiences. These strategies contribute to an enriched educational environment that fosters holistic development and excellence in early years education (Kinsner, 2024).

High-quality early years provision enhances outcomes for all children through ambitious goals and effective teaching. It offers personalised learning, development, and support, tailored to each child's unique needs (Donoghue, 2017). Additionally, high quality early years education, particularly during the first five years of life, plays an integral role in shaping lifelong learning and behaviour. Recognising its significance, many governments worldwide are shifting their focus from simply providing childcare to prioritising early education (Education Development Trust, 2024; National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2020).

In Wales, exceeding statutory requirements in early years and childcare means delivering care, education, and support beyond the minimum standards established by regulatory bodies like Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW) and Estyn (Care Inspectorate Wales, 2025b; Welsh Government, 2023a; Welsh Government, 2015).

Furthermore, the Welsh Government (2023c) states that early year's settings must follow the National Minimum Standards for Regulated Childcare, regulated by Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW). These standards ensure safeguarding, appropriate staffing ratios, health and safety measures, well-equipped learning environments, and support for children's well-being and development, fostering a strong foundation for lifelong learning.

Additionally, early years settings in Wales are required to complete the self-assessment of service statement (SASS), overseen by Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW), as part of their regulatory responsibilities. This assessment ensures that childcare providers meet national standards and maintain high-quality care and education. It promotes compliance, self-evaluation, and continuous improvement, helping settings reflect on their practices and enhance service quality (Care Inspectorate Wales, 2025b).

Furthermore, the SASS assessment evaluates key areas, including general information, which covers service details, registration, and the age range of children. Other integral areas include staffing and qualifications, which ensures staff roles, ratios, and training compliance. Furthermore, well-being and safeguarding, which focuses on child protection policies. Additionally, operational details, which outline service capacity and hours including quality and improvement plans, encourage self-assessment and ongoing and future development (Care Inspectorate Wales, 2025d).

By completing the SASS assessment, early year settings demonstrate accountability, transparency, and a commitment to excellence. It also reassures parents that the setting is regularly monitored and continuously improving, while supporting CIW in maintaining high standards across the sector (Care Inspectorate Wales, 2025a).

Why is it important?

High-quality early years education is integral because it provides children with the best start in life. Settings that exceed statutory requirements foster thriving children, skilled professional practitioners, and confident families (Welsh Government, 2023). Enhanced standards support child development, mental well-being, and parental trust, while strengthening the setting's workforce and driving innovation in teaching. By leading best practices, these settings elevate early years education across Wales and England (Department of Education, 2025a; Evans, 2021).

Outstanding early childhood experiences can significantly support children's learning and development before entering school (Wechsler *et al.*, 2016). Effective implementation of such programmes, blending intentional teaching with play-based, developmentally suitable experiences, necessitates continuous professional support (Administration for Children and Families, 2023). Moreover, Melhuish *et al.*, (2015) supports the concept of the lasting impact of high-quality early years provision on children's cognitive, social, and emotional development. Their research emphasises the importance of strong professional practitioners' interactions, stimulating environments and settings, and qualified professional practitioners fostering learning and well-being.

How do we know it is important?

Exceeding high quality in early years education is integral because it has a lasting impact on children's development, the effectiveness of professional practitioners, and the overall learning environment. Research consistently shows that higher-quality education leads to better outcomes for children and more effective educational systems (Administration for Children and Families, 2023b; DeSouza, Wagner, 2024).

High-quality early years education promotes cognitive, emotional, and social development, laying the foundation for academic success later. It fosters resilience, self-regulation, and positive behavior which are essential qualities for lifelong learning and well-being (Ghosh, 2024; National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2020b).

Moreover, exceeding quality standards helps children develop important life skills like problem-solving, creativity, and communication, better preparing them for school and future challenges (Teacher Development Trust, 2024). For professional practitioners, high-quality settings offer ongoing professional development, ensuring they stay skilled and motivated, while continuously refining their teaching to meet each child's needs (Peleman *et al.*, 2018).

Additionally, when early years settings exceed quality standards, it builds parental confidence, strengthening family-school partnerships and supporting children's progress (Özgenel *et al.*, 2024). Furthermore, children who experience high-quality education are more likely to perform well in later stages of education and face fewer behavioral and emotional challenges. The benefits of early high-quality education extend throughout their academic careers and into adulthood (Uhing, 2021).

To summarise, exceeding high quality creates the best environment for children to thrive, supporting both their development and professional practitioner's growth, leading to better outcomes for future generations (Bustamante, *et al.*, 2021).

Benefits of using Additional Methods to improve and expand quality

Expanding early years provision beyond statutory requirements enriches learning experiences and improves child outcomes. Personalised learning, play-based approaches, and enriched environments support cognitive, social, and emotional growth (Haoyue, Donna and Oyam, 2024; Hirsh-Pasek, K *et al.*, 2022) while outdoor learning and storytelling foster creativity and independence (Kiviranta *et al.*, 2024).

According to Frank *et al.*, (2013) and Marymount University (2022) integrating mindfulness and self-regulation techniques enhances emotional well-being, and technology-enhanced learning boosts engagement and accessibility. Continuous professional development empowers professional practitioners (Hood, 2025; Mann and

Webb, 2022; Turner, 2020), while strong home-school partnerships reinforce learning (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Stanley and Kuo, 2022).

By adopting innovative and inclusive practices, early years settings can elevate educational standards and promote lifelong success (Edutopia, 2025).

Quality Assurance Methods

Quality Counts, developed by the National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA), is a widely recognised accreditation programme aimed at fostering excellence in the early years of education. It offers a structured framework that promotes best practices, effective leadership, and a high-quality curriculum. Participation in the scheme reflects a setting's commitment to ongoing development, ensuring that children benefit from a strong foundation for learning and well-being (National Day Nursery Association, no date a; Quality Counts, 2023a).

A key benefit of this scheme is staff development, providing ongoing training to ensure professional practitioners remain skilled and knowledgeable. It also supports strong leadership and management, helping settings implement clear policies and maintain high standards (Dubiel, 2019a).

Furthermore, for children, the scheme enhances learning experiences and emotional well-being through child-centered, inclusive approaches. It also builds trust with families, reassuring parents that settings meet high-quality standards and fostering strong home-school partnerships (Barnardo's, 2016). Additionally, Quality Counts offers national recognition, strengthening a setting's recognition and improving inspection outcomes. By adopting this framework, settings create enriching, high-quality environments that support outstanding child development (Quality Counts, 2023b).

Moreover, a fundamental element of Quality Counts is its focus on staff training and professional development. Professional practitioners are encouraged to engage in reflective practice, enhance their skills, and adopt innovative teaching approaches

(Quality Counts, 2015). This commitment to continuous learning improves educational quality and ensures that professional practitioners remain adaptable to the evolving needs of children and their families (Halle *et al.*, 2021). By implementing Quality Counts, early years settings showcase their dedication to high standards in care and education, creating stimulating, child-focused environments that nurture development and learning (National Day Nursery Association, no date b).

However, the Quality Counts scheme by the National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA) aims to enhance early years education, but it faces several criticisms. Cost and accessibility present challenges, as smaller settings may struggle with the financial burden. The administrative workload of documentation and self-evaluation can be time-consuming, particularly for settings with limited staff (Nursery World, 2003).

Some argue that standardisation limits flexibility, making it difficult for settings with unique educational approaches to fully benefit. Additionally, the scheme may increase staff pressure, shifting focus from child-led learning to meeting accreditation criteria (Jackson, 2022).

A further concern is its limited impact on Ofsted ratings, leading some to question whether the time and effort invested results in significant advantages. While Quality Counts supports high standards, its effectiveness depends on balancing accreditation demands with the practical needs of nurseries, staff, and families (McKown, 2016).

While Quality Counts upholds high standards in early years settings, it does not provide a comprehensive view of a child's unique development. It lacks personalised insights into individual learning styles, social-emotional well-being, and cultural background. The scheme also does not fully capture spontaneous creativity, long-term progress, or the depth of relationships children form with peers and caregivers. According to While it ensures quality provision, it cannot replace a professional practitioner's intuition, close observation, and individualised assessments essential for truly understanding a child's holistic development (Peterson and Elam, no date).

The Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years (PACEY) ensures high-quality standards in early years education through training, accreditation, and professional support (PACEY, 2025).

The key contributions to quality assurance are professional development which supports CPD training, workshops, and online courses to keep professional practitioners updated on best practices (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2025). This includes accreditation and standards whereby supporting professionals in meeting and exceeding ESTYN and Care Inspectorate Wales and the national standards (Care Inspectorate Wales, 2016). Guidance and resources offer policy templates, safeguarding tools, and best-practice frameworks for high-quality provision (Gamble, 2024; PACEY, 2024).

Moreover, reflective practice encourages self-assessment and continuous improvement to enhance learning environments (Porter, 2023). Policy and advocacy involve policymakers to shape early years policies and maintain high standards (Bucher, Clark and Larkin, 2023). Additionally, parental confidence through the PACEY accreditation reassures families that settings meet professional excellence. By fostering training, accountability, and policy advocacy, PACEY strengthens early years settings, ensuring safe, enriching, and developmentally appropriate experiences for children (PACEY, 2014a).

Both approaches provide valuable insights into how settings uphold quality and foster continuous professional development. However, Quality Counts delivers a more comprehensive assessment of operational practices, while PACEY Accreditation emphasises flexibility and professional development. Together, they offer a clear picture of educational quality, staff development, and the ability of settings to evolve and improve over time (Cwlwm, 2016; Quality Counts, 2023c).

To summarise, Quality Counts is well-suited for nurseries aiming for structured quality control, offering a rigorous framework that helps ensure best practices and high

standards. However, its cost and the administrative demands it places on providers may be challenging, especially for smaller settings with limited resources (Teaching Expertise, 2011).

Additionally, PACEY Accreditation provides a more accessible and flexible option, making it ideal for childminders and smaller early years settings. It supports professional development and quality improvement but lacks the rigid evaluation structure found in schemes like Quality Counts (PACEY, 2014b).

Both quality schemes contribute to quality assurance in the early years of education. Their effectiveness, however, ultimately depends on the specific needs and resources of the setting provider (Herts for Learning Education 2024; National Children's Bureau, 2025).

Conclusion

Building on these insights, it is evident that exceeding national standards in early years of education is fundamental to ensuring the highest quality of care and learning experiences for young children (National Association for the Education of Young Children, no date).

Exceeding national standards in early years education is integral for fostering the best possible outcomes for children, professional practitioners, and families. High-quality early years provision supports children's cognitive, social, and emotional development, laying a strong foundation for lifelong learning and well-being (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2024a). It also ensures that professional practitioners receive ongoing professional development, enabling them to provide enriching and responsive learning experiences (Dubiel, 2019b). Moreover, surpassing basic requirements enhances parental confidence, strengthens accountability, and drives continuous improvement within early years settings (Loeb, 2018). By striving for high quality beyond national standards, early years settings create nurturing, stimulating

environments where children can thrive, ultimately shaping a stronger, more resilient future generation (National Association for the Education of Young Children, 2024b).

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