

ECEY6011

Part 2

Quality is a subjective concept which is mainly influenced by how early years practice is perceived to look from personal experience (Canning and Reed, 2012). However, striving for quality in the early years is a choice to collectively work towards a provision that continuously reflects and adapts in order to go above and beyond minimum standards, ensuring the best possible provision for the children and families supported by early years settings (Moss, 2016 and Welsh Government, 2023). Much research indicates that children's outcomes are linked to consistently high-quality care, however, where settings are working at a lower level and quality improves, studies also suggest the improvement has little to no effect on children already attending the setting (Zazlow *et al.* 2016). Therefore, where a setting consistently strives for high quality by going above and beyond minimum requirements, children are given the opportunity to experience safe and fun learning while giving them the foundations for better social, emotional and educational outcomes (Care Inspectorate Wales, 2018, Early years Wales, no date and Tayler, 2015). Additionally, many years of research into this field shows there is significant evidence linking high quality early years provision to children's outcomes (Neitzel *et al.* 2019). Likewise, children accessing quality early years settings have greater school readiness and academic ability (Auger *et al.* 2014). However, Zazlow (2016) suggests that the link between quality and child outcomes is often minor and dependant on the tools used to assess quality and the areas of quality measured.

In Wales there is an obligation placed on early years settings to review the quality of their provision at least annually as part of their Quality of care review, under section

16 of the Child Minding and Day Care (Wales) Regulations 2010 and standard 18 of the National Minimum Standards for Regulated Childcare for children up to the age of 12 years (Welsh Government, 2023). Care Inspectorate Wales (2018) describes the quality of Care review as an opportunity for settings to identify the quality of their service's environment, management and leadership, wellbeing and care and development, ensuring the setting endeavours to reach the highest standard possible in order to contribute to children's wellbeing. This self-reflection of practice which takes into account the views and experiences of all who are involved in the service, is critical in creating and maintaining a safe and well managed setting (Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years (PACEY), no date). Furthermore, where settings account for and react to the views of stakeholders, quality is enhanced (Williams, 2016)

In addition to annual quality of care reviews, Care Inspectorate Wales regularly undertakes inspections of registered settings. The inspection schedule has recently changed, with inspection frequency ranging from every two to four years dependant on a setting's needs and the results of their previous inspection (Care Inspectorate Wales, no date). Furthermore, those settings which are funded to provide early years education are jointly inspected by Care Inspectorate Wales and Estyn on a six year cycle (Estyn, 2024). The reports created by regular inspections give parents the confidence that their child is receiving care that meets regulatory requirements (Rouine, McDonnell, and Hanafin, 2022). However, inspections are often criticised for their lack of transparency when it comes to awarding inspection gradings (Castro-Kemp and Kemp, 2025). Nevertheless, Care Inspectorate Wales (2024) have developed clear inspection framework guidance which sets out all areas of which the setting is graded. Yet research suggests that where settings have previously graded

highly in inspections, the tone of their inspection report is usually more positive than those who have been identified as needing improvement (Castro-Kemp and Kemp,2025). Where inspections show there is a need for improvement, studies suggest that the majority of settings do make changes to improve the quality of their provision (Rouine, McDonnell, and Hanafin, 2022). Although inspection reports are generally consistent in their approach, they may lack continuity with what are generally considered markers of a high quality provision (Castro-Kemp and Kemp,2025) and therefore should be considered alongside other quality indicators.

Furthermore, Settings must realise that regulatory requirements are the minimums standard that should be achieved and through continuous reflection and evaluation of practice, providers can strive to achieve quality (Early Years Wales, no date), how those working in early years think about quality and go about promoting it is integral to quality practice experience (Canning and Reed. 2012). It can be argued that policies, procedures and external legislation, in themselves are a form of quality assurance, with many believing that quality assurance ensures minimums standards are met (Williams, 2016) However, it is important to realise that some settings can become so focused on complying to regulation that meeting the needs of the children in their care becomes an afterthought (Reed and Canning, 2012). Early Years Wales (no date) believes that exceeding minimum standards is key to achieving high quality childcare.

There are many additional ways in which quality can be monitored in order to strive for higher quality, including Environmental Rating Scales, Sustained shared thinking and Emotional Wellbeing (SSTEW) scales and quality assurance schemes to name a few (Department for education, 2021). However, Early *et al.* (2018) argues quality cannot be measured with a one tool approach and with measuring systems being

imprecise it is difficult to measure a concept that is often subjective, furthermore, Eadie *et al.* (2024) state that clear evidence from all areas must be gained and therefore a collaborative approach may be appropriate for measuring quality.

Where a setting wants to identify whether children are receiving, safe, engaging and fun experiences, and what areas need support to enhance quality, environmental scales such as Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale (ECERS) may be beneficial (Early, *et al.* 2018). Environmental rating scales are one of the most commonly used tools for measuring quality in the early years (Early, *et al.* 2018 and Neitzel *et al.* 2019), ECERS, originally published in 1990 (Environment Rating Scales Institute, no date) is an environmental rating scale implemented by an observer completing hundreds of yes or no tick box questions over a three hour observation period (Neitzel *et al.*, 2019). ECERS has been revised twice since its original release in 1990, ECERS-3, most recently revised in 2015, is an amended version of ECERS-R, published in 1998, ECERS-3 places much more emphasis on the role of the practitioner (Environment Rating Scales Institute, no date and Neitzel *et al.*, 2019). Both ECERS-R and ECERS-3 are still available to purchase, the key changes in the ECERS-3 being; the ability to include factors relating to additional needs throughout, the removal of the optional parent and staff section and the removal of the post observation interview section (Environment Rating Scales Institute, no date). One of the appeals of ECERS for early years settings is the link between high ECERS scoring and child outcomes (Department for education, 2021) However, one study of 1063 preschool classrooms showed little evidence of links between using the ECERS- 3 scale to drive quality and child outcomes (Early, *et al.* 2018). Furthermore, Zazlow *et al.* (2016) Suggests that the link between quality and child outcomes is non linear and varies dependent on the area in which quality is

measured. Additionally, Setodji, Schaack and Le (2018) state that once mid-range scores have been met, the link between quality and outcomes levels off.

Although research suggests that quality indicators such as ECERS may be a predictor of child outcomes, the additional cost of such schemes due to workload and assessment may be a barrier for settings (Department of Education, 2021). Furthermore, although rating scales may identify the areas of the provision that are being implemented well, they may lack the information to show what is deficient and therefore it may be difficult to understand areas requiring improvement (Reed, and Owen, 2012). Additionally, ECERS-3 does not capture variability in the items it observes and is therefore better used alongside another quality assurance rating scheme (Early, *et al.* 2018), thus further increasing the workload attributed. Consequently, quality measures such as assurance schemes with fewer assessment criteria and therefore less of a work burden may be more appealing for providers (Department for education, 2021)

Quality assurance may be defined as a set of systems and practices that are in place to maintain and improve quality, these can vary from a setting's policies and procedures to outside initiatives (Williams, 2016). The national minimum standards for regulated childcare sets out a number of policies and procedures that settings must develop as a minimum, however Care Inspectorate Wales suggests that settings should strive to go above the minimum in all aspects of their service (Welsh Government, 2023). Where early years settings are supported by specific early years associations, there is the opportunity to improve quality with a more personalised approach which may be less daunting than improvements being imposed by inspecting bodies (Canning, and Reed, 2012). Early Years Wales (no date) have developed their own quality assurance scheme called 'Quality for All'. This quality

assurance scheme is aimed at giving settings the tools and support to reflect on their service in order to identify areas needing modification to improve quality. Childcare Wales Learning and Working Mutually (CWLWM, no date) state that quality assurance schemes provide settings with a quality mark that demonstrates to families and stakeholders that the setting is providing a high quality provision, Furthermore, there is evidence to support quality assurance schemes being a driving force for quality, particularly when these schemes are paired with the support of other professionals (Reed and Owen, 2012), moreover, where a comprehensive range of strategies are in place for quality enhancement, child outcomes may improve (Eadie *et al.* 2024). The 'Quality for All' scheme must be worked through in individual units which are then verified by an assessor, settings are provided with a quality assessor who can support them through the scheme and ensure the process is as straightforward as possible (Early Years Wales, no date). The benefit of using a quality assurance scheme is the clear pathway to drive improvement, with clear principles and outcomes enabling reflection, evaluation and response (National Children's Bureau, (no date). Furthermore, the 'Quality for All' scheme takes approximately 6 months to complete, and settings are able to become reaccredited annually (Early Years Wales, no date), allowing settings an approach with fewer assessment criteria and a clear timetable which may consequently reduce the burden scales such as ECERS place on staff (Department for education, 2021).

With quality being a subjective concept it is difficult to truly define what makes a high-quality early years setting. It is clear from much research that an indicator of quality being achieved is the outcomes of children, however ideas on how that quality is measured and what is needed to achieve a high level of quality differ greatly. There is a mandatory requirement placed on settings to regularly monitor

their quality, along with further compulsory inspections. However, these statutory requirements may only ensure a setting meets the minimum standards and there is often controversy surrounding statutory inspection and as to whether they provide a true picture of quality. Where a setting chooses to strive for high quality, there are a number of options available to support them with this, including environmental scales such as ECERS and quality assurance schemes such as the Early Years Wales 'Quality for All' scheme. What this paper has demonstrated, is that no one initiative can guarantee quality, therefore, settings must find a solution which fits with their provision and allows them to identify their strengths and weaknesses in order to create and improve a setting that allows children to thrive and is outstanding in all areas.

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