

Introduction

What is quality?

Reed and Walker (2015) suggest that the concept of quality is intricate and contested. According to Foundation Years (2014), quality in the early years and childcare sector is secured through a confident workforce, with Workman and Ullrich (2017) stating that the workforce is the most important component of quality in an early years program. This includes collaboration, parental involvement, and a deep understanding of child development. Furthermore, effective, quality care can impact children's growth and development (Birth to 5 Matters, no date; Education Development Trust, 2024a).

The quality of early childhood education plays a key role in shaping children's development and future learning. Palaiologou (2023) suggests that this is influenced by two fundamental aspects: structural quality and process quality. Further adding that both elements work together to create a nurturing and effective learning environment that supports children's growth and well-being.

Eadie *et al.* (2022) state that structural quality in early years settings consists of strong leadership and management. This includes child-adult ratios, staff qualifications, group size, stability, working conditions, and safety (Hutchinson, Reader and Akhal, 2020). These factors create a secure, organised learning environment, supporting children's well-being and development. Education Policy Institute (2017) and Birth to 5 Matters (2021a) add that a stable, qualified workforce improves consistency and effectiveness.

In contrast, Birth to 5 Matters (2021b) states that process quality focuses on the pedagogical aspects of early years care and education. Furthermore, Edwards (2021) adds that it surrounds the curriculum, teaching practices, children's daily experiences, and the nature of interactions between children and practitioners, which can play a key role in promoting children's cognitive, social, and emotional development. High process quality ensures that children receive meaningful, engaging, and developmentally appropriate learning experiences.

Why is quality important?

The Heckman Equation (2015a) states that high-quality care will create high-quality outcomes. According to Hobbs and Mutebi (2021), quality in early years care and education is important for children's development, learning, and well-being. Further adding that high-quality early childhood education and care can provide a solid foundation for cognitive, social, and emotional development and positive short-term and long-term outcomes. Research highlights that early experiences can shape brain development (Education Development Trust, 2024b).

National Assembly for Wales (2019) suggests that inadequate quality care and education in the early years could have undesirable outcomes, particularly for the disadvantaged. The Heckman equation (2015b) adds that disadvantaged children benefit from high-quality care and education compared to children who have stimulating home and family environments. Nevertheless, high-quality early years care and education are important for all children to thrive (Ofsted, 2024).

How do we know it is important for children to have access to high-quality settings?

According to Bland (2024a), various research highlights the importance of high-quality early childhood education and care, such as EPPE and SEED.

According to Sylva *et al.* (2004), the Effective Provision of Preschool Education (EPPE) research found that high-quality preschool education can have an outstanding impact on children's intellectual and social development. The study states that well-trained staff, stimulating activities, and positive adult to child interactions contribute to better academic and social outcomes. This is supported by Eliassen, Brandlistuen and Wang (2023) and Education Endowment Foundation (2024) by adding that high quality early years education and care can have a positive effect on children's outcomes which can also promote school readiness.

In addition, University of Oxford, Department of Education and National Centre for Social Research (2025) show three waves of children, commencing in 2013, taking part in a longitudinal study. This was The Study of Early Education and Development (SEED).

This builds on EPPE to assess how different types and quality of early years education and care can support children's cognitive, social and emotional development and to identify the long-term benefits using quality measures such as Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Well-being (SSTEW) measuring staff quality and child interaction, Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale- Revised (ECERS-R) measuring activities, interactions and routines, and ECERS-E which is an extension of ECERS-R but focusses on learning opportunities (Department of Education, 2015, Department of Education, 2021; Melhuish and Gardner, 2021). Gordon *et al.* (2013) and the University of North Carolina (no date) agree that these tools are important to measure childcare quality with child development. Foundation Years (2019) states that the SEED report has uncovered the positive effect that high-quality early education and care can have on children, such as language, social and emotional development, regardless of the level of disadvantage.

Early Years Wales

Childcare Wales Learning & Working Mutually (2022) states that 'Early Years Wales' is an organisation that supports high-quality provision and care to give children the best start in life. Early Years Wales (2020) adds that it is a quality assurance scheme to ensure early years settings maintain ambitious standards of care and education. This is a Welsh quality assurance scheme. All early years care and education providers in Wales are expected to have a quality assurance process that they follow to improve outcomes for those in their care (Care Inspectorate Wales, 2025).

National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA)

The NDNA quality assurance scheme is a program that will support early years settings in improving standards of care and education (Quality Counts, 2023). National Day Nurseries Association (2021) states that the quality assurance scheme can ensure that the framework and skills are present to embed high-quality care and education throughout a setting. Bland (2024b) and Wisbech Day Nursery (2022) add that NDNA's Quality Counts scheme provides a holistic approach to evaluating practice through audits to ensure high-quality care.

The National Day Nurseries Association, Quality Counts, and Early Years Wales quality assurance strive to provide high-quality early years care and education. Additionally, they focus on continuously improving childcare quality (Evans,2012; Early Years Wales,2023). Quality Counts assurance focuses on reflection, review, and improvement across four areas such as health, safety, and wellbeing; leadership and management; workforce; and play and learning (Quality Counts, 2023b). This aligns with the Self-Assessment Service Statement (SASS) and the core areas that are reviewed, these are well-being, care and development, environment, leadership, and management (Care Inspectorate Wales, 2025b). However, Quality Counts is a nationwide scheme, so it does not solely focus on Wales. Additionally, Quality Counts focuses on long-term sustainability, enabling high-quality care and education to thrive in early years settings (National Day Nurseries Association Cymru,2016).

Early Years Wales is specifically designed to meet the Welsh government's childcare quality expectations and builds on reflection, review, and development (Early Years Wales Cwlwm,2022). This is similar to Quality Counts assurance. In contrast to Quality Counts, Early Years Wales puts a focus on high-quality child development, education, and family engagement (Early Years Wales, 2023b). Engagement in high-quality early childhood education and care that is promoted by quality assurance schemes has been linked to improved cognitive, social, and emotional development in children (Schoch *et al.*,2023). However, Owston, Jones and Stanley (2024) state that there may be issues in implementing and maintaining high quality through assurance schemes due to workforce issues such as low pay, challenging working conditions, inadequate qualifications and skills and lack of professional development.

Quality assurance schemes play a key role in enhancing early childhood education and care by ensuring continuous improvement, staff development, and alignment with national standards. Quality Assurances such as NDNA's Quality Counts and Early Years Wales Quality for All provide structured approaches that support high-quality provision (Foundation Years,2014b).

Additionally, a key benefit of Quality Assurance is continuous self-evaluation, which enables settings to reflect on and improve their practices (Care Inspectorate, 2021). NDNA's Quality Counts promotes and encourages ongoing assessment, helping practitioners identify strengths and areas for development, leading to improved outcomes for children (NDNA, 2021b). Similarly, Quality for All encourages staff to review and refine their provision in alignment with regulatory requirements, ensuring consistency in quality (Early Years Wales, 2023c).

Furthermore, Quality Assurance supports staff training and professional development, which is important in maintaining high standards (Mercer, 2000). Research highlights that well-trained practitioners contribute significantly to child development (Teacher Development Trust, 2024b). By participating in Quality Assurance schemes, staff engage in structured learning, promoting a shared commitment to quality (OECD, 2022).

Moreover, focusing on areas such as play and learning environments, health and well-being, workforce development, and leadership, Quality Assurance schemes contribute to creating high-quality experiences for children. Settings that adopt these Quality Assurance schemes can demonstrate improved outcomes for children, better inspection results and enhanced child development measures (Quality Counts, 2023c)

Bland (2024c) states that quality can be measured in many ways. Quality assessment tools such as the Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Well-being (SSTEWE) Scale and the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) enhance early years provision by focusing on adult and child interactions, emotional well-being, and learning environments. SSTEWE evaluates practitioner-child interactions and emotional support, which are important for cognitive and social development (Hoare, no date). Similarly, Jones (2024) adds that the Sustained Shared Thinking and Emotional Wellbeing (SSTEWE) Scale enhances reflective practice in early childhood education by providing a structured framework for practitioners to assess and improve their interactions with children. By focusing on areas such as building trust, supporting critical thinking, and evaluating learning, SSTEWE promotes high-quality pedagogy and emotional support, encouraging better developmental outcomes for children.

ECERS assesses physical environments, curriculum, and teaching quality, ensuring engaging and inclusive settings (Tools of the Mind, 2015). Research shows that high scores on these frameworks correlate with better child outcomes (Setodji, Schaack and Le, 2018). Implementing both tools supports continuous quality improvement in early years education. Brodie (2024) states that the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) enhances reflective practice by guiding practitioners and settings in assessing and improving learning environments. Thus, promoting self-evaluation of interactions, resources, and routines, upholding continuous professional development and better child outcomes. Further adding that the use of these tools can enhance practice to further improve quality and outcomes for children.

Conclusion

To conclude this reflection, high quality in early childhood education is important for promoting children's cognitive, social, and emotional development. Both structural and process quality contribute to a strong foundation, with highly trained staff, effective leadership, and engaging pedagogical practices playing key roles (NEAYC, 2019). According to Administration for Children and Families (2023), high-quality early years care and education has lasting benefits, particularly for disadvantaged children, improving school readiness and long-term outcomes.

Siraj, Kingston and Melhuish (2023) and Peterson and Elam (2020) state that assessment tools such as the SSTEWS Scale and ECERS ensure continuous quality improvement by measuring practitioner-child interactions, emotional support, and learning environments. The SSTEWS Scale enhances quality by promoting sustained shared thinking, deep discussions, and problem-solving, encouraging critical thinking and emotional regulation.

Furthermore, Quality Assurance schemes like NDNA's Quality Counts and Early Years Wales Quality for All support early years practitioners and settings through structured evaluation, self-assessment, and professional development to continuously improve quality. Despite challenges such as low pay and staff shortages, continuous effort and support are important for maintaining high standards. Moreover, prioritising high quality

in early childhood education ensures lifelong benefits for children (Early Years Wales, 2023d; National Day Nurseries Association, 2024).

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