

Reflective Paper

Quality in early years settings is a complex and varied idea that focuses on providing nurturing, stimulating, and inclusive environments to support children's overall development, well-being, and learning (UNICEF, 2017). Cottle and Alexander (2012) describe quality in early years as a concept shaped by multiple perspectives, highlighting the influence of government policies, research discourses, and practitioners' lived experiences. Also, emphasising the importance of reflective practice and child-centered approaches in achieving meaningful quality within diverse early years settings. Furthermore, Bland (2025) suggests that evaluating quality in practice is beyond a single event or an upcoming inspection by a regulating body. It is measured through various methods to ensure there is a thorough understanding of all aspects of care.

Early years settings abide by the National Minimum Standards for Regulated Childcare for children up to the age of 12 years. It is a framework for regulated childcare in Wales that regularly register and inspects what actions to take to improve the standards and safety of settings for the well-being of children in Wales (Welsh Government, 2023). The Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW) aims to safeguard the well-being of children, encourage improvements in the care and ensure that the settings are compliant with the legislation and regulations requirements (Care Inspectorate Wales, no date, d). Care Inspectorate (2022) suggests that childcare settings can use additional quality assurance methods to provide a higher standard of care and support continuous improvement. This being said, Moss (2016) argues that at times quality assurance often fails to accommodate the direct needs of someone's diversity, complexity and values due to differing environments. Conversely, Quality First, supported by Early Years Wales centres its approaches on inclusivity and aims their research to what is needed for each child (National Day Nurseries Association (no date b). Therefore, by achieving a balance between standardised measures and quality assurance frameworks is essential for addressing individuality and values, as highlighted by the differing views between Care Inspectorate (2022), National Day Nurseries Association (no date, b) and Moss (2016) on the effectiveness of quality assurance methods in different childcare settings.

Foundation Years (no date) believes that early year's provisions should use multiple quality assurance tools that can contribute to the comprehensive understanding of ensuring effective provision. Three types can be described as structural quality, a measurable aspect such as staff qualifications, child-to-staff ratios, and the physical environment, which create the foundation for a high-quality learning environment (Melhuish and Gardiner, 2018). Similarly, Bonetti and Brown (2018) state structural quality forms the essential groundwork for establishing an environment that supports children's well – being. Secondly, process quality focuses on the dynamic and interpersonal elements, including the quality of interactions between educators and children and the variety of experiences offered to stimulate learning and development (OECD, 2021). Lastly, system quality refers to the policies and frameworks that support the early years provision in meeting established benchmarks and standards effectively. Therefore, together these three domains provide a comprehensive understanding of what constitutes quality in early years settings (Birth to 5 Matters, 2025).

Methods of Quality Assurance in Early Years

The Wales Pre-school Providers Association (WPPA), now known as Early Years Wales, has been the foundation organisation supporting early years education in Wales since its establishment in 1961 (Early Years Wales, no date, a). Early Years Wales provides a membership service

offering a quality for all scheme that is designed to help early years settings in achieving and maintaining high standards of childcare (Early Years Wales, no date, b). According to the Early Years Wales (2025 a) membership booklet it offers professional discussion with a quality advisor, supports the planning in future improvements and highlights excellent practice whilst signposting to additional support services if necessary. In addition, Childcare Wales Learning and Working Mutually (CWLWM) works in partnership to support families across Wales in accessing affordable, high-quality childcare to meet the diverse needs of children, parents and their families (Cwlwm, 2016). Also, The Welsh Government's Childcare Offer holds similar core aims to support families in Wales with affordable high – quality care. Likewise, this approach is designed to ease the financial strain of childcare, be more accessible to all families and help parents return to work or pursue possible opportunities for education and training (Welsh Government, no date, b). Rosa and Tudge (2013) suggest that Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory highlights how interconnected systems, including policies, community support networks, and societal structures, shape and influence children's development. Therefore, creating these types of accessible provisions helps strengthen home and school connections with engaging families providing a sense of belonging for all (Early Years TV, no date). This links with the Welsh term *Cynefin* defined by the Curriculum for Wales for the children to feel a sense of belonging (Welsh Government (no date, d).

Siraj and Hallet (2022) say that in early years settings continuous professional development (CPD) opportunities inspire reflective practice, teamwork and mentoring that enhance the growth and provision of quality. Early Years Wales (2025b) offers training that equips practitioners with quality development opportunities to enhance their skills, knowledge and reflective practices to progress in their careers and support in delivering positive outcomes for children.

Early Years Wales clearly offers an accessible quality assurance scheme however, many other organisations provide similar benefits, which might lead members to consider alternative providers such as National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA) Cymru, Professional Association for Childcare and Early Years (PACEY), and the Children in Wales - Early Years Action Group.

Quality First is an initiative by the National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA) it is all about helping childcare settings reach excellent standards of care and keep improving continuously (National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA, 2024). NDNA provides a framework for self-evaluation and quality of care in childcare settings to enhance the outcomes. The NDNA Quality statement states key areas of focus, and they are planning and learning, health, safety and well-being, leadership and management and workforce (National Day Nurseries Association, no date, a).

The difference in ethos between Early Years Wales and Quality First (NDNA) lies in the fact that Quality First aligns its practices with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), emphasising inclusivity and focusing its approach and research on understanding what matters most to the child (National Day Nurseries Association (no date, b). Welsh Government (2022, b) agrees that UNCRC principles are to be integrated into promoting a child-centered approach with all policy making and enriching learning environments. NDNA Cymru aimed specifically for education settings in Wales, provides support with specific Welsh policies and procedures, supporting and advising leaders on running a successful business and

sharing accessible online and face-to-face training for early years practitioners (National Day Nurseries Association (no date, c). Welsh Government (no date, c) encourages practitioners to have as much access as possible to different insights into delivering meaningful learning experiences, recognising the importance of continuous professional development, sharing best practices, and tailoring approaches to meet diverse learner needs. Furthermore, Welsh Government (no date, d) says this support empowers practitioners to create enriched environments that foster holistic child development and align with the Curriculum for Wales.

It is clear that both Early Years Wales and NDNA work in partnership with some of the same organisations to be able to provide a quality service. However, Argile (2024) explains that the Foyle Foundation supports NDNA in providing additional training programs that offer music training and teaching opportunities to support and improve the delivery of music with children with additional learning needs to enhance engagement and skills in early years settings. The Foyle Foundation is not a funding source that Early Years Wales receives. Although they are similar organisations, they operate differently to address the geographical and culturally specific areas. This is reflected in their partnerships with organisations such as the Early Years Alliance, Ofsted (England), Care Inspectorate Wales (CIW), the Department for Education (DfE), the Welsh Government, the National Children's Bureau (NCB), and the Children's Commissioner (Early Years Wales, no date) National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA), (2024).

Alternatively, early years settings can use an Environment Rating Scale tool, specifically designed to assess the process of quality. This includes interactions with children, parents, staff, and activities within the provision. These tools are widely used to evaluate and enhance the quality of childcare settings (FPG Child Development Institute, no date). Child Care Aware of New Hampshire (2025) suggests that these types of tools help identify early years provisions strengths and target areas of improvement to help guide the next steps in the setting, enhancing their quality and reaching a higher standard of care. In addition, the Environment Rating Scales provide a consistent framework for assessing quality across various age groups and diverse early years settings. This approach ensures that childcare providers can evaluate their practices effectively and make necessary adaptations to accommodate the unique needs of every child, fostering inclusive and person-centred care (Early Childhood Investment Corporation, 2025). However, Jennifer Neitzel *et al* (2019) agrees that while the Environment Rating Scale tool is widely used, it may not fully reflect the complexities of quality in diverse early years settings.

Even though the Curriculum for Wales or the UNCRC is not specifically mentioned in the Environmental Rating Scale, it guides practitioners to reflect on implementing effective strategies to increase the best possible outcomes for children's learning. This reflection encourages deeper professional development and helps the practitioner understand what contributes to providing a high-quality early years environment (Cryer *et al*, 2019). Continuing Professional Development (CPD) involves a variety of learning and activities that are designed to prepare practitioners to be effective in their work. It strengthens the practitioner's capacity to be able to support and advocate for children's needs and well-being, leading them to grow into a high-quality, competent workforce (National Association for the Education of Young Children, no date and Siraj and Hallet (2022)). It is evident that Early Years Wales, Quality First and Environmental Rating Scale offer opportunities for practitioners to enhance workforce CPD.

Early Years Wales, NDNA Cymru, and tools like the Environment Rating Scales (ERS) all have aims to support high-quality care in early years settings as well as offering training and performance enhancement. Additional quality assurance tools used by early years settings to exceed the national minimum standards often have costs to be able to access the resources, training and advice. Early Years - The Organisation for Young Children (2025) explains that the cost is required to be able to support resources from other partnerships, research with compliance with regulations and to continue to improve a high standard of support and training. The Foundation Years (no date) and Welsh Government (2022) agree that quality assurance tools in early years settings help contribute to the care and learning opportunities that children receive, which ultimately, encourages the best possible outcomes through their learning journey. In addition, the Welsh Government (2015) says that adopting a collaborative approach through implementing policy, curriculum and working in partnerships with organisations builds a foundation for early years settings. This enables the setting to create an enriching learning experience for children in their early years. To conclude, children who are exposed to high-quality early years provision are likely to succeed academically and beyond, acquiring essential social, emotional, and cognitive skills that benefit lifelong learning and development. Conversely, inadequate early years provision fails to deliver long-term benefits, reducing its lasting influence on a child's development and opportunities (The Foundation Years, no date).

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