

Lessons from practice worth sharing - childcare and play

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Background

In 2022 the childcare and play improvement project was launched. The aim was to consider how we could change our ways of working to allow us to focus more on challenging and supporting childcare and play providers in Wales to adopt a continuous improvement approach.

The project aimed to:

- improve outcomes for children
- increase assurance about the quality of specific settings
- give more emphasis on providers driving their own improvement
- provide clearer information for providers about excellent practice
- increase awareness of national areas for improvement

The project ended in November 2024 and resulted in three new initiatives.

- Quality meetings
- Quality conferences
- Practice worth sharing

This report focusses on practice worth sharing. It considers the common factors underpinning the positive practice we find whilst inspecting. We hope it will help those working in the sector to consider how they might further improve the care and support they provide for children and families using their services.

Practice worth sharing

When we find examples of particularly effective practice which has a positive impact on children, we ask providers to tell us more about what they are doing and how the children in their care have benefitted. We share the examples on our website and social media channels to encourage other providers to consider how this learning can be applied to their own settings. Here are some of the common themes we've seen so far:

1. Child-centred and emotionally attuned practice

Many of the successful services prioritise children's emotional wellbeing, confidence, and sense of belonging. For example, **First Friends** (<https://www.careinspectorate.wales/first-friends>) focuses on managing 'big feelings' through a wellbeing lens, while **Red Robins** (<https://www.careinspectorate.wales/red-robins>) nurtures empathy through intergenerational contact.

These examples show that when providers place a strong emphasis on children's rights, wellbeing and voice, in line with the expectations set out in the **National Minimum Standards (NMS)** (<https://www.gov.wales/national-minimum-standards-regulated-childcare>) and the **Early Childhood Play, Learning and Care (ECPLC) Plan** (<https://hwb.gov.wales/curriculum-for-wales/early-childhood-play-learning-and-care-in-wales/>), this improves experiences and outcomes for children.

Providers who work to support emotional literacy, coregulation and positive relationships demonstrate their understanding of both nationally and internationally recognised principles included in the **Working Together to Safeguard People framework** (https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/publications/2022-01/working-together-to-safeguard-people--code-of-safeguarding-practice_0.pdf) and Wales's wider commitment to the **United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)** (<https://www.unicef.org.uk/what-we-do/un-convention-child-rights/>).

Approaches such as helping children manage "big feelings" demonstrate how wellbeing-focused practice embedded in everyday provision has a positive impact on how children feel and how they communicate and build relationships with those around them. This practice aligns with CIW's growing emphasis on attachment and trauma-informed practice within our inspection framework, and with the aims of the **Nyth/Nest** (<https://www.gov.wales/nest-framework-mental-health-and-wellbeing-introduction>) initiative. By placing children's experiences and emotional needs at the centre of what they do, these settings are applying evidence-based approaches that support Welsh Government objectives and CIW's expectations around child development, behaviour and responsive care.

2. Inclusivity and cultural awareness

Several providers demonstrate a strong commitment to inclusion through multilingual support and anti-racist practice. For example, **Sarah Sharpe** (<https://www.careinspectorate.wales/sarah-sharpe>) focuses on offering an inclusive environment and **Helena Kowalewska** (<https://www.careinspectorate.wales/helena-kowalewska>) nurtures improved relationships by adapting her approach. Both approaches reflect a deep understanding of children's identities and the importance of equitable environments.

These examples reflect Welsh Government's strategic direction on equality, antiracism and culturally aligned care. The **AntiRacist Wales Action Plan** (<https://www.gov.wales/anti-racist-wales-action-plan-2024-update-html>), the **More Than Just Words** (<https://www.gov.wales/more-just-words-welsh->

language-plan-health-and-social-care) framework for Welsh language and culture, and NMS requirements relating to diversity and respect all guide providers towards creating equitable and inclusive environments where every child's ability, culture, background, language and traditions are recognised and celebrated.

The **Curriculum for Wales** (<https://hwb.gov.wales/curriculum-for-wales>) shares an ambition for all children in Wales to experience 'Cynefin', a feeling of belonging, strongly linked to their locality and heritage. Providers who work to ensure all children and families are welcomed, included and fully accepted are fostering this sense of 'Cynefin' within the children they care for and their families.

3. Innovative use of the environment

We are also seeing some positive examples of outdoor learning and community engagement activities across Wales. For example, **Emma Lyddon** (<https://www.careinspectorate.wales/emma-lyddon>) highlights how nature-based play can build confidence, while community visits show how external environments can enrich learning.

Prioritising outdoor learning and nature-based play gives children meaningful, hands-on experiences that connect them with nature, food sources and wildlife whilst supporting their wellbeing.

Wider community engagement, such as facilitating visits to a local dementia group, reflects an ongoing commitment in Wales to support children's wellbeing through play and enrich their learning experiences through building strong community links and a sense of belonging. Many of the positive practice examples also show how naturebased and experiential learning approaches are being incorporated into practice, in line with the **Curriculum for funded nonmaintained nursery settings** (<https://hwb.gov.wales/curriculum-for-wales/curriculum-for-funded-non-maintained-nursery-settings/>).

These approaches foster environments where children experiment, learn about cause and effect and build confidence in their own ability and independence.

4. Reflective and intentional practice

Providers often describe how they've adapted their approaches based on observation, feedback, or specific goals. This reflective mindset is a hallmark of high-quality practice and a true desire to continuously improve outcomes for children.

Many providers describe how they have refined their approaches in response to observation, feedback and identified priorities, demonstrating a commitment to continuous improvement in line with the National Minimum Standards and the ECPLC approach. The use of tools such as the **ECPLC Reflective Practice Tool** (<https://hwb.gov.wales/api/storage/a8d10028-25ae-4d94-ad18-0247286ce822/early-childhood-play-learning-and-care-reflective-practice-toolkit-v1.pdf>) is becoming more common, helping providers structure their evaluation and plan future developments.

CIW recognises the importance and impact of practitioners' understanding of child development and using reflective processes to shape their provision. By embedding thoughtful, responsive decisionmaking into their daily work, these settings show how reflective practice directly contributes to improved experiences and outcomes for children.

Other features of the childcare and play improvement project

Quality meetings

We introduced quality meetings in December 2024. These meetings are less formal than a full inspection and take place between inspection visits. They give providers a chance to discuss improvements made since their last inspection, including progress on any identified 'Areas for Improvement' (AFI) or recommendations. Providers can also share plans for future improvements, and we will point them towards any relevant sources of advice and support. Conversations focus on how the work being carried out affects the quality of the service provided for children, and the impact on their wellbeing, development and engagement.

Quality conferences

We started hosting annual quality conferences in 2024. These events provide a forum for all childcare and play providers to come together and celebrate positive practice and share learning.

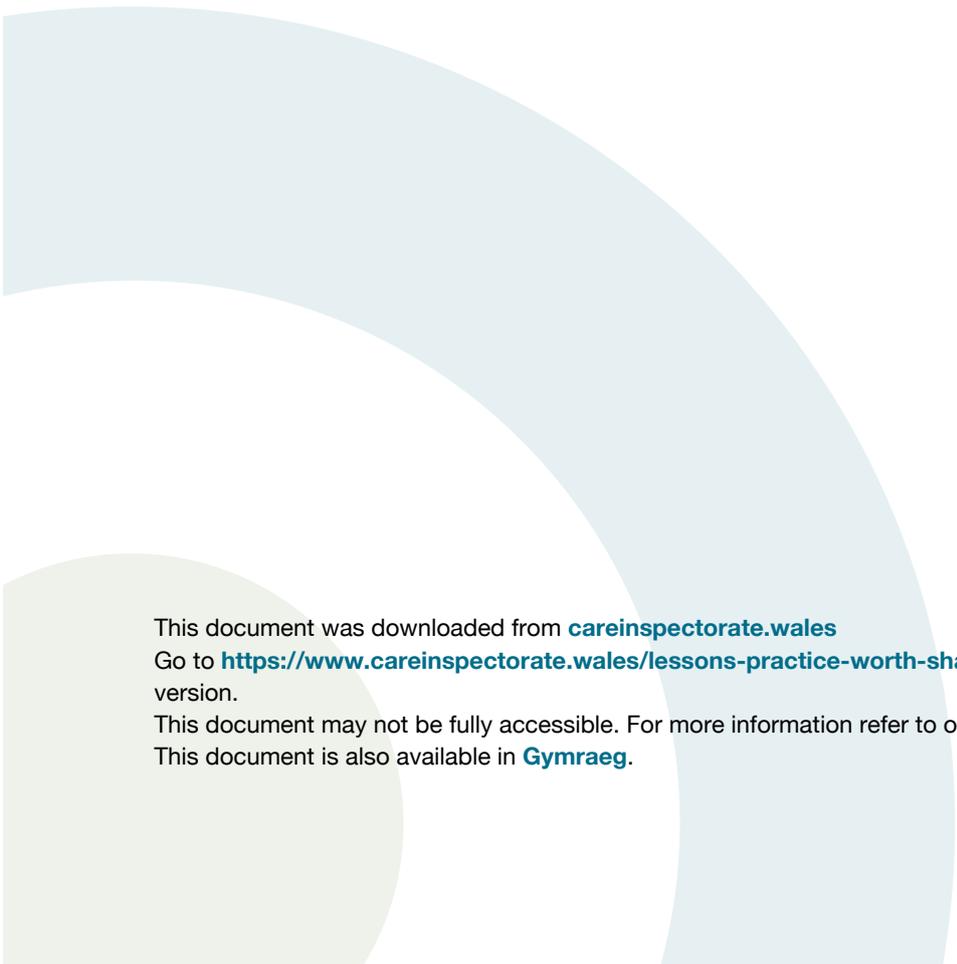
Providers who have provided us with practice worth sharing examples are invited to share their stories with other providers and are on hand to answer any questions from their peers.

“Fantastic conference, great ideas and I’m feeling confident to use the information to support our setting. Thank you”

“The event was celebratory, informative and supportive - a lovely way to inspire and encourage us to continue to strive to improve for our little ones”

Conclusion

We want to recognise and celebrate good practice where we find it. Recognition not only validates practitioners' work, it also reinforces national messages about the value of improvement through shared learning. CIW supports the policy intentions of the ECPLC plan to strengthen the workforce through professional respect, sharing best practice, and sector-wide improvement. Most importantly, we want children in Wales to have access to childcare and play services that continue to improve and flourish.



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