Guide to Effective Professional Development in the Early Years
About the Education Endowment Foundation

The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) is an independent charity supporting teachers and school leaders to use evidence of what works—and what doesn’t—to improve educational outcomes, especially for disadvantaged children and young people.
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At the Education Endowment Foundation (EEF), we aim to support early years professionals to improve outcomes for young children through better use of evidence. We recognise the diversity and challenges faced in the Early Childhood Education and Care sector, with children aged 0–5 years attending a variety of different provisions such as maintained, private, voluntary, and independent nurseries and pre-schools as well as home-based settings and reception classes.

This guide was specifically created to support the DfE’s ‘Early Years Stronger Practice Hubs’ in providing advice and sharing evidence-informed practice. However, the content is also applicable to other organisations that provide support for settings as well as leaders of settings themselves. It focuses on approaches to improving the quality of professional development for educators.

Research shows that the Covid-19 pandemic has led to unprecedented disruption to early years settings, negatively impacting children’s learning and development. This has been further exacerbated by workforce challenges such as recruiting and retaining early years professionals—especially those who are qualified.

Supporting the early years sector in its vital work is crucial if we want to see all young children—regardless of their background—get the best possible start in life and go on to achieve their potential.

The EEF is committed to increasing its focus on the early years so that professionals working in this sector feel empowered to use evidence to their advantage.

It is our hope that we can play a role in providing meaningful and timely guidance to professionals working in this crucial area of our education system.

Professor Becky Francis
Chief Executive
Education Endowment Foundation
Introduction

Early years providers play an important role in supporting all children’s learning and development, but attending a setting with high quality provision can be particularly beneficial for children experiencing poverty.

The EEF recently commissioned an evidence review of professional development. The review included 104 studies of which a third assessed the impact of PD on staff and children in the early years. These studies consistently demonstrate that PD can change practice and improve outcomes for children.

Following the review, the EEF published a guidance report for those working in or with schools titled ‘Effective Professional Development’. This guide is the second resource based on the review and focuses on the early years.

Who is this guide for?

There are many individuals who work within or with early years settings who may find this guide useful. They could include professionals who are:

- designing professional development;
- signposting to professional development opportunities;
- funding professional development;
- setting leaders making plans for their staff’s professional development; or
- early years professionals making choices about which professional development to prioritise.

This guide explores four areas we recommend professional development includes and considers some of the key features or mechanisms of each area which could make the PD more effective. The content is by no means exhaustive.

This first edition has been put together to support the DfE’s Covid-19 recovery initiative ‘Stronger Practice Hubs’ and aims to be a starting point with further exemplification added in future editions. Links to further evidence-based resources and tools that complement this guide can be found at the end of the report.

“...A quality learning experience for children requires a quality workforce. A well-qualified, skilled staff strongly increases the potential of any individual setting to deliver the best possible outcomes for children.1”

“...Providers must support staff to undertake appropriate training and professional development opportunities to ensure they offer quality learning and development experiences for children that continually improves.2”

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What is professional development?

Professional development (PD) may take a variety of different meanings in different contexts. In this guide, we define PD as structured, facilitated activity for educators intended to enhance their practice.

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What makes professional development work?

There is substantial evidence that shows the importance of supporting professional development through a ‘balanced approach’ that encompasses four key areas:

A. Build knowledge
B. Motivate educators
C. Develop teaching techniques
D. Embed practice

PD that has these four areas is recognised as using a balanced approach.

The EEF’s evidence review of professional development found that there were fourteen mechanisms within these areas that when used could make the PD more effective.

Mechanisms can be thought of as the building blocks of effective professional development. Drawn from research on human behaviour, these mechanisms have been shown to lead to changes in practice.

For this guide, we have decided to shine a spotlight on five of the key mechanisms as seen in Figure 1.

We recommend that when early years settings consider attending, designing, or providing PD they ensure it encompasses the four areas and at least one mechanism in each area. The more mechanisms included the more likely the PD will lead to improved outcomes for children.
**What is PD?**

Professional development is not...

- A training day provided by a stronger practice hub on how to use evidence-informed strategy to improve children’s communication and language skills.
- A nursery manager providing an update on the setting’s health and safety policy.
- A series of early years child development modules delivered by an external provider involving a mix of self-study learning and interactive webinars.
- An information session for early years professionals on websites which support early mathematics.
- A period of coaching from an expert or mentor to support educators or leaders within an early years setting.
- An online briefing for early years professionals to update them on local priorities and partnership projects.

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**Figure 1: The EEF’s professional development mechanisms**

**A** BUILDING KNOWLEDGE

1. Managing cognitive load
2. Revisiting prior

**B** MOTIVATING EDUCATORS

3. Setting and agreeing on goals
4. Presenting information from a credible source
5. Providing affirmation and reinforcement after progress

**C** DEVELOPING TEACHING TECHNIQUES

6. Instructing educators on how to perform a technique
7. Arranging social support
8. Modelling the technique
9. Monitoring and providing feedback
10. Rehearsing the technique

**D** EMBEDDING PRACTICE

11. Providing prompts and cues
12. Prompting action planning
13. Encouraging monitoring
14. Prompting context-specific repetition
When designing and delivering PD, it is important to present new knowledge in ways that support understanding. PD facilitators must pay close attention to how they structure and build the knowledge taught through the programme.

Mechanism 1: Managing how much information we have to process

Learning requires information to be committed to memory. If the amount of new information exceeds a person’s processing capacity they are unlikely to successfully remember it.

When presenting new information as part of professional development, careful thought should be applied to managing the ‘cognitive load’ of participants.

To avoid ‘overloading’ participants, programme developers and deliverers should either:

- focus only on the most relevant content;
- vary how they present information by the using multiple examples; or
- employ strategies such as dual coding—the combination of verbal and visual instruction.

This is particularly relevant for busy, time-poor early years professionals: they have demanding roles and may have a wide range of qualifications and experience. When providers are planning PD, it may be worth considering how to work closely with setting leaders or managers to audit existing knowledge and skills to identify any gaps. This ensures that PD is pitched at the appropriate level.

One approach to PD is the ‘drip-feed approach’ where a small amount of content is introduced and combined with examples and modelling, enabling educators to incrementally build knowledge over time.
We were planning to deliver a series of professional development (PD) sessions to local private, voluntary, and independent nursery educators as part of the Opportunity Area Early Years Implementation Leads programme.

When planning, careful consideration had to be made for the fact this would be the first time some educators had engaged in project work and evidence-based professional development. The challenge was to plan the sessions to ensure the content was both accessible and rigorous. The objective was to promote learning behaviours so educators would be motivated to engage with evidence-based research and feel confident to improve the practice within their setting. We also wanted to enhance their skill-sets so that they would be able to lead other colleagues through this process.

To meet this criteria, careful consideration was given to timing and delivery of the sessions and the content.

All sessions were delivered on the same day and at a regular time. We planned the sessions for 45–60 minutes with an initial follow-up session which was a networking opportunity led by the educators.

The content was very focused on a specific, relevant area of practice rather than a general overview and included exploring research evidence and what this could look like. The educators would often be unsure of certain research terminology but when presented with the practical application would be surprised that this was part of their usual offer. This enabled educators to understand the rationale for particular aspects of practice, meaning that these could be applied more deliberately and consistently.

The PD in this project was delivered over one term with the educators having to produce an implementation plan (based on the EEF template).

The educators reported both that the timeline and support given ensured they engaged with the evidence base and that they were pleased with the improvements to provision and outcomes for learning.
Once educators have built knowledge they still need to be motivated to act upon that knowledge. To achieve this, three mechanisms may be used:

- setting and agreeing on goals;
- presenting information from a credible source; and
- providing affirmation and reinforcement after progress.

Mechanism 2: Presenting information from a credible source

The sources that information is derived from impacts how motivated educators are to use it. PD facilitators should, therefore, think carefully about how they present and make the case for a particular change in educator practice. Useful methods that make educators more likely to change practice may include:

- supporting a suggestion with published and robust research;
- featuring a prominent education academic to advocate for a change; or
- using an expert educator from within the setting, or externally, to promote a particular practice.

This links closely to the need to ensure that the content of PD is evidence-based. Providing content from trusted sources (such as EEF guidance reports, the EEF’s Early Years Toolkit, the Evidence Store, published trials of interventions, or other evidence brokers) is crucial and more likely to be motivating than offering instruction based on anecdotal or unsupported impact statements.
A worked example of a stronger practice hub using credible sources of evidence.

A Stronger Practice Hub shares The Evidence Store with their local early years network. They provide bite-size taster sessions, introducing the videos and infographics that make up the store, to draw educators in.

Together, they create a supportive network involving open discussions and regular meetings. They support early years professionals to develop their understanding of the evidence and what evidence-informed practice might look like in the context of their own individual settings.

The Stronger Practice Hubs support settings to prioritise the evidence-based approaches that will have the most impact on improving children’s learning and development. Using a credible source such as The Evidence Store gives early years professionals the confidence to make changes linking their decisions back to the robust evidence base.

“Every early years educator will recognise much of the content of the [EEF] Toolkit and Evidence Store as fundamental components of their practice. These updated and new resources shine a research-informed spotlight on aspects of that can potentially make the biggest difference for our youngest children. They can really support practitioners to continue to improve practice and provision in their settings.”

Rob Newton, Associate Strategic Director at Huntington Research School.
C. Develop teaching techniques

Effective professional development provides educators with the techniques they require to improve their practice.

Following building knowledge, and being motivated to act upon it, these techniques will provide the tools required to take action and change practice.

These might include:

- instructing educators on how to perform a technique;
- arranging practical social support;
- modelling the technique;
- providing feedback; and
- rehearsing the technique.

**Mechanism 3: Arranging practical social support**

In various contexts, both within and beyond early years settings, peer support can encourage and facilitate development. Peers often share a common language, culture, and knowledge regarding the problems they face. They are often able to provide emotional or informational support to colleagues looking to improve their practice. PD that arranges social support is, therefore, more likely to be effective and in turn lead to improvement in children’s outcomes.

Social support could be offered in a variety of ways, such as:

- a coaching relationship, where an expert coach provides peer support and assistance;
- regular conference calls between a number of participating educators who could discuss how they are finding the PD programme; or
- at the most basic level, it could just be a programme requiring at least two educators from each setting to participate in training so that, subsequently, these colleagues can support each other throughout.
The Early Years Professional Development Programme is a comprehensive package of continuous professional development based on current early years pedagogy. The training creates opportunities to build upon educators’ skills and knowledge with peers and expert trainers, focusing on:

- improving the skills needed to identify children who are at risk of communication and language needs;
- providing an understanding of child development in early mathematics;
- developing skills to support children’s self-confidence, relationships, and self-awareness through expertly developed Personal, Social and Emotional Development (PSED) training; and
- improving engagement with parents and carers to support the home learning environment.

The programme design consists of self-study eLearning and regular facilitated webinars in which educators will meet with their programme trainer and other early years professionals. The programme design plans in time to meet with other educators from different settings and offer peer support. The programme takes approximately 60 hours to complete over an eight-month period.

An educator who had completed phase two of the programme said, ‘The training was helpful, and it was beneficial to do it alongside (someone in my setting) being able to discuss and reflect on current practice and plan together to develop the action plan. We could talk about individual children and decide on the strategies that would work best for them in nursery. It also helped being in separate webinar groups so that we could collect lots of different ideas from people from different areas. My programme trainer was particularly encouraging and supportive.’
Once educators have built knowledge, been motivated, and been taught techniques, PD programmes then need to support educators to effectively embed changes to their practice, to make sure that they continue with improvements to their teaching.

Four mechanisms may be deployed to support this:

1. providing prompts and cues;
2. prompting action planning;
3. encouraging self-monitoring; and
4. prompting context specific repetition.

Mechanism 4: Providing prompts and cues

To ensure that educators sustain improvements to their practice, PD providers may choose to provide a series of prompts that remind educators to carry out certain behaviours. For example, having delivered an inset day and a series of webinars on how to embed early literacy interventions into their curriculum, a PD trainer may prompt staff through a daily reflection activity.

A worked example of using prompts and cues to embed speech, language, and communication strategies in a pre-school

A pre-school leader invests in an evidence-informed programme of speech and language training for the team. They identify a set of prompts and cues to display in spaces around the pre-school in areas where educators work with children. The intended purpose of this is to remind educators to use key strategies that were taught in the training to support children’s speech, language, and communication needs.

The prompts and cues include:

- a ‘think about questions’ poster—to prompt educators to think about questioning when talking to children; and
- an ‘interaction’ poster—to cue educators to stop (wait ten seconds—give thinking time), listen, and respond (repeat and add one or two more words) as well as give praise, follow children’s interests, and use the hand rule (using one question to four comments, repetitions, expansions, and explanations).

In addition, a checklist devised by the training provider was used by the team as a prompt to audit the pre-school learning environment to ensure it was ‘communication friendly’.
Mechanism 5: Prompting action planning

Action planning is when an educator plans how they will perform a technique.

Purposeful action plans are detailed and should consider:

- the context of their setting.
- the frequency with which the technique will be used;
- the duration it will be used for; and
- the intensity of the technique.

Producing an action plan makes it more likely that an educator will use a technique they have learned during PD.

It could be done in a variety of ways: for instance, as the final activity in a training session on interactive book reading, participants could be asked to review the sessions they will deliver in the following week and identify where they can use models to help children develop their language skills.

Case study: Becky’s Buddies (Rebecca Taylor—childminder)

As part of Becky’s on going self-evaluation, she undertook a training course delivered by the local authority to develop children’s communication and language skills. The training highlighted the possibilities of using a variety of poems to create the building blocks for literacy skills and language development. Becky learnt how reciting poems with actions enabled children to discover new words, make predictions, explore rhythm, explore speech patterns, and explore the structures of sentences in fun ways. Becky shared her learning with her assistant Rachel and together they decided that they wanted to embed the use of the basket of 36 poems within their setting.

During a meeting, they made a plan to do this through:

- learning the poems together and use their knowledge of Makaton to support the poems through actions;
- introducing one poem per week to their singing during the daily small group time (building up over time);
- adding props to the continuous provision to encourage children to recite the poems independently; and
- recording themselves reciting the poems and sharing with children’s parents so they could learn them at home too.

This action plan helped ensure Becky and Rachel actually changed their practice and allowed them to reflect on its benefits for their children. They were then able to share the poems and the associated practices with their network of childminders.
The importance of ongoing professional conversations

Much PD is centred around high quality professional conversations.

Professional conversations are structured to enable an early years professional to review, reflect on, and develop professional practice. They might take place peer to peer, between educators, or with an early years’ leader or expert. Conversations should include the perspectives of both parties and be centred around an agreed topic or area.

Professional conversations might include:

- reflecting on an observation;
- peer to peer reflection and action planning throughout the day;
- discussion after modelling a new teaching technique; or
- discussion at a supervision session;
- goal setting as part of an appraisal process;
- formalised coaching or mentoring relationships;
- at professional development sessions, online or face to face, focusing on a teaching technique;
- a small group setting reflecting on practice; or
- educators in different early years settings meeting to share practice.
PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT CONVERSATION CYCLE

1. Prepare, Reflect and Plan
   - Agree/prepare professional development conversation focus
   - Reflect on own knowledge, skills and practice
   - Set goals within an agreed action plan

2. Build Knowledge and Motivate
   - Select credible sources of evidence such as the Early Years Toolkit and Evidence Store.
   - Identify the 'best bets' from the evidence
   - Consider their relevance to individual contexts

3. Identify ways to support the development of practice
   - Review current approaches, practices and goals
   - Identify an expert educator to model/support/instruct
   - Rehearse the practice and offer feedback

4. Plan opportunities to embed and review
   - Provide prompts and cues to support practice
   - Scaffold peer support and opportunities for self-monitoring
   - Encourage productive repetition of practice

5. Review goals
   - Review goal setting and action plan
   - Celebrate achievements
   - Share success with others

Access the professional development conversations tool here: eef.li/eypd
Evidence suggests that it is important to ensure both that professional development aligns with settings’ specific needs and that it is supported by leadership teams.

The challenge of implementation means that less is more: selecting a small number of priorities is a safer bet than creating a lengthy list of strategies that becomes hard to manage. It is worth noting that professional development is only one aspect of implementation.

The diversity of the early years sector may present additional challenges for implementation. It is particularly important for settings to ‘explore’ the challenges of their specific context.

Some settings may have more access to wider systems of support than others.

In order to mitigate this, a range of additional resources and tools can be found below to bolster early years settings that are part of smaller networks. For example, Stronger Practice Hubs have been established to help develop and support new networks, giving educators space to reflect on and develop their practice.

The EEF’s guidance report on implementation offers recommendations to support improvement in any education setting, built around the implementation cycle:

1. **Explore**: Identify a key priority that is amenable to change.
2. **Prepare**: Systematically explore programmes or practices to implement.
3. **Deliver**: Examine the fit and feasibility with the context.
4. **Sustain**: Develop a clear, logical and well specified plan.

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**STABLE USE OF APPROACH**
- Use implementation data to drive faithful adoption and intelligent adaptation.
- Reinforce initial training with follow-on support within the setting.
- Support staff and solve problems using a flexible leadership approach.

**PREPARE**
- Treat scale-up as a new implementation process.
- Continuously acknowledge support and reward good implementation practices.
- Plan for sustaining and scaling the intervention from the outset.

**DELIVER**
- Identify a key priority that is amenable to change.
- Systematically explore programmes or practices to implement.
- Examine the fit and feasibility with the context.

**SUSTAIN**
- Develop a clear, logical and well specified plan.
- Assess the readiness of the setting to deliver the implementation plan.
- Reinforce initial training with follow-on support within the setting.
- Support staff and solve problems using a flexible leadership approach.

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**DELIVERY BEGINS**
- NOT READY - ADAPT PLAN
- READY

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**IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS BEGINS**
- Evidence suggests that it is important to ensure both that professional development aligns with settings’ specific needs and that it is supported by leadership teams.

**APPROACH**
- The challenge of implementation means that less is more: selecting a small number of priorities is a safer bet than creating a lengthy list of strategies that becomes hard to manage. It is worth noting that professional development is only one aspect of implementation.

**DECISION**
- The diversity of the early years sector may present additional challenges for implementation. It is particularly important for settings to ‘explore’ the challenges of their specific context.

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**TREATMENT**
- Some settings may have more access to wider systems of support than others.

**ADAPTATION**
- In order to mitigate this, a range of additional resources and tools can be found below to bolster early years settings that are part of smaller networks. For example, Stronger Practice Hubs have been established to help develop and support new networks, giving educators space to reflect on and develop their practice.

**GROWTH**
- The EEF’s guidance report on implementation offers recommendations to support improvement in any education setting, built around the implementation cycle.
Sources of support

Early Years Stronger Practice Hubs

The DfE—supported by NCB—has established a network of Stronger Practice Hubs across England. These are led by partnerships of school and PVI group-based settings—and can involve childminders. The hubs seek to provide information and support for all early years providers, offering the opportunity to join a local network as well as signposting access to evidence-informed programmes.

Further information on this can be found at https://www.ncb.org.uk/strongerpracticehubs2

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| The Early Years Evidence Store | [The Early Years Evidence Store](#) is a summary of evidence-informed approaches to help educators to understand and reflect on their practice. The approaches are illustrated with practices that typically make up the approach and a range of examples of what these might look like in practice.  
This was designed to support the EEF Stronger Practice Hubs programmes. |
| The Early Years Toolkit    | [The Early Years Toolkit](#) provides an accessible overview of the international evidence on teaching for two- to six-year-olds, with some studies including younger and older children. The Toolkit guides settings towards the 'best bets' for improving outcomes on the basis of research on what has (and also what hasn't) worked in the past. Each of the topics covered in the Toolkit briefly answer four key questions: How effective is it? How secure is the evidence? What are the costs? What should your setting consider? |
| Guidance reports          | EEF guidance reports provide evidence-informed recommendations on key improvement priorities—such as improving literacy. They are accompanied by additional resources to support successful implementation, such as self-assessment tools, case studies, and planning frameworks.  
Particularly useful guidance reports for early years settings include:  
Preparing for Literacy  
[eef.li/literacy-early-years](#)  
Improving Mathematics in the Early Years and Key Stage 1  
[eef.li/early-maths](#)  
Effective Professional Development  
[eef.li/epd](#)  
Putting Evidence to Work: A school's guide to implementation  
[eef.li/implementation](#) |