



The Ofsted inspection guide

Aiming for Exceptional

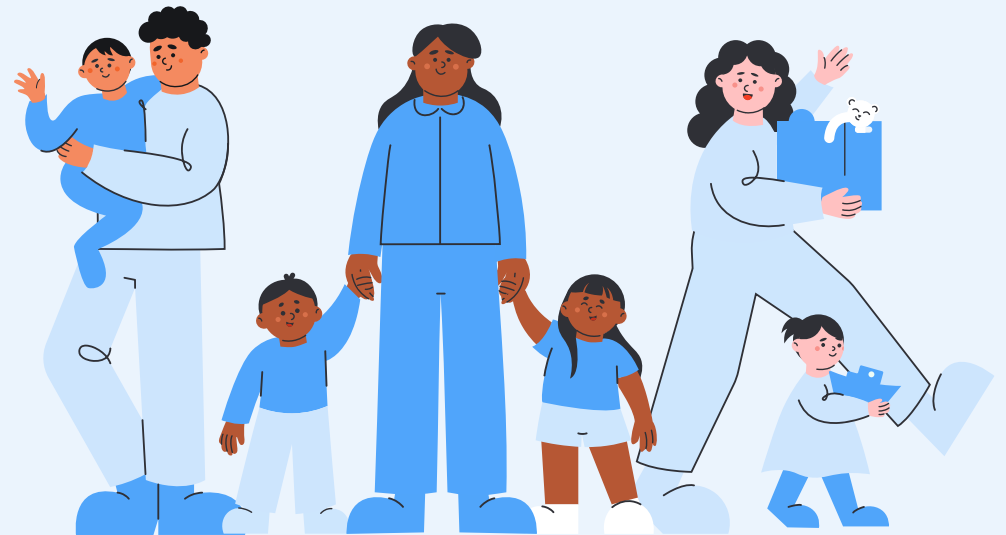


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About this guide

When I was working in settings, a visit from Ofsted was something we all seemed to dread, regardless of how amazing our practice was. Sadly, many Early Years educators and managers still feel the same way when inspection day rolls around.

The culmination of up to 6 years of hard work and the fear of something going wrong, all coming together on inspection day, can feel like a huge amount of pressure. And for leaders and managers, it can feel pretty lonely at the top.

So we wanted to help.

With so much to think about, how do you know what to focus on in order to get the grading you know you deserve? And how can you really be sure that you're focusing on the right things to make your setting 'Exceptional', day in and day out?

We've spoken to settings who've achieved top judgements and collected all their inspiring tips for improving your provision, as well as how to shine on the all-important day that Ofsted comes. Plus, we've sat down with Ofsted inspectors themselves to find out what they're really looking for, so you're prepared with everything you need to know.

With all that said, it's still really important to remember that while Ofsted's judgment is important, it is not the be-all and end-all of your practice and provision. Use this guide to help you out with tips and tricks, but most of all, use it to remind you that you're not alone.

The Early Years works best when we all work together, collaborating on sharing skills and knowledge, and sharing the pressure too.

My inbox is always open.



Julia Rose
Early Education Editor, Family

Our expert contributors

In this guide you'll hear from...



Sam Sleeman-Boss

Early Years Regulatory Inspector, Ofsted

Sam is Early Education Quality and Practice Lead at Ofsted and was one of His Majesty's Inspectors. Sam co-presented a webinar for us around inspection changes.



Jayne Coward

Deputy Director for Early Years
Regulatory Policy and Practice, Ofsted

Jayne is Deputy Director for Early Years Regulatory Policy and Practice and was one of His Majesty's Inspectors. You can read more about Jayne [here, on Ofsted's website](#). Jayne co-presented a webinar for us around inspection changes.



Lizzy Barlow & Becky Pike

Nursery Group Leader and
Director, Hollies Day Nurseries

Hollies Day Nurseries were a group of five settings in Nottingham, now part of Kids Planet. Hollies were progressive and forward-thinking, making sure that each child had a unique journey towards becoming a life- long learner.



Ailsa Monk

Principal, Cotswold
Montessori School

Cotswold Montessori School is located in specially converted farm buildings in the beautiful North Cotswolds. They aim to create a safe and caring home environment for children filled with opportunities to engage and learn. Their Guiting site was judged to be Outstanding in 2022.



Becky Cook
Executive Headteacher of
Waterton Pre-schools

Becky is the Executive Headteacher of Waterton Pre-Schools. Becky and her team at Waterton's setting, The Meadow Pre-School, had the opportunity to experience a trial thematic visit with two Ofsted inspectors before the main framework was released.



Kerry Smith, Charlotte Bateman & Charlotte Moss
Group Head of Children and Adults' Education, Managing Director, and Southwater Manager, Little Barn Owls Nursery and Farm School

Little Barn Owls Farm and Forest School Nurseries have five settings around West Sussex, several of which have been judged to be Outstanding. Little Barn Owls is inspired by Reggio Emilia Approach and when children aren't working with professional artists, they might be caring for the resident farm animals or exploring their own 11 acres of woodland. The LBO ethos is to nurture confident, caring and curious children.



Joanne Routledge
Owner and Manager, Kinder
Park Nursery

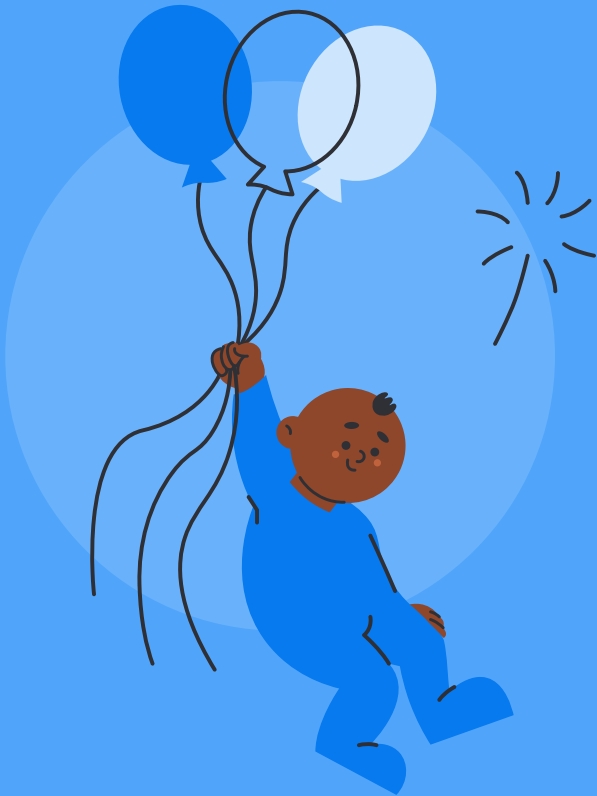
Joanne has owned and managed Kinder Park since she was 22. Kinder Park received their 4th consecutive 'Outstanding' judgement in July 2022. Kinder Park are committed to providing an outstanding environment, where all children reach their full potential, through high-quality care and education from their knowledgeable and dedicated staff team.



Yasmin Darling
Equitable education, neuroinclusion and intersectionality consultancy

Yasmin has over 30 years of lived and professional experience working with children, families, young people, communities, and organisations. She has been a childminder and nursery director, running the Outstanding Maisie Poppins setting and creating 'The Maisie Poppins Way: An Early Years Ecosystem'.

A new way of inspecting Early Years settings



A new way of inspecting Early Years settings

The move away from the single-word headline grade, the renewed framework for inspection, and the publication of inspectors' training tools are all part of Ofsted's drive towards fairer, less stressful, more collaborative inspections for settings. Let's find out more about what's changed.

Changes to Ofsted inspections in the Early Years

From November 2025, there are no more overall effectiveness grades (Outstanding, Good, Requires Improvement, Inadequate).

Instead of the one-word headline grade we're used to, grading across your provision, including your Safeguarding judgment, will be collated into a 'report card'. Ofsted will inspect your provision in seven new evaluation areas:

- Safeguarding
- Inclusion
- Curriculum and teaching
- Achievement
- Behaviour, attitudes, and establishing routines
- Children's welfare and wellbeing
- Leadership and governance

The area of safeguarding will be judged to be Met or Not Met. All of the other areas will be judged to be one of the following grades:

- Exceptional
- Strong standard
- Expected standard
- Needs attention
- Urgent improvement

If you haven't seen the report cards yet, [this is what they look like](#).

Changes to Ofsted inspections in the Early Years

Ofsted have also created foundations for their new framework for inspections, which are as follows:

- **Children and pupils first** – high expectations with a focus on outcomes and experiences
- **The care and well-being of those we inspect** – through collaborative working with settings and building positive relationships with leaders and staff
- **A provider's unique context** – evidence is evaluated in the light of each setting's strengths, challenges and priorities for improvement, and how well it identifies and meets the needs of significant groups of children
- **The lens of the toolkit** – the toolkit sets out the grading standards, supporting shared professional dialogue
- **Quality and impact** – evidence-based decisions focus on the quality and the impact of leaders' choices and actions on children, reflected in the grading standards

“At the heart of the writing of this proposed renewed framework, is that we want it to feel different,” says Jayne Coward, Ofsted’s Deputy Director for Early Years, “We’ve made a commitment to it being an open, collaborative, transparent process, building on those values of courtesy, respect, professionalism and empathy.”

We're looking at smaller chunks so that we can be more nuanced about where provision is stronger or where attention might be needed. We really hope that this means we're clearer with settings about what they should be focusing their attention on and celebrating what it is that they're doing well, but also being clearer with parents so that they can send their children to settings that are strong or secure in the things that they value most.



Sam Sleeman-Boss
Early Years Regulatory Inspector, Ofsted

About the Exceptional grading



Reaching a judgement of Exceptional in an evaluation area

Exceptional (highest quality provision): an evaluation area can be graded 'Exceptional' when all the strong standards have been met and if it meets all the additional standards in the 'Exceptional' section of the toolkit.

Guidance: Education inspection framework

If this grade is awarded, leaders should use their 'Exceptional' success in this evaluation area to:

- support improvement across all aspects of their own setting and/or group
- share their learning and best practice externally to support system-wide improvement, for example with other settings, professionals, their community and stakeholders, including local and/or national networks.

Early Years inspection toolkit

Getting ready for an Ofsted inspection

Getting ready for an Ofsted inspection

It's not about having a special Ofsted inspection plan, but making sure you get to really show off all the amazing work you do day-to-day. Here are some top tips to help you keep calm and carry on as normal, right from when you get 'The Call'.



What happens when you get ‘The Call’?

The famous Ofsted notification call (or, The Call) will now be split into two parts:

- The initial notification call
- A conversation with the manager or Nominated Individual.

Ofsted’s Early Years Regulatory Inspector, Sam Sleeman-Boss, explains that Ofsted want to use the two-part call to collaborate with settings and better understand the context in which the setting is working.

The Call is also to cover the logistics of the inspection and make any practical arrangements, such as which documents the inspector would like to see, planned inspection activities, and which children to case sample. Of course, you will also have the opportunity to ask questions. You can find out more about what will be discussed on The Call in Ofsted’s guidance, “Early Years inspection operating guide for inspectors”

What questions will Ofsted ask on The Call?

- Questions about the context in which your setting is working (the area, the type of families who attend, funding, setting type etc.)
- What you and your team see as their strengths
- What your setting’s priorities are
- What you and your team are working to improve or develop, and why
- What your curriculum looks like
- Any areas of the practice or provision you’d really like to focus on
- Which children would be appropriate to observe or ‘case sample’

Ofsted’s guidance, “[Early Years inspection information](#)”, tells us that settings will also receive an email, following the call. In this email, you’ll receive further information about how the inspection will be conducted, including how to raise any concerns.

What happens you get 'The Call'?

The inspector really took the time to understand the context of the setting. Usually, it's more the practical things: your numbers, the people, your qualifications, the welfare requirements, but they also wanted to talk about our curriculum offer, what's unique about us, our ethos, and what's strong in the setting. It was a very much a two-way discussion.



Becky Cook
Executive Headteacher, Waterton Pre-schools

The Call is the first point for you to really sell yourself. To say "Yes, come on, we're ready for you, we're looking forward to it, can't wait to show you around." Be positive. Be competent. Ordered. Ask questions. Sell yourself, because that's effectively what you're doing.



Ailsa Monk
Principal, Cotswold Montessori School

It's not a memory test. If you've forgotten anything in the context call, then you'll be talking to us about that when we arrive. You'll be talking to us constantly throughout the inspection. So there'll be lots of opportunities for you to share whatever it is that you want us to know.



Sam Sleeman-Boss
Early Years Regulatory Inspector, Ofsted

On The Call, she [the inspector] went over the timings of the day and what she'd be looking for. It didn't necessarily go exactly to timescale, of course, but it meant that I knew that at one point, 'Right, okay, we've still got this thing to come.' She really went down into what we'd be doing together, what she'd want me to be involved in, and what she would then spend time observing.



Charlotte Moss
Manager, Little Barn Owls Southwater

The team at Hollies Day Nursery have strategies for when they get The Call:

- After the phone call - inform everybody straight away
- Get the nursery clean and ready
- Make sure everyone feels confident about their room
- Don't put something in you haven't done before
- Hold a quick meeting the night before to tell all the staff how amazing they are
- Get other practitioners to share their experience from past inspections



Becky Pike & Lizzy Barlow
Director and Nursery Group Leader, Hollies Day Nurseries

Telling the staff

I waited until the end of the day to tell the staff so that they could just go home and relax as much as possible. There's nothing that we needed to do or change that day specifically for Ofsted's visit.



Ailsa Monk
Principal, Cotswold Montessori School

After The Call, when we let the staff know Ofsted were coming, we spoke to each of them about their individual strengths, as those are what we really want to show off to Ofsted.



Kerry Smith
Group Head of Children and Adults' Education, Little Barn Owls

As leaders, we made sure we got our little, "Oh my gosh!" out the way with each other. Then when we went and spoke to the staff, we came across quite chilled and relaxed, to ensure that they were. We said, "Just so you know, everyone, we have got The Call, they're coming tomorrow, it's all fine. We're on it." Just encouraging the day to go on as usual.



Charlotte Moss
Manager, Little Barn Owls Southwater

Telling the parents

We put a post out on Famly to let the parents know that Ofsted were coming the next day and to expect to see her at the setting. We also let them know that the inspector might want to talk to them, so they were welcome to have a chat to her.



Charlotte Moss
Manager, Little Barn Owls Southwater

Nothing 'just for Ofsted'

Charlotte quite often holds coffee mornings for parents where we have coffee out the front and some croissants and breakfast bars. But you can't just suddenly do something like that just for Ofsted, as it would be obvious. None of the parents commented about it, as it's something that happens once a week. The inspector can see it's something that happens consistently or not. But the main reason we do anything is for our families and children, not Ofsted.



Kerry Smith
Group Head of Children and Adults' Education, Little Barn Owls

Showing off your strengths

Our environment is always set. Our standards are always set. Our safeguarding is always set. But on the day we really want to show off where our staff's strengths are and elevate that.



Kerry Smith

Group Head of Children and Adults'
Education, Little Barn Owls

Striving for continuous improvement

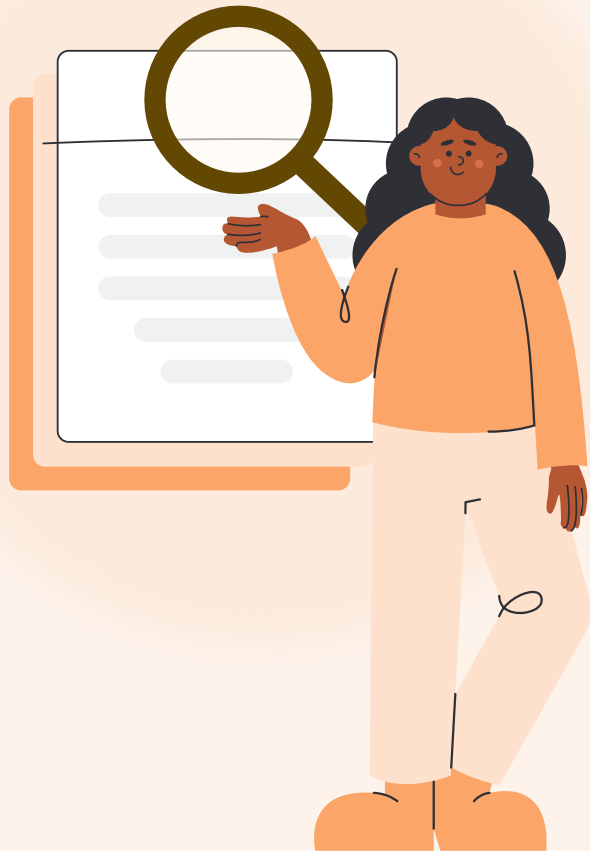
As a team, we're continually 'preparing' for inspection day. We had our last visit from Ofsted in July and we don't think 'Oh, they've been now, put your feet up!' We're continuously looking at ways that we can improve the setting and what we deliver to the children and their families. It's an ongoing programme of development.



Joanne Routledge

Owner and Manager, Kinder Park Nursery

What happens on inspection day?



What happens on inspection day?

Despite a brand new framework, and new gradings for settings, Ofsted are mostly inspecting the same things they always were - they just really want the day to feel different. Here's what to expect...

What happens on inspection day?

If you've never been part of an Ofsted inspection before, it can be nerve-racking not knowing what to expect. And, with a brand new inspection framework from November 2025, even the Early Years veterans might be curious to how different inspection day will be.

Ofsted are clear that while the day should feel different, what they're fundamentally inspecting is the same.

"We'll still be focusing on priorities like the quality of adult interactions, the importance of communication and language, and most importantly, keeping children safe and happy," explains Jayne.

"And we will continue to report on what it's like to be a child at an Early Years setting, looking at what your priorities are, what actions you're taking, and the impact that that has for the children that attend your settings."

Inspection activities

In Ofsted's [Guidance: Early Years inspection information](#), and [Guidance: Early years inspection operating guide for inspectors](#), we get an idea what inspectors will be doing in your setting. The inspector(s) will...

On arrival

- Ask you to display the notice of inspection
- Check on the well-being of you and your team and find out whether any issues have arisen since the planning call
- Check whether they need to make any adaptations to the inspection process, where those with other protected characteristics may otherwise be put at a disadvantage ([Responding to requests for reasonable adjustments and/or adaptations](#) offers more details about this)
- Meet with leaders and/or the nominated individual (if you have one) to review the planned timetable and the areas of inspection focus you discussed during The Call
- Confirm the children selected for case sampling, as discussed in The Call

During the inspection

- Check that you have all the documents detailed in the [Inspection information for Early Years](#) (see the next chapter, [What about paperwork?](#) for more details)
- Meet with the practitioner designated to take lead responsibility for safeguarding children
- Check that recruitment is managed safely
- Speak to staff, children, and parents and carers, where possible
- Conduct case sampling of the agreed children
- Engage in respectful professional dialogue in reflection meetings
- Record evidence
- Check with leaders on their well-being and the well-being of other staff before the inspection activities begin, and throughout the day.

Before they leave

- Conduct the grading discussion at the end of the inspection

Knowing what to expect

As it was some of the staff's first Ofsted inspections, we broke down for the team exactly what would happen and how the day would run, so they knew exactly what to expect. The worry around Ofsted so often comes from the 'unknown', so we wanted to fully explain to them how it works.



Kerry Smith

Group Head of Children and Adults' Education, Little Barn Owls

Coming to that conclusion of your lines of inquiry together felt very powerful. Every step of the way felt really collaborative. It really felt like the inspection was being done with us and not to us, a definite switch in how the whole experience felt. We were treated as professional partners in the inspection, right from the initial phone call.

As a leader, if you've identified any areas where you think more attention is needed or is developing, then that's a discussion to be had - here's the evidence, this is what we're doing about it. It's very much that professional discussion that leads to an understanding of the setting.



Becky Cook

Executive Headteacher, Waterton Pre-schools

After we've made the shared observation, we're going to have time to come together to think about what the leader's reflections are and what the inspector's reflections are. To have that professional dialogue for the inspector to understand where they might be able to see further evidence, or where there are gaps in the evidence that they need to address and get later in the inspection.



Sam Sleeman-Boss

Early Years Regulatory Inspector, Ofsted

We talked about what we'd all seen that morning and got the opportunity to say, 'We think we're strong in this area and this is why. If there were any sort of challenges where they'd disagree, I'd have the opportunity to go back and say, 'Actually I think we are strong and here's the evidence of what we do. You haven't seen this, but this happens or this happens' and they'd agree that yes, we are strong in that area. It was very much a two-way conversation about what we'd all seen and how that reflected the wording in the toolkit. We felt that was really positive.



Becky Cook,
Executive Headteacher, Waterton Pre-schools

When we're gathering that evidence against the areas of inspection focus, there will be times that inspectors will need to talk to staff and parents without the leader or the nominee present, and we should expect that to be able to happen.

But it is very much that we're doing this together.



Sam Sleeman-Boss
Early Years Regulatory Inspector, Ofsted

She observed two staff and I did one joint observation. She wanted to make sure that I could pick up pros and cons from the observation. We had a reflection meeting afterwards where she basically just opened up to me and said, "Well, how do you think that went?" and we spoke about the activities that had happened. She also caught up with that member of staff afterwards as well. It's just making sure everybody's consistent, that you're picking up same things as the educators picking up, and that she's picking up.



Charlotte Moss
Manager, Little Barn Owls Southwater

We got to talk about what we were doing within the Pre-Schools and the Trust. I could explain how that impacts the children and the adults in the settings in terms of their learning opportunities and their wellbeing. We're part of that larger organisation so there's training available, career progression and the wellbeing package in place for everybody and the inspectors were happy to discuss that further. In the past, I felt like inspections have been really narrow in focus, but this was much more holistic.



Becky Cook
Executive Headteacher, Waterton Pre-schools

Our inspectors should be caring and they'll take reasonable steps to prevent any undue anxiety and minimise stress during inspections. Our inspectors uphold the highest professional standards, so they should act with integrity and treat everybody they meet fairly.



Jayne Coward
Deputy Director for Early Years, Ofsted

Collaboration at the heart

In order to be collaborative, we're inviting leaders, as far as they're able to, or want to, to come along with us on that inspection. We're asking the setting to nominate someone, probably the person who knows this setting best, knows the children best, to join us on the inspection as much as they can or as much as they want to, and they're going to be able to see and hear what it is that we see and hear.



Sam Sleeman-Boss
Early Years Regulatory Inspector, Ofsted

A new way of doing things

The staff all felt the same; they'd been heard. What we do and how we do it and the passion with which we do it had been acknowledged. We really all felt that the inspection had been done with us and not to us. We definitely felt like it was a collaboration. We'd all enjoyed the day.



Becky Cook

Executive Headteacher, Waterton Pre-schools

CHAPTER 04

What about paperwork?



What about paperwork?

When we spoke to Ofsted, they told us that they're not interested in piles of assessment and tracking paperwork. However, it's important to understand the type of paperwork that the inspectors will ask for, so you can be completely prepared when they arrive.

What paperwork or documents do Ofsted want to see?

The Early Years Toolkit tells us that, “Inspectors are required to view specific documentation. This should be limited to documents relating to the setting’s statutory requirements or documents it produces as part of its normal business processes. Inspectors do not need information to be presented in any specific format, as long as it is easily accessible. We do not need leaders to produce documents specifically for an Ofsted inspection of their setting. This would create unnecessary workload.” So, what documents do they need to see?

What documents will Ofsted ask for?

According to Ofsted’s guidance, “Early Years inspection information”, you must provide your inspectors with the following documentation, either online or in printed form:

- Paediatric first-aid arrangements
- Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) records
- Any other documents summarising the checks on, and the vetting and employment arrangements of, all staff working at the setting

What other documents might Ofsted ask for?

- Any referrals made to the LADO (Local Authority Designated Officer) for safeguarding, and their resolution
- The details of all children who are an open case to social care/ children’s services and for whom there is a multi-agency plan
- Details of the children present at the setting during the inspection
- Your records of accidents
- Your records of any instances where children have been refused a place
- Your logs of incidents of discrimination, including racist incidents
- The records of any complaints and their resolution
- Any other documents providers are required to have to meet the EYFS

Top paperwork tips

Our inspector did not want to see any paperwork about the children, it was all through verbal communication and observation.

She really wanted to see how well we knew them. There was a huge emphasis on the key person system as your educators have to know why they're doing what they're doing with those children.



Charlotte Moss
Manager, Little Barn Owls Southwater

Our inspector spoke to different educators about the same child to be sure that everybody knew that child well. She didn't want all of the paperwork, she wanted to know that everybody actually knew the children. She asked one educator about a child, then asked another one about how they were supporting that child, to make sure it was consistent.



Kerry Smith
Group Head of Children and Adults' Education, Little Barn Owls

The inspector didn't ask to see any paperwork about it or a development plan, but she asked several of the leadership team separately about our planned actions or improvements.

She wanted to make sure it was embedded and that we all knew what we were working on.



Charlotte Moss
Manager, Little Barn Owls Southwater

You can buy policies and procedures off the shelf but you will not understand them because they were somebody else's documents. So when the inspector asks you why they are like that it's going to be difficult. The inspectors will realise if you know what you're talking about or not.



Ailsa Monk
Principal, Cotswold Montessori School

During "The Call" the day before, our inspector went through all of the paperwork I needed to show her, which was really helpful so I could be prepared. She told me the main policies and procedures she wanted to see, so I could quickly refresh those in my memory too.



Charlotte Moss
Manager, Little Barn Owls Southwater

No more folders labeled 'Ofsted'

We're definitely not going to be going backwards on [paperwork]. We've made huge strides. Although, I do still hear of inspections where settings have laid out a whole table full of folders that they want the inspector to go through. We really want to bust this misconception - there are very limited documents that we have to see and those are laid out in the EYFS. We are more interested in observing what's happening in practice and having that professional dialogue.



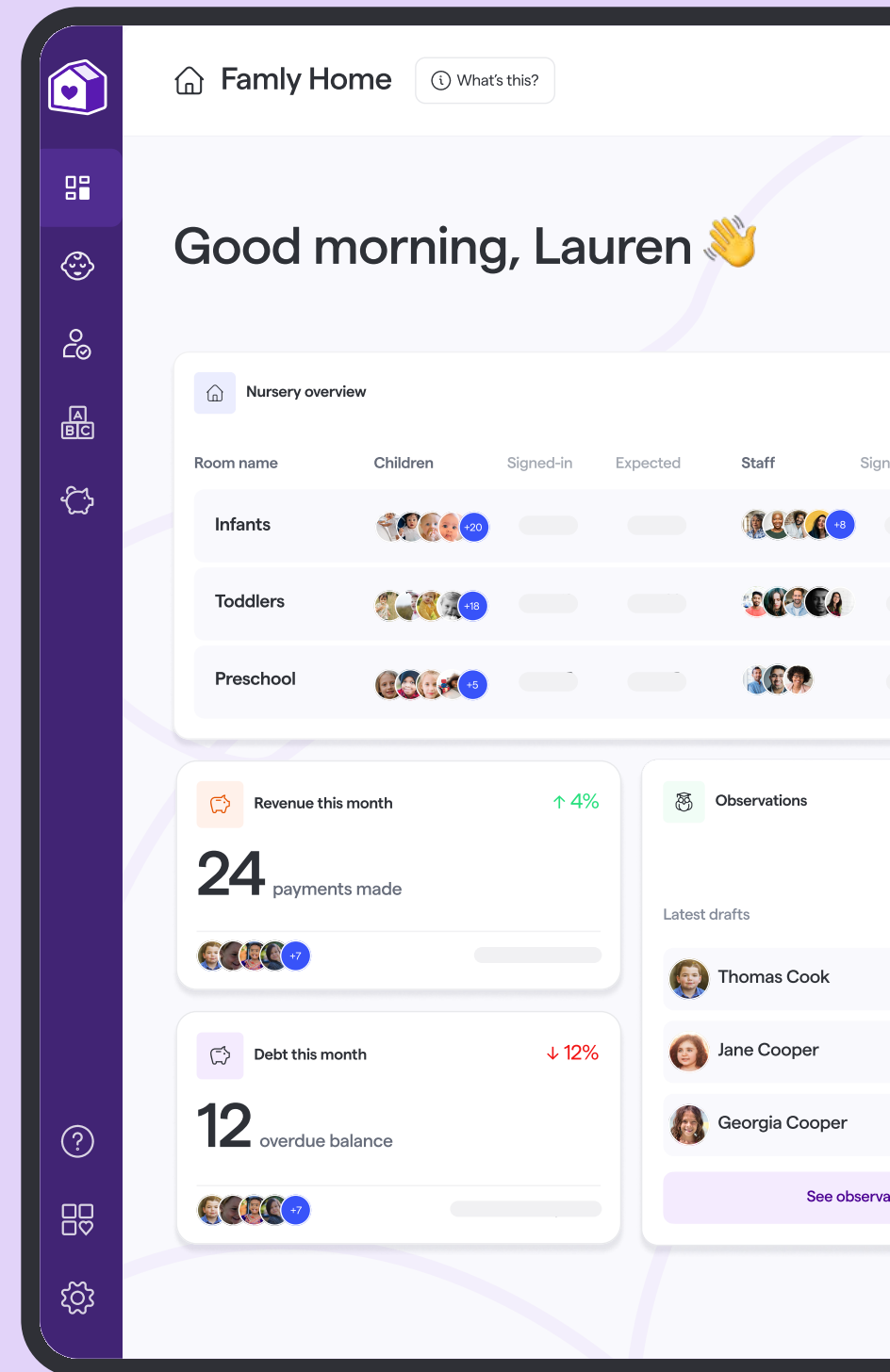
Sam Sleeman-Boss

Early Years Regulatory Inspector, Ofsted

A complete overview of your setting

Famly gives you all important info, room attendance, and finances at a glance.

Get a demo



CHAPTER 05

Safeguarding

Safeguarding

The new 'Safeguarding' area of inspection is unique in that it can only be judged as 'Met' or 'Not met'. However, despite Safeguarding now being its own, separate area of inspection, Ofsted have said that safeguarding should run throughout your provision as a 'golden thread'.



Judging Safeguarding in Early Years settings

This evaluation area considers:

- whether the setting establishes an open and positive safeguarding culture that puts children's interests first
- the extent to which leaders take an effective, whole-setting approach to safeguarding

Inspectors focus on gathering evidence relating to the factors that statutory and non-statutory guidance, research, inspection evidence and learning from internal reviews indicate contribute most strongly to safeguarding. This is so that children who need help and protection receive high-quality support.

[Early Years inspection toolkit](#)

Getting it right with Safeguarding

The September 2025 EYFS introduced some key changes to safeguarding rules, especially around safeguarding training criteria, how your setting is monitoring child absences, safer eating practices, paediatric first aid, safer recruitment, whistleblowing, and toileting and intimate hygiene. Make sure you and your team are up-to-date with the latest guidance and that your safeguarding policies are embedded in your practice and procedures.

In the 2025 Education Inspection Framework, Ofsted state that, “Inspectors always take into account how well learners are helped and protected so that they are kept safe. Inspectors now provide a separate grade for this important aspect of a provider’s work: safeguarding will either be ‘met’ or ‘not met’.”

What will Ofsted be looking for?

According to the Early Years Inspection Toolkit, to grade the safeguarding in your setting as ‘met’ or ‘not met’, Ofsted inspectors will be looking to gather evidence around:

- The safeguarding culture in your setting and amongst your team
- Whether staff have all the safeguarding information they need and can act on it
- The management of safeguarding in your setting
- Safer recruitment
- How you would respond to safeguarding concerns or allegations

In terms of our inspection methodology, we use an analogy of a shelf with safeguarding sitting securely across everything.



Jayne Coward
Deputy Director for Early Years, Ofsted

Knowing safeguarding inside out

When we're checking the team's safeguarding understanding, we try to ask the questions in different ways and then break down their answer by asking more questions. We want them to be ready for when Ofsted asks them something and not just give a learned answer. The understanding's got to be there too.



Charlotte Moss
Manager, Little Barn Owls Southwater

You have to know your safeguarding policies as that's at the forefront of everything you do. It has to be consistent across your staff team and not just for Ofsted. Our inspector told us that the safeguarding questions are so important that if they're not answered properly, you lose your 'Outstanding' grade. Our core function is to keep children safe so everybody has to know how to do it.



Kerry Smith
Group Head of Children and Adults' Education, Little Barn Owls

Our inspector asked about safeguarding in a lot of detail. She asked about online safety, county lines, radicalisation, ratios in the rooms, Prevent Duty, and how we support staff wellbeing.



Charlotte Moss
Manager, Little Barn Owls Southwater

Open safeguarding culture

To have a situation where staff don't cover up anything, you have to have a framework in which it's safe to say when you've gone wrong.



Ailsa Monk
Principal, Cotswold Montessori School

Treat your team with respect and have open and honest lines of communication. It is all about communication.

You've got to make the time to speak to them on a daily basis.



Joanne Routledge
Owner and Manager, Kinder Park Nursery

Getting it right with Safeguarding

Questions to help you reflect on your practice...

- How do your team access your safeguarding policies?
- How do you evaluate and monitor how well your safeguarding policies and procedures are being followed?
- How do you report a safeguarding concern?
- When might you share appropriate information about a child with an outside agency, like the Local Authority?
- Do staff know what to do about a safeguarding concern if the manager or DSL is not present?

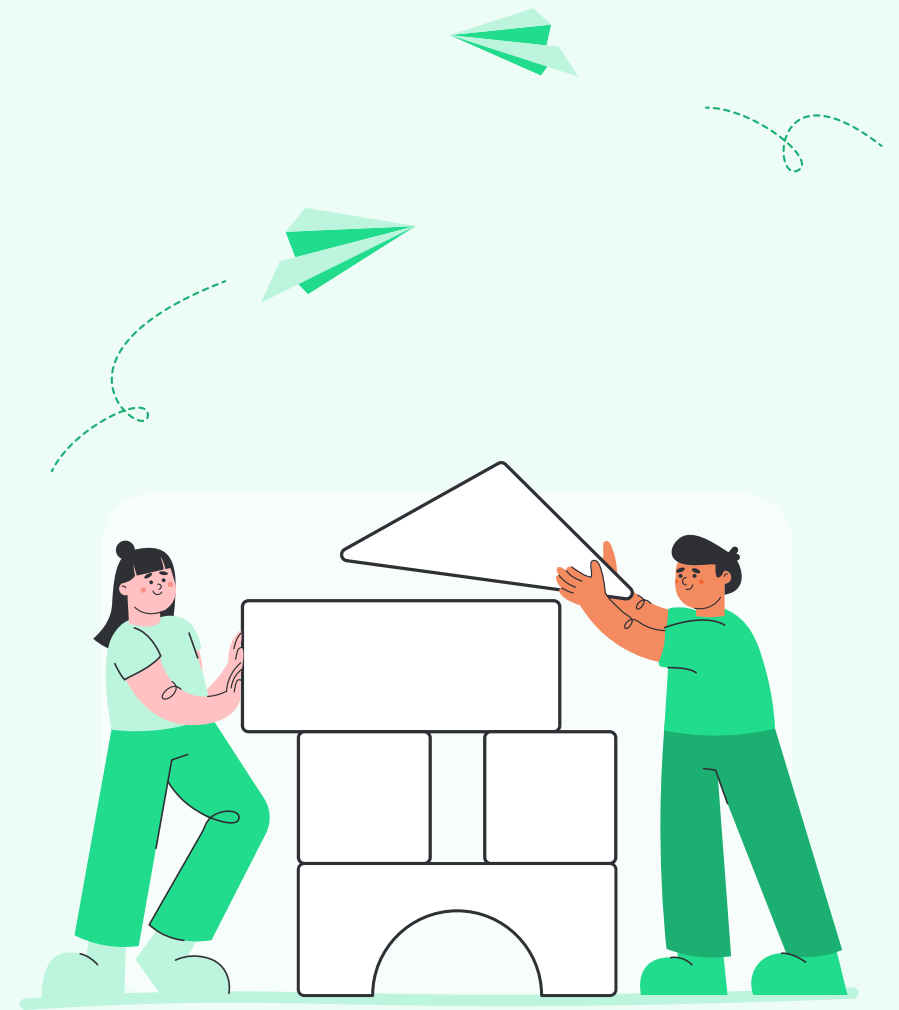
- What would be some warning signs for you that there was a safeguarding issue with one of your key children?
- What does your safeguarding training look like?
- Who delivers your safeguarding training?
- Who is your DSL?
- How do you safely and securely document safeguarding concerns?
- What would you do if an armed person tried to enter the setting?
- What do your recruitment procedures look like?
- What are your fire safety arrangements?
- How do you ensure staff adhere to your code of conduct?
- What is Prevent Duty?
- What is transferable risk?
- What arrangements are in place to receive and share records at points of transfer?
- What is the harm threshold?
- How would you refer a concern to the LADO?
- To what extent are you alert to the potential needs and vulnerabilities of the children that arrive at your setting?
- How do you inform receiving schools of any concerns or support you have provided?

CHAPTER 06

Inclusion

Inclusion

To identify exceptional practice in the Inclusion area of inspection, inspectors will be looking to see a transformational impact on children's individual experiences. This means individualised support and guidance, irrespective of the barriers that children and families might be facing.



Judging Inclusion in Early Years settings

This evaluation area considers how leaders and practitioners identify and support:

- Socioeconomically disadvantaged children (those eligible for the early years pupil premium - EYPP)
- Children with SEND; this means children receiving special educational needs (SEN) support and those with an education, health and care (EHC) plan
- Children who are known (or previously known) to children's social care, such as children in need and looked-after children
- Children who may face other barriers to their learning and/or well-being, which may include children who share a protected characteristic

Inspectors focus on gathering evidence relating to the factors that statutory requirements and non-statutory guidance, research and inspection evidence indicate contribute most strongly to inclusion.

Early Years inspection toolkit

Getting it right with Inclusion

Although Inclusion is a new area of inspection, Ofsted tell us that theme of inclusion, like safeguarding, should run as a 'golden thread' through all evaluation areas, and all aspects of your practice and provision.

What will Ofsted be looking for?

According to the Early Years Inspection Toolkit, inspectors will be looking to gather evidence about:

- How well your setting is identifying, assessing, meeting needs, and reducing barriers
- How effectively you're supporting disadvantaged children
- How you're supporting children with SEND
- How you're supporting children who are known (or previously known) to children's social care

The EYFS requires settings to meet the needs of all children at their settings, and that's not going to change. If you are secure in your inclusive practice, then you are meeting the requirements of the EYFS. So we're not asking for anything over and above that in terms of you being secure, and that's what we'll expect to see for those children.



Sam Sleeman-Boss
Early Years Regulatory Inspector, Ofsted

Inclusive practice

If there are changes to your environment, be aware of how you've dealt with that. For example, if you have an influx of children who all have English as an additional language, they'll want to know what you've done about it and how it's changed your environment. The same with SEND, and EYPP - how are you using that funding to help support that child's growth?



Lizzy Barlow
Nursery Group Leader, Hollies Day Nurseries

The inspector chose to observe children with additional needs and EAL and wanted a lot of detail about how we were supporting them. She didn't want to hear, "Oh, that child has a speech and language difficulty," she wanted to know exactly what the difficulties were, and what we were doing to support that. Even when the team answered that we were using a certain strategy, she'd ask "OK, how are you doing that?" It wasn't an interrogation or anything like that, but she wanted to be sure that the understanding was really embedded.



Charlotte Moss
Manager, Little Barn Owls Southwater

They're always looking at the quality of interactions, the quality of language development, and what it's like to be a child in this setting. Within that, they will track a 'vulnerable' child and look at what the lived experience of that child is and then the overall impact of the setting."



Becky Cook
Executive Headteacher, Waterton Pre-schools

What really swung it for us was how well we know our children. Every child has an individual learning plan and twice a year we take the time to make assessments on how the children are doing and produce a CoEL report on them. We use our own practitioner knowledge for that which helps us to understand our children really well.



Ailsa Monk
Principal, Cotswold Montessori School

Getting it right with Inclusion

Questions to help you reflect on your practice...



- How do you take steps to provide an inclusive, broad, and varied curriculum for all children at your setting, including SEND, EAL, and recipients of EYPP?
- How are you working with the families or carers of this cohort of children?
- How do you monitor and support the well-being of your most disadvantaged children?
- How do you partner with parents and carers to signpost additional support?
- How are you working with the relevant agencies to further support this cohort of children?
- Who is your SENDCo?
- What does the SENDCo's role look like?
- How do you identify children with emerging SEND?
- How and when do you share information with other agencies, such as the Local Authority?
- How do you meet the requirements of the Equality Act 2010?
- How are you meeting the specific needs of your EAL children?
- How are you using the funding you receive through the EYPP?
- How do you learn about the most effective ways to use EYPP?
- How do you monitor and support progress in this cohort of children's learning and development?

CHAPTER 07

Curriculum and teaching

Curriculum and teaching

Inspectors will consider whether educators offer a rich variety of learning experiences to promote understanding, emotional literacy and learning.



Judging Curriculum and teaching in Early Years settings

This evaluation area considers:

- Whether leaders ensure that they provide all children with a high-quality, ambitious curriculum
- Whether leaders and practitioners plan, design and implement the educational programmes of the EYFS statutory framework to create a coherent and sequential curriculum that builds on what children know and can do
- The extent to which the setting's curriculum meets the needs of the range of ages and stages of children who attend, especially disadvantaged children, those with SEND, those who are known (or previously known) to children's social care, and those who may face barriers to their learning and/or well-being

Inspectors focus on gathering evidence relating to the factors that statutory requirements and non-statutory guidance, research and inspection evidence indicate contribute most strongly to high quality curriculum and teaching.

Early Years inspection toolkit

Getting it right with Curriculum and teaching

Curriculum and teaching replaces the old 'Quality of education' area of inspection.

The [Early Years inspection toolkit](#) tells us how Ofsted defines 'teaching'.

"Teaching is a broad term that covers the many different ways in which adults help young children learn. It includes:

- Their interactions with children during planned and child-initiated play and activities
- Communicating and modelling language
- Showing; explaining; demonstrating

- Exploring ideas
- Encouraging; questioning; recalling
- Providing a narrative for what they are doing;
- Facilitating; and setting challenges.

It takes account of the equipment that adults provide, the attention given to the physical environment, and the structure and routines of the day that establish expectations.

What will Ofsted be looking for?

According to the [Early Years Inspection Toolkit](#), inspectors will be looking to gather evidence about:

- The leadership of the curriculum and teaching
- Your curriculum design
- To what extent teaching is "high-quality"
- How inclusive your curriculum and teaching is

Planning and assessment

The Early Years inspection toolkit tells us that Ofsted consider assessment and planning as integral to teaching.

“Practitioners assess what children know, understand and can do, taking account of their interests and dispositions to learn (characteristics of effective learning), and using this information to plan children’s next steps in learning and to monitor their progress.”

What will Ofsted be looking for?

According to the Early Years Inspection Toolkit, inspectors will be looking to gather evidence about:

- How well settings understand child development and children’s age-appropriate learning and development and how they use this knowledge to set ambitious goals for children to achieve and to be ready for their next stage in education, including school, where relevant.
- How practitioners reflect on the different rates at which children are developing and adjust their teaching accordingly
- How practitioners use their day-to-day interactions with children to check what they know and can do, to inform their teaching
- How well practitioners check for gaps in understanding and plan further teaching to ensure that children’s early learning is secure

We didn’t get asked anything about the EYFS last time. It’s more about the children’s interests and what inspires them and how you keep them engaged. As long as you can show that they are making progress in line with the EYFS, it’s more about how you’re helping them towards that progress and keeping them engaged.



Lizzy Barlow
Nursery Group Leader, Hollies Day Nurseries

Myth-busting about Curriculum and teaching

Ofsted says:

We evaluate settings that take radically different approaches to the curriculum fairly.

- Inspectors evaluate curriculums favourably if they have been built or adopted with appropriate coverage, content, structure and sequencing, and implemented effectively.
- Inspectors consider the extent to which the curriculum reflects the breadth and ambition of the EYFS.

Inspectors do not look unfavourably on settings that use curriculums created by others, for example commercial or local schemes.

- They consider how inclusive the curriculum, culture and practices are. This is the case whether the setting has devised its own curriculum or uses, for example, commercial or local schemes/programmes.
- It is up to leaders to determine the setting's practices and to justify these on their own merits.

We do not prefer any particular method of planning, teaching or assessment.

We do not expect a specific format for curriculum planning.

We do not grade individual staff or activities.

Guidance: Early Years inspection information

Top Curriculum and teaching tips

It's about why you do what you do and what your values are. It's about what you believe about children and what children should have access to. It's about what you think children's rights should be and what you want to create for them.



Charlotte Bateman
Managing Director, Little Barn Owls

We observe our staff daily so when the inspector and I did the joint observation of an educator, it didn't faze them. When we had the discussion afterwards, the inspector wanted to check if I'd noticed the same things she had, and if the educator also felt the same. It was about consistency.

In our baby and toddler rooms, the inspector asked specific questions about how we were supporting the prime areas of learning. She asked leadership and a member of staff, to check whether the answers were consistent.



Charlotte Moss
Manager, Little Barn Owls Southwater

You've got to know who you are and why you do what you do, through your curriculum and your beliefs. You can't fake that on the day. It has to be embedded.



Kerry Smith
Group Head of Children and Adults' Education, Little Barn Owls

We tried a new approach to our environment and teaching as I'd felt it was what we should be doing. But we found it just didn't work for us, as a setting. The children were so much more engaged in their play with the toys we had before. We came back together as a staff team and we decided to keep a few elements that did work and added those to our ethos, but we'd never keep pushing something that wasn't working or benefitting the children.



Joanne Routledge
Owner and Manager, Kinder Park Nursery

The inspector watched meal times very closely and throughout the day was really looking to how the team interacted with the children and reacted in the moment. She wanted to see if the educators made the most of teachable moments.

Our inspector used the terminology 'sensitive educator' a lot and she was really checking to see that the team gave the children time and were responding appropriately to children. She wanted to see if the staff could articulate why they were doing a certain activity like, "Well, that child was struggling with this so we've chosen that to support them." She wanted to see those personal touches.



Charlotte Moss
Manager, Little Barn Owls Southwater



Getting it right with Curriculum and teaching

Questions to help you reflect on your practice...

- How did you construct your curriculum?
- How do you ensure that children have the skills and the knowledge they need to be ready for their next stage in education?
- How do you plan your provision?
- How do you support your educators to learn about child development?
- How does your curriculum and provision meet the requirements of EYFS educational programmes?
- How do you ensure your team is delivering high-quality interactions and teaching?
- How do you check children's understanding?
- How do you support communication and language?
- What are some of the ways that you work on parent partnerships to enhance their child's learning?

Correcting your mistakes

A member of staff was doing an activity with playdough when a child wanted to come in and put water in the playdough and she stopped him. But, within 30 seconds she realised she'd made a mistake and so in front of the inspector she went to her line manager and said 'I've made a mistake and I need to change it'. They brought the child back in, brought the water with them, and they developed the activity into something completely different. In her report, the inspector noted specifically that this was outstanding practice. She said it doesn't matter that she made a mistake, she acknowledged it, she did something about it, and she engaged the child with the child-initiated choice.



Lizzy Barlow & Becky Pike
Nursery Group Leader Director,
Hollies Day Nurseries

The children's interests are paramount

A while ago, I walked into one of our rooms and one of my team had added this giant, plastic castle. I said, "Oh my gosh that's awful! You can't have that when Ofsted comes!" But she said, "No, the children love it. I will tell the Ofsted inspector that these children thoroughly enjoy it and all the benefits it brings." When Ofsted came, the castle was there, and it's still there now!



Joanne Routledge

Owner and Manager, Kinder Park Nursery

CHAPTER 08

Achievement

Achievement

The evaluation area of Achievement focuses on how your provision supports children's all-around progress in relation to their age and current stage of development, so they can make the best possible start in life. Inspectors want to know how children are individually supported to make the progress they're capable of, and be ready for their next stage of learning.



Judging Achievement in Early Years settings

This evaluation area considers:

- Whether the setting provides a high-quality education that gives all children, especially disadvantaged children, those with SEND, those who are known (or previously known) to children's social care, and those who may face barriers to their learning and/or well-being, the necessary knowledge so they are ready for the next stage in education, including school, where relevant
- The progress that children make from their starting points across the 7 areas of learning and development set out in the EYFS statutory framework, so that they know more, remember more and can do more

Inspectors focus on gathering evidence relating to the factors that statutory requirements and non-statutory guidance, research and inspection evidence indicate contribute most strongly to achievement.

Early Years inspection toolkit

Getting it right with Achievement

Achievement is part of the first of three key principles for Ofsted's inspectors.

In the guidance 'Early Years inspection operating guide for inspectors', it states that inspectors should consider the extent to which children:

- Achieve – develop the knowledge, skills and confidence they need to secure the best start in life
- Belong – feel safe, welcomed and valued
- Thrive – benefit from the right systems, processes and levels of oversight, so that they are kept safe and are able to flourish, whatever their background or individual needs

What will Ofsted be looking for?

According to the Early Years Inspection Toolkit, inspectors will be looking to gather evidence about:

- Inclusive achievement across the EYFS areas of learning and development
- Whether children are quickly and securely developing the necessary foundational knowledge for accessing later learning
- How children are gaining detailed knowledge across the 7 areas of learning and development and using this in an age- and stage-appropriate way
- How children are being supported to make the best possible start in their learning and development, including children who begin to fall behind or do not make progress at the same rate as their peers

Exceptional achievement tip



At the beginning of each big term I spend a whole day in each class with the teachers to track the children's development. I also observe how the classroom runs, how the teachers are teaching, how the routines are and so on. That is my monitoring system to make sure no child is left behind and that we always have things to improve on.



Ailsa Monk
Principal, Cotswold Montessori School

Getting it right with Achievement

Questions to help you reflect on your practice...

- How are you assessing children's starting points?
- How do you ensure children are gaining detailed knowledge across the 7 areas of learning?
- Show me how you adapt your provision for different ages and stages of development.
- How are children being supported to make the best possible start in their learning and development?
- How do you learn what children already know and can do?
- What is your process for planning what's next for the children?
- How do you make two-year progress checks?
- Run me through a specific observation you might make on a child.
- What areas of the EYFS do you need to work on with certain cohorts at the moment?

Behaviour, attitudes, and establishing routines



Behaviour, attitudes, and establishing routines

It's important to remember, it's not about children being regulated all the time, and inspectors won't penalise settings for instances of children becoming dysregulated. The focus is on ensuring practitioners have effective approaches to support the development of self-regulation in all children.

Judging Behaviour, attitudes, and establishing routines in Early Years settings

This evaluation area considers whether:

- Leaders and practitioners create an environment that positively supports children's learning, development and care
- Leaders and practitioners support children's behaviour and attitudes, including how they teach children to understand and manage their own emotions and behaviour and to relate to others
- Settings work with parents to establish routines, including by promoting attendance, so that children, especially those receiving additional funding, including the EYPP, form good habits for future learning
- The setting has an impact on the behaviour, attitudes and routines of children receiving additional support, including disadvantaged children, those with SEND, those who are known (or previously known) to children's social care, and those who may face other barriers to their learning and/or well-being

Inspectors focus on gathering evidence relating to the factors that statutory requirements and non-statutory guidance, research and inspection evidence indicate contribute most strongly to behaviour, attitudes and establishing routines.

Early Years inspection toolkit

Getting it right with Behaviour, attitudes, and establishing routines

Behaviour, attitudes and establishing routines replaces the old 'Behaviour and attitudes' area of inspection.

As part of the September 2025 changes to EYFS safeguarding rules, monitoring child attendance and following up on absences (especially prolonged and/or unexplained absences) became a requirement. Ofsted are now also looking to see how you support punctual and continued attendance for the children in your care, to support good routines and positive habits.

What will Ofsted be looking for?

According to the Early Years Inspection Toolkit, inspectors will be looking to gather evidence about:

- Strategic leadership of behaviour, attitudes and establishing routines
- Positive relationships
- Attitudes to learning
- Attendance
- Inclusive approaches to behaviour, attitudes and establishing routines

Top tips for Behaviour, attitudes, and establishing routines

If you're doing something and the children are really engaged, don't stop for 'lunch time'. Lunch can wait.

We don't tend to have strict routines and you need to have that because that's when the most amazing moments happen.



Lizzy Barlow
Nursery Group Leader, Hollies Day Nursery

We have a rhythm of the day on the wall, to give sense of order and control and empowerment for the child, which is in photo form as well. The children feel, "I know what's going on, I have ownership over this experience, I can build confidence, I can sit here and feel a sense of control, etc". And we also have golden rules because we need to make sure that in any community we're respecting each other.

Each child has their own mat and blanket and each child has a picture of their face and their name in print on an easy-to-read font. That sense of ownership and confidence...this is my bed, my place, that's me. And then all these different factors lend themselves to the child feeling secure and safe enough to sleep.

At mealtime, it's really important that children experience food pressure-free. Lots of disordered eating starts early on and mealtimes, for families, can be emotionally loaded experiences. Food's really important and it should be a pleasure, but it's also something we need to do. What we try and do at Maisie Poppins is make food more of a ceremonious occasion. So it's not just about the fuel of eating, it's about sitting together as a community.

With care routines, rather than just being something where we can switch off, or just change nappies and your mind goes somewhere else, they are a golden opportunity to learn about your key child and support that child's well being. There are special golden moments where you can engage, get eye contact and be attuned to the child. You can see what's going on for them and develop that wonderful trust that raises their well being and enables them to feel at peace and able to engage in the room. It's easy to go on autopilot when we've got a lot of work, but it's nice just to draw back and remember that those are really special moments.



Yasmin Darling
Equitable education, neuroinclusion and intersectionality consultancy

Getting it right with Behaviour, attitudes, and establishing routines

Questions to help you reflect on your practice...

- How do you support children's behaviour and attitudes?
- Do you have a behaviour policy?
- What routines do you follow in the setting?
- What are your key person arrangements?
- Tell me about your care routines.

- How do you support children to settle into the setting well?
- Explain how you support children to develop their confidence, resilience and independence.
- How do you foster a culture of treating others with kindness, care and respect?
- How do you teach emotional awareness?
- How are you monitoring and supporting children's attendance?
- How do you support children to develop executive function, conflict management, and self-regulation?
- How do you create an environment that supports children's motivation and positive attitudes to learning?
- How do you ensure that all children benefit from the setting's experiences and education?
- How do you demonstrate clear expectations of behaviour and attendance?
- How do you remove barriers to consistent attendance for children and families?
- How do you ensure that all practitioners apply the rules consistently, fairly and effectively?
- How have you created a positive, inclusive and respectful culture?
- How do you evaluate how well staff know, support, and care about children?

Let the children lead

The inspector told the practitioner that she'd like to do the observation, but at the time the children were outside. The activity that the staff member had planned was inside, but the children were engrossed in their learning and challenging themselves. The practitioner said 'I don't feel comfortable pulling the child away from an activity that they are engrossed in and learning from in order to do a different activity. Can you observe me now?'

The child was just drawing with chalk on the floor. It was a really simple activity, but because she'd said she didn't want to disturb the child's learning, the inspector said that was amazing.



Lizzy Barlow & Becky Pike
Nursery Group Leader Director,
Hollies Day Nurseries

Behaviour is communication

We think about behaviour as communication. What is the unmet need that's being expressed for the child and how can we respond to it? How can we decode it, as their advocates, as their key workers, as their supporters, as their champions, as their staff, to understand what's going on for them and meet the unmet need?

Leadership teams need to be able to support staff teams well enough in the setting holistically, so staff have the head space to keep that child in mind and meet their emotional needs.



Yasmin Darling

Equitable education, neuroinclusion and
intersectionality consultancy

CHAPTER 10

Children's welfare and wellbeing



Children's welfare and wellbeing

Children should feel a sense of belonging and enjoy positive relationships with the people in their settings. Through respectful care routines and sensitive support, children learn to be more independent in their self-care and learn to keep themselves safe.

Judging Children's welfare and wellbeing in Early Years settings

This evaluation area considers how the setting:

- Promotes children's welfare and well-being
- Ensures that children receive the care and support they need to achieve and thrive in the setting and beyond

Inspectors focus on gathering evidence relating to the factors that statutory requirements and non-statutory guidance, research and inspection evidence, and learning from internal reviews indicate contribute most strongly to children's welfare and well-being, giving them the greatest possible opportunity to thrive in all aspects of their lives.

[Early Years inspection toolkit](#)

Getting it right with Children's welfare and wellbeing

Naturally, children's welfare and wellbeing, alongside safeguarding, are at the heart of all Early Years practice.

Ofsted want to see that leaders are consistently prioritise children's welfare and well-being, and that children and families feel well supported. In practice, this might look like thorough knowledge and understanding of the children and families in your setting, as well as their unique and changing needs. Settings should have embedded and well-structured care routines, and foster secure attachments and belonging through positive relationships.

What will Ofsted be looking for?

According to the [Early Years Inspection Toolkit](#), inspectors will be looking to gather evidence about:

- The leadership of children's welfare and well-being
- How well your setting is developing and supporting children's welfare and well-being
- Whether children's welfare and well-being is inclusive

Children's welfare and wellbeing at the heart of everything

When people have a passion for what they do you can't teach that and you can't force that, however much you might try. When your team naturally has that, they'll articulate it. Our feedback from the inspector was that it was clear that the leadership and management have so much passion for what we do.

We hire people who care so much about the children's lives and helping them to develop.



Charlotte Moss
Manager, Little Barn Owls Southwater

It's all about the 'why'. Why do we get down on a child's level and ask if we can change their nappy? Why take them one at a time when it would be quicker to take a group? Because of what we believe about respecting children and their rights. We always keep going back to that.



Charlotte Bateman
Managing Director, Little Barn Owls

We use Famly to do a daily diary. It's a requirement by contract at my nursery - parents write a little message early in the morning, before their child arrives, what's going on for the child?

The idea is that we don't talk about the children in front of them but the information goes to the room and key worker, so they can seamlessly receive that child and plan effectively.

At the end of the day, they will send photos and a write up a daily diary of what that child had going on for them that day at nursery.

What's important is that everyone has a really positive relationship and the communication is circular.

We call it the 'team around the child'. So the team is parents, any extended people, like grandparents and the staff together as a team for that child. That child is held in mind and physically within our care at all times.



Yasmin Darling
Equitable education, neuroinclusion and intersectionality consultancy

We've had a parents' nursery association for some time, but we wanted to open it up to the children too. It gives them the floor to really open up about their nursery experience. Every few weeks, the manager will sit down with different groups of children from each setting and ask them what they'd like to change or anything new they'd like. It gives us so much insight into how tuned in the children are to changes.



Charlotte Bateman
Managing Director, Little Barn Owls

You need to know what's going on in the rest of your children's lives, not just in these four walls with you. Because everything that goes on outside affects what happens inside the setting with you.



Becky Pike
Director, Hollies Day Nursery

We've introduced a voting system for all our children aged two and above. When we do a collaborative project with the children, we ask them to vote on decisions, so they can give their opinion. We want to encourage the children to learn to offer their opinion in a healthy and appropriate way.



Charlotte Bateman
Managing Director, Little Barn Owls

Getting it right with Children's welfare and wellbeing

Questions to help you reflect on your practice...

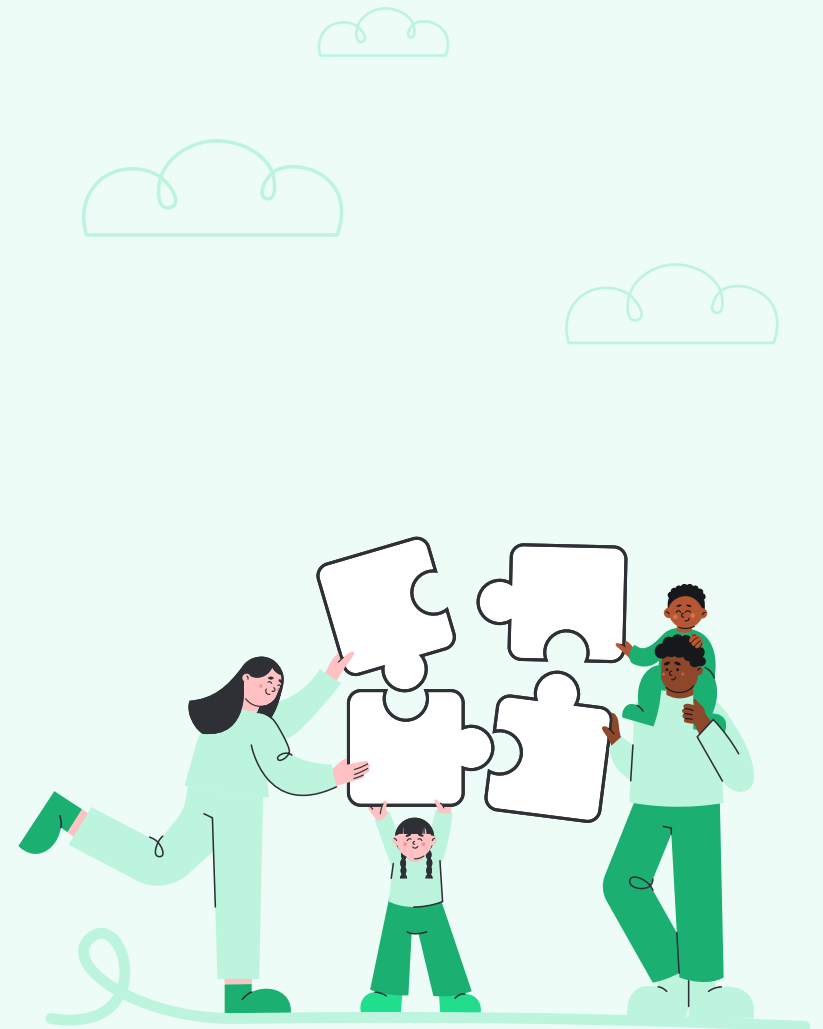
- What are the ways that you establish warm, positive relationships between key people and babies and children?
- What do secure attachments look like in this setting?
- How do you support children's developing understanding of how to keep physically healthy and maintain an active lifestyle?
- How do you support risky play?
- What kind of opportunities do you offer to children to be active during the day?
- What does your menu look like?
- How are you promoting a healthy diet?
- How do you ensure that you're providing care that is appropriate to children's needs, ages and/or stages of development?
- How do you promote safe use of technology to children and their families?
- What do your sleep routines look like?
- What do respectful hygiene routines look like in this setting?
- How is weaning supported?
- How do you ensure equality of opportunity and belonging?

CHAPTER 11

Leadership and governance

Leadership and governance

Exceptional leadership is all about how well you guide your provision, educate and care for children, and inspire your team of educators. With so much responsibility, Early Years leadership and management require a supportive and effective team, just as staff need strong leadership to do their best.



Judging Leadership and governance in Early Years settings

This evaluation area considers:

- Whether leaders and governors understand and meet the statutory requirements set out in the EYFS
- The commitment of leaders and those responsible for governance to provide high standards of education and care to improve the lives of all children, especially those receiving statutory support, including disadvantaged children, those with SEND, those who are known (or previously known) to children's social care, and those who may face barriers to their learning and/or well-being

Inspectors focus on gathering evidence relating to the factors that statutory requirements and non-statutory guidance, research and inspection evidence indicate contribute most strongly to leadership and governance of childcare and early education.

Early Years inspection toolkit

Getting it right with Leadership and governance

Leadership and governance replaces the old 'Leadership and management' area of inspection.

Ofsted want to be sure that leaders in the Early Years demonstrate consistently high standards of suitability and professional conduct, and act in the best interests of children.

Leaders should show that they have high ambitions for children and for the care and education they provide, with a commitment to continuing improvement. They'll also be investigating how well leaders establish and sustain the setting's ethos and strategic direction, in partnership with those responsible for governance.

What will Ofsted be looking for?

According to the [Early Years Inspection Toolkit](#), inspectors will be looking to gather evidence about:

- Leaders' high expectations for all children at the setting and these being embodied in all staff's day-to-day interactions with them.
- Leaders' understanding of their setting's strengths and areas for development and the effectiveness of the actions they take to improve the setting and/or to sustain high standards of education and care.
- The understanding of leaders and those responsible for governance of their respective roles and their performance of these in ways that enhance the setting's effectiveness.
- The thoughtful and positive engagement of parents in ways that support children's education and care.
- Leaders taking into account the workload and well-being of their staff.
- Leaders' decision-making in the best interests of children, including disadvantaged children, those with SEND, those who are known (or previously known) to children's social care, and those who may face barriers to their learning and/or well-being.

Top Leadership and governance tips

We have a motto that we want our team to 'live well' so we ask ourselves, as a leadership team, what can we do day-to-day to look after our staff? We put a staff representative in place to gather feedback from the team about things that could improve their experience working here. It gives a voice to the team.



Charlotte Bateman
Managing Director, Little Barn Owls Southwater

If you like telling people off, this isn't the business to be in. If something goes wrong it should feel as upsetting to you as it does to them.



Becky Pike
Director, Hollies Day Nursery

We have such an excellent long-standing staff team because we take their ideas on board. We listen to their ideas, worries, and concerns and I hope they feel valued by us doing so.



Joanne Routledge
Owner and Manager, Kinder Park Nursery

We really work hard on having a democratic culture and involving staff as much as possible in decisions and change. We want everyone to be part of the process.



Charlotte Bateman
Managing Director, Little Barn Owls

You've got to make the time to speak to [your team] on a daily basis. Ask them what they're doing over the weekend. Take the time to be interested in them, personally. It sounds common sense but it matters. Remember who is important in their lives, like a partner, parents, or pets and ask after them. That's key in any organisation.



Joanne Routledge
Owner and Manager, Kinder Park Nursery

People often ask us, "How do you hire a motivated and qualified team?" Well, the short answer is, we don't. There isn't a pool of staff out there waiting to be hired, let alone qualified staff. We hired our team because we knew they were good but we have a very realistic training and induction process. We have clear expectations of the team at every level.



Charlotte Bateman
Managing Director, Little Barn Owls

Leading from the front

I take a bottom-up approach as I want to develop the practitioners to be confident. I don't want to be sitting in an office saying, "You must do this!" - it doesn't work and can create problems.



Joanne Routledge
Owner and Manager, Kinder Park Nursery

Staff understand that they have a part to play in the success of the setting and in each new initiative we take on.

The expectations are clear. While expectations for staff are high, they must be reflected in the expectations of leadership - you can't just sit behind a desk and tell your team to do something better. We as leaders want to do everything we can, too.



Charlotte Bateman
Managing Director, Little Barn Owls

Getting comfortable with inspection

Back when I was a deputy manager, at our Farlington site, we ran a "mocksted" (mock Ofsted) inspection where two of our senior management were the inspectors. I hadn't had any experience yet with Ofsted, as a manager, so it was really useful. We practiced joint observations and it reminded me to really explain why we do what we do thoroughly. When you know your own setting so well, you can forget that the inspector doesn't.



Charlotte Moss
Manager, Little Barn Owls Southwater

We do semi-regular 'mocksted' inspections and regular audits, like our Pedagogy and Practice Audit. We unpick all of our practice and our environment termly, and we have clear expected behaviours, so we know we're always on our A game. We discuss safeguarding at every supervision meeting. The night before Ofsted, the team aren't expected to suddenly know everything - it's already embedded in their practice.



Kerry Smith
Group Head of Children and Adults' Education, Little Barn Owls Southwater

Leading your team on inspection day

Our inspector didn't speak a lot to the apprentices or educators or question them much. We asked, in a roundabout way, if she'd like to speak more to some of our educators, but she explained that she wanted to see that our passion, knowledge, and skills are embedded in our practice, as leaders and managers.

Because we're training the educators and apprentices, if we weren't getting it right, what hope would the team have? If we don't know it, how would they know it?

One of our educators asked me what would happen if the inspector asked her something and she didn't know the answer, could we help? As the manager, I was with the inspector all day anyway, but of course you can support your team - that's what we're here for. For the team, they can see we're present so they don't feel abandoned!

The inspector asked a couple of members of staff about the leadership and management team and how we'd grown as a setting. We'd had a lot of change, with me being a new manager and a new deputy too, but luckily, things were going well. We told the inspector that, but she wanted to hear it from the staff too. She asked how my deputy and I worked together and who supported us.

She wanted to hear first-hand from the team how we support them day-to-day.



Charlotte Moss
Manager, Little Barn Owls Southwater

They also know that everybody's at different levels. There are people that had never done an Ofsted before. This is people's first ever nursery jobs. You've got apprentices right up to the leaders who have been in childcare for 10 plus years. There's always going to be different levels of educators. That's nursery life. But it's how we're supporting that and how we're training them and how we're developing that.



Kerry Smith
Group Head of Children and Adults' Education, Little Barn Owls Southwater

Getting it right with Leadership and governance

Questions to help you reflect on your practice...

- What does your recruitment process look like?
- How do you manage staff supervision and appraisals?
- How are you monitoring staff performance?
- How do you embed high expectations for all children at the setting in your practice?
- What are your setting's strengths?
- What are your key areas for development?
- How do you evaluate and maintain high standards of education and care?
- How do you create positive relationships with parents and carers to support children's education and care?
- How do you monitor the workload and well-being of your team?

Amazing staff meetings

These are the first three things the team at Cotswold Montessori discuss at every meeting to ensure that all staff are on top of the latest safeguarding issues and risks. It means they are prepared for Ofsted to come at any time.

1

Are there any safeguarding issues that we need to address?

2

Risk assessments: is there anything that we need to change or anything new that isn't working?

3

Are there any early help concerns? That's a level down from safeguarding and it's about spotting early warning signs. For example, it could be parents who are struggling.



Ailsa Monk
Principal, Cotswold Montessori School

Amazing staff meetings

At any staff meeting, if everybody agrees on something, then it's somebody's designated job to disagree. They need to find an argument against it and play devil's advocate. Funnily enough, that argument can often win out, because being able to take a completely different view of something can often come up with the best answers. We call that The Tenth Man. I think it came from a film! It's just a great way of questioning stuff.



Lizzy Barlow & Becky Pike
Nursery Group Leader Director,
Hollies Day Nurseries

CHAPTER 12

Top tips for inspection day

Don't fear the meeting at the end

It didn't feel like a negative experience throughout the day, just bracing ourselves for the meeting at the end. Our inspector reassured us that nothing would come as a shock - if she saw something she didn't like, she would feed back to me as we went. A few times throughout the day, she took me to one side to clarify the process around something so it wasn't the case that at the end, she suddenly told me all these negative things. It's not supposed to be an ambush, you're working together throughout the inspection.



Charlotte Moss
Manager, Little Barn Owls Southwater

A positive mindset

We don't view it as Ofsted coming in to scrutinise us, we see it as our chance to show off the very best that we can do. We weren't thinking, "Oh no they'll come and pick everything apart," we were thinking, "If they have questions, we're confident enough in the way we do things to explain things articulately and reflect on our practice."



Charlotte Moss
Manager, Little Barn Owls Southwater

Finding the answer

If you get put on the spot, just say "You know what, my mind's gone blank, can you give me a minute?" That's all you need to do - you don't need to have every answer every time.



Lizzy Barlow
Nursery Group Leader, Hollies Day Nurseries

The inspector isn't there to nit-pick

Ofsted know that is a nursery, you're human and they are children - nothing ever goes completely to plan! For example, we had some paperwork up on the wall with the previous month's date on and she asked us, "Would you like to print out the most up-to-date version?" We did and put it up and that was it. She didn't just put a red mark in her notebook and keep that to herself.



Charlotte Moss
Manager, Little Barn Owls Southwater

Feedback to staff

Throughout the day, we were able to say to staff, "It's ok, just relax, this is what she's picking up on and you're doing a great job. She loved this and that's what we can work on more." It's working together.



Kerry Smith
Group Head of Children and Adults' Education, Little Barn Owls

Your time to shine

The inspector said, this is your time to shine. Because it is your time to shine. Do what you're good at.



Becky Pike
Director, Hollies Day Nursery

Don't add anything new for inspection day

You can't put on a fake front as Ofsted will see straight through it. You don't want the inspector to ask an educator, "Why are you preparing the snack like that?", to have the educator answer, "Well, my manager told me to last night!" It's got to be embedded in your day-to-day practice.



Charlotte Moss
Manager, Little Barn Owls Southwater

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Little Rainbow Nursery

We had so much fun today!

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24 invoices sent

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September

☒	Little Wild Things Preschool	\$35,200	
☒	James Graham	\$192	●
☒	Ava Morgan		●

