



LONDON INSTITUTE
OF EARLY YEARS

The twoness of twos

June O'Sullivan OBE and Louise Hannan



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Thank you

We would like to express our thanks to the following colleagues who took time out of their busy schedules to read and comment on this report.

There is nothing better than getting an insight from those who work with 2-year-olds every day and we are deeply appreciative of their time and dedication.

A very special thank you to:

- Katerina Boletou, Anlea Rode and the team at LEYF New Cross Nursery and Pre-school
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Introduction

In 2012, June O’Sullivan and the late Sue Chambers completed the ‘Twoness of Twos’ report (2012) to identify how to support staff to deliver the 2-year-old expansion policy in a way that celebrates the uniqueness of being two.

The report addressed how staff would lead and manage effective high-quality provision for 2-year-olds underpinned by a deep understanding of how 2-year-olds develop and learn. We designed a questionnaire with 7 key questions and invited 23 settings to complete them.

The questions were as follows:

- 1 What do you think are the key features of quality when leading a setting for 2-year-olds? List in order of importance.
- 2 What do you understand by leading the curriculum for 2-year-olds?
- 3 What role do you have in leading engagement with parents?
- 4 How do you support your setting to get involved in the local community?
- 5 What do you think is involved in maintaining positive relationships with your team?
- 6 How much involvement do you have with the local health visitor?
- 7 If you had a magic wand, what training and support would help you lead a better service for 2-year-olds?

The findings highlighted a significant lack of confidence among staff leading provision for 2-year-olds. They identified limited access to training especially on how to lead a 2-year-old room. They lacked pedagogical confidence, about nurturing positive relationships with parents and connecting with the community. They had inadequate access to local health visitors which was a key concern for them, to weave the critical elements of leadership into a set of actions.

Ten years on and policies for 2-year-olds have changed, so has the state of the sector. For example, there is a serious workforce shortage in terms of both recruitment and retention, with turnover in some settings over 30%. Long-term inadequate funding has left the sector with heavy



financial consequences and since the COVID-19 pandemic we are experiencing a reported tidal wave in children presenting with significant health and educational learning needs.

Government policy has also shaped a big change. For example, the early education entitlements policy was introduced to support children’s early learning and development, and to reduce inequalities in participation in early learning. However, since 2017, the policy focus has shifted with new entitlements for more hours and younger children introduced to support mainly maternal parental employment. This policy shift is leading to a substantial increase in younger children from working families entitled to funded hours, while the number of disadvantaged 2-year-olds eligible for entitlement has decreased

Since the introduction of entitlements, participation in early education has substantially increased. In 2015, a year after the entitlement was expanded to the 40% most disadvantaged 2-year-olds, take-up was 58% (NAO, 2020), compared with 75% in 2024 (DfE, 2024). Despite this progress, a substantial minority of children miss out on their entitlement and attendance can be inconsistent.

Take-up rates are lower in urban areas and particularly in London where the 2-year-old entitlement take-up rate varied from less than 50% to more than 90% across different authorities (Albakri et al., 2018). Disadvantaged children, including those from persistently poor White British households, ethnic minority backgrounds, with English as an additional language and children with SEND are significantly less likely to take up their entitlements (Harding and Hardy, 2016; Campbell, Gambaro and Stewart, 2018).

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Interesting to read how the 2-year-olds will benefit from good quality provision because their parents can access the working families 15 hours and 30 hours from September 2024. Unfortunately, this will not benefit those children from disadvantaged backgrounds who will not gain an increase of hours and instead remain on 15 hours, risking the chance that the attainment gap will not close. In Barking and Dagenham, there are fewer 2-year-olds accessing the funded hours and many families are being moved far afield due to the lack of social housing. Who knows if the areas these families move to have quality settings for their children to support their future life chances?”

Pauline Emmins, Nursery Manager, LEYF Ford Road

The new Labour Government has pledged to create 3,300 new childcare settings, which amounts to almost 100,000 new childcare places. In order to help staff prepare for this change, we refreshed the 2012 report by asking the same questions to a new set of colleagues in 20 settings across England.

What we found was a similar picture. Staff lacked confidence about developing a 2-year-old strategy and then leading it to deliver best practice for 2-year-olds. Ten key concerns emerged from the respondents.

Diagram 1: The LEYF Leadership Hexagon



Respondents were concerned about their abilities to:

- 1 Lead a 2-year-old room effectively
- 2 Weave routine activities into practice, so it is not just a timetable
- 3 Delegate sensibly within the new ratios
- 4 Articulate and anchor a relevant pedagogy into practice
- 5 Role model good practice to new and less confident staff
- 6 Motivate a high-quality performing team, including the chef
- 7 Communicate effectively with each other and parents
- 8 Translate child development into pedagogical conversations with staff and parents
- 9 Connect with health visitors and relevant professionals
- 10 Monitor for successful outcomes.

This report is structured around the London Early Years Foundation (LEYF) Leadership Hexagon. It suggests a set of actions at the end of each section, which are collated in the final summary. The report concludes with a reference list of works cited but also some additional references which we hope you will find useful.

Leading and managing a sustainable service

While we know effective leadership is an essential starting point for ensuring and sustaining quality, our research showed that few staff had received specific training to lead 2-year-old rooms.

Staff appeared to lack confidence about building a strategy for 2-year-olds that would establish a vision to deliver best practice for the children.

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We do lots of training for under 2s and pre-school; however, very little is put into 2-year-olds.”

Siobhan Dennis, Nursery Manager at LEYF Barking Riverside

The training they had accessed tended to be either small, work-based sessions, INSET days, informal networking or online workshops and courses. This appeared to be because of time constraints, limited funding and finding suitable training expertise. Some respondents worried that training tended to focus on competences which were criticised for reducing the complexities of teaching to a set of standards and failing to acknowledge the context within which the training takes place or paying attention to the learning style and emotions associated with leading toddler rooms (Kolb, 1984; Nutbrown, 2012; Sims et al., 2021).

The lack of appropriate training and development was of concern given good leadership is central to high quality settings, requiring staff to apply the key tenets of good pedagogical leadership supported by theory, knowledge and experience of 2-years-olds. They also raised the importance of having guidance and a support system to translate good ideas into practice, aligning setting priorities and providing sufficient time to make interventions work in the setting so new learning was strongly anchored in practice.

LEYF use a change model designed to respond to the challenges of getting change understood and anchored into practice. The ‘7As of change’ takes Early Years professionals through the change journey, setting out the need to plan the change by analysing, articulating the proposal, applying the change to the practice and then adapting and appraising the progress before anchoring and amplifying it.

The rationale for developing this model is the high failure rate of change. Up to 70% of all change management initiatives fail, usually caused by poor planning, poor execution or a lack of competence or commitment and compounded when the organisational goals, values and leadership were incongruent with staff (Beer and Nohria, 2000; Hofstede, 2004).

Diagram 2: 7As of Change, June O’Sullivan



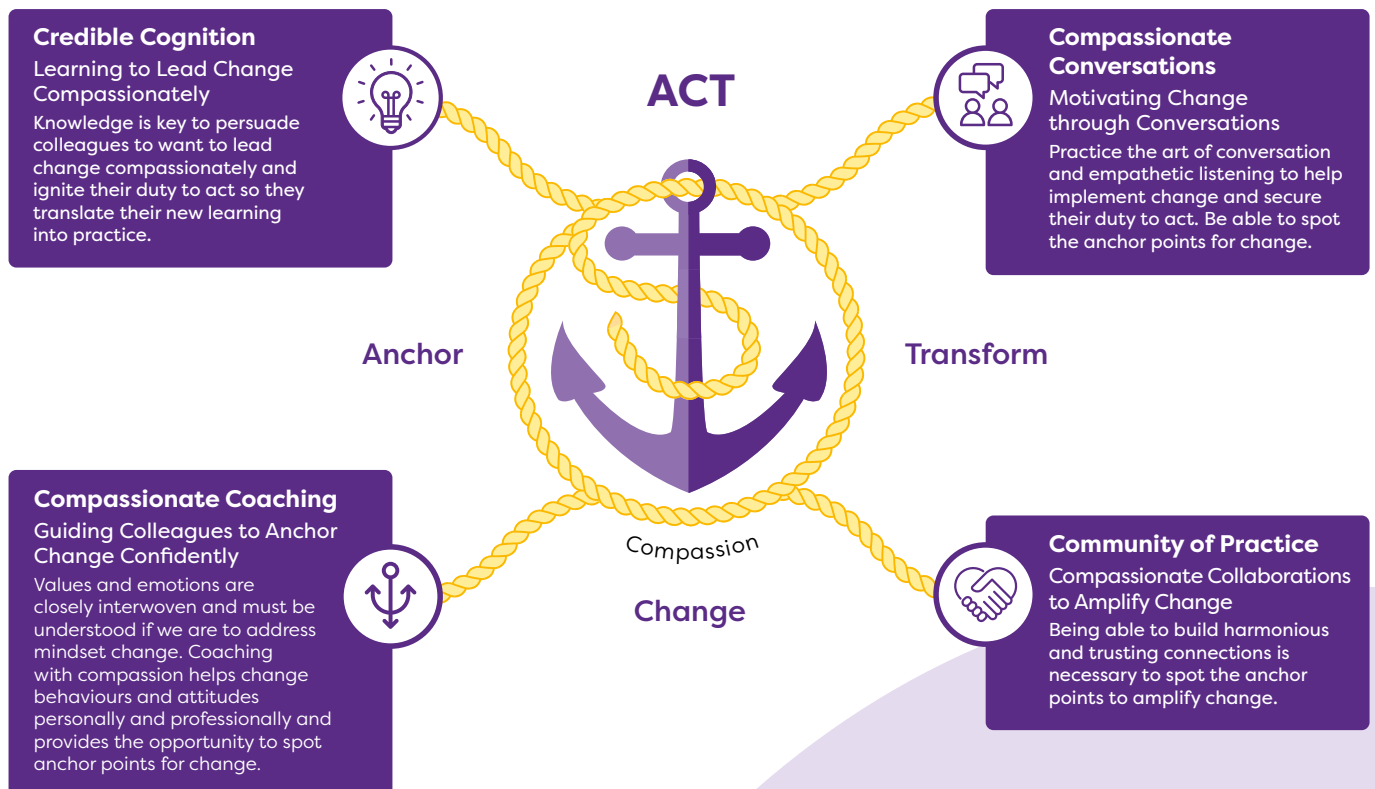
In her recent research, O'Sullivan (2024) further developed the idea of the 7As of change highlighting the need for staff to be motivated to change and be supported by processes that would help anchor the change in practice. She found that this was more likely when staff were motivated by compassion which instilled a duty to act. To capitalise on their willingness to act, settings needed to ensure staff gained and shared credible knowledge through the social nature of moment-by-moment workplace learning, coaching conversations and accessing a community of practice.

This combination drove the operational behaviour across the whole setting and shaped a more compassionate culture. In essence, compassionate staff observe and respond to suffering for example 2-year-olds struggling to settle and find their place in the setting (Kemmis, 2022). Therefore, our



recommendation would be that CPD programmes for 2-year-olds be designed to ensure staff can anchor the changes needed to ensure Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) for two-year-olds is compassionate and competent.

Diagram 3: A duty to act with compassion (anchor the change to transform)



Action



When participants were asked what they thought leaders of 2-year-olds needed to be able to do, they agreed that staff should be able to do the following:

- settle new 2-year-olds coming into the setting
- tune into each child
- apply the art, craft and science of Early Years teaching to support, differentiate and extend the children's learning; for example, modelling activities after allowing children to explore for themselves, extending language, building on children's interest, introducing new concepts appropriately or using open-ended questioning to encourage confident speaking, listening and vocabulary extension
- balance teaching activities between instructive learning environments and sustained shared thinking, all framed within a visible pedagogical structure with sensitive and engaged adults
- extend their interest especially during role play to stretch their language more effectively
- assess against child development norms, as well as being able to use their assessment evidence to measure and make professional judgements and design relevant interventions to help children reach their developmental milestones
- be confident 'pedagogical conversationalists', explaining how we lead the children to learn to colleagues and parents
- be confident, especially with parents, to share children's learning and extend it into the home learning environment
- provide relevant training and support for colleagues, including leading pedagogical conversations and creating compassionate coaching opportunities to enhance and nurture reflective practice.
- Understand the process of change and how to anchor it in practice



Managing ratios and building attachment

In terms of managing the setting, respondents worried about the delegation of staff within the ratio requirements which have changed since 2023, allowing settings to use a one adult to five 2-year-olds ratio.

Managing ratios well is a feature of good practice including nurturing consistent positive and compassionate relationships; for example, children need time to build attachment, especially with their key person. According to Bowlby (1969), it is universally agreed that attachment is of prime importance to children's longer-term development; it is the bond which lays the groundwork for emotional security and social development, providing a secure base for the child to explore their environment and develop independence.

In addition, Mary Ainsworth's Strange Situation experiment (1978) further confirmed that secure attachments contribute to healthy emotional regulation and stress responses. Ainsworth demonstrated that children with secure attachments tend to have better coping mechanisms, suggesting that both the psychological comfort and physical proximity of a teacher/educator are essential for early development.

Staff felt that having the right staff ratio was important for creating a warm, compassionate and emotionally secure space for the children with enough staff to help them co-regulate, including dealing with the demands of being in a group space all day. Two-year-old children are highly attuned to forming bonds with their teachers/educators and their peers. This is characterised by responsiveness, consistency and emotional availability. They learn to seek and give comfort and establish a sense of trust and safety in their environment, which becomes their secure base.

Furthermore, 2-year-olds are beginning to develop cognitive empathy and can demonstrate high levels of pro-social behaviour (Roth-Hanania, Davidov and Zahn-Walker, 2011). Adults play a crucial role in developing attachment by responding sensitively to children's cues, offering comfort and reassurance when needed, nurturing warm interactions, and establishing routines and rituals that promote a sense of predictability and safety. Through these secure relationships, children learn to trust others, explore their surroundings, develop social skills, regulate their emotions effectively and develop



a positive sense of self-worth and belonging within the nursery community (Hannan, 2024).

We know that 2-year-olds regularly involved in small group experiences with adults have been shown to be more able and more confident at participating in the activities and having their voice acknowledged, which enhanced their own learning and development (Bredenkamp, 1997; Svanberg, 2009). Ultimately, attachment serves as a foundation for 2-year-olds to build resilience and cope with the separation from their parents, easing their transition from home to nursery.

While respondents recognised the impact of attachment for 2-year-olds, they were concerned that many staff needed support to adapt to the increase in 2-year-olds struggling to label and regulate their often very intense emotions including delaying gratification; for example, learning to share and wait and adapt to meet external demands (Neaum, 2019). Self-regulation and co-regulation are essential skills for 2-year-olds as they learn to navigate social interactions, manage their emotions and regulate their behaviour in the nursery environment (Shanker, 2017; Asquith, 2020).

“

Staff working with 2-year-olds definitely need a strong understanding of supporting children’s emotional well-being and co/self-regulation. This is almost as important as paediatric first aid.”

Tyler Morris, Deputy Manager, LEYF Barking Riverside

The importance of the emotional environment was the basis on which many settings have rejected the ratio change, especially the fear that it puts too much pressure on staff and children, and some settings will use it flexibly to manage the beginning and end of the day to allow staff to leave on time. Leaders need to get this right if they are to balance retaining staff, especially Level 3 teachers/educators, with an expanding provision. It was therefore unsurprising that respondents expressed doubts about their confidence to manage reduced staff-child ratios in a way that motivated staff.

“

Ainsworth demonstrated that children with secure attachments tend to have better coping mechanisms, this is so crucial in the toddler room. Many staff agree that even the slight change from four adults to five can negatively affect the 2-year-olds especially when growing numbers are demonstrating SEND. Trying to make secure attachments by providing a safe and secure environment and bond with the children whilst at the same time navigating a higher ratio can be challenging to provide the emotional security and remain compassionate.”

Siobhan Dennis, Nursery Manager at LEYF Barking Riverside

Another concern raised in the research was leaders of 2-year-old rooms worried about how best to monitor children’s progress. Many more 2-year-olds are presenting with significant health and learning needs in addition to what used to be considered a low level of speech and language delays. This now seems to be a commonplace starting point for many children.

This was even more worrying for staff working with children in more disadvantaged and poor communities who were very alert to the big differences in cognitive development between children from rich and poor backgrounds, and their fear that lack of leadership experience and competence might contribute to widening the gap rather than closing it (Esping-Andersen, 2009; Sabates and Dex, 2012; Goodall, 2017).

Action



All leaders of 2-year-old rooms access a specific leadership programme, which includes training on the Social, Physical, Intellectual, Communication and Emotional (SPICE) needs of 2-year-olds. In addition, we suggest a number of other subjects to include in any CPD programme to support staff working with 2-year-olds. These are not finite but we recommend you include:

- the importance of attachment
- understanding the impact of neuroscience, schematic play
- self-regulation and co-regulation
- extending speech and language
- accessing support through the SEND systems
- how to create the right emotional environment for 2 year olds.

These are essential to support staff working with 2-year-olds.

Understanding sustainability in the 2-year-old room

As a researcher in the areas of sustainability in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), June O’Sullivan (2022) loses no opportunity to raise the issue of how much the ECEC sector needs adults who are in tune with their own attitudes about sustainability, because this will impact on their willingness to learn about the subject, apply it to practice and build and share a bank of knowledge with colleagues, children and beyond.

Teachers/educators in ECEC can be part of that journey by learning about sustainability and how to share and anchor the learning quickly, effectively and deeply. The UNICEF State of the World’s Children Report (2003) suggested that children need to be visible in the social and environmental debates and we should be preparing them to become global citizens, but this can only happen when teachers/educators understand both global and local issues in a coherent context.

Action

Seek support to design a sustainability strategy across the setting using the three pillars of sustainability (economic, social and environmental) with a focus on helping staff become more sustainability-informed and able to deliver this in practice consistently and with confidence.



Leading the pedagogy

There was a clear agreement that quality relies on staff having a sound knowledge and understanding of pedagogy with an emphasis on the importance of reflective practice.

In the 2012 research, we found that there was anxiety about the introduction of 2-year-olds to more formal education and staff wanted to build their confidence to explore what this could mean in practice, including being able to lead confident pedagogical conversations with staff and with parents to help build a home learning bridge.

At LEYF, we describe ‘pedagogy’ as our understanding of how children learn and develop, our educational theories, our understanding of play and how we put children right at the heart of our approach and how this translates into our practice. The LEYF Pedagogy is rooted in values and beliefs about what we want for children, especially those from the more disadvantaged communities. These children are often further disadvantaged by poor quality teaching and learning environments which are not underpinned by strong knowledge, theory and experience of staff, and weak relationships with children, adults and stakeholders (Stewart and Pugh, 2007; Sakr and O’Sullivan, 2023).

The LEYF approach was influenced by social pedagogy which is concerned with how we support children through a multi-dimensional and holistic understanding of their well-being and that of staff, underpinned by the view that children are competent and curious and have the right to have their voices heard. Therefore, learning experiences, opportunities and environment need to be designed by staff where education does not impose but facilitates children’s capacity to think for themselves and develops their skills to live in a democracy.

Respondents’ conversation about pedagogy was shaped by an anxiety that modern settings are too fast-paced with insufficient time to wallow and enjoy their play without interruption (Bruce, 2019). Respondents worried that they and the



children often felt that their day became a rush of timetabled activities with the routine woven in between, which highlighted the need even more for capable, confident staff able to lead the 2-year-old rooms. Clark’s (2023) study of slow pedagogies emphasised the need to slow down and allow children to enjoy time to play, linger and dwell on their interest, which is more likely to be facilitated by staff who understand how children develop and learn while remaining curious about how children learn

Staff working with children need to be alert to emerging research which deepens our learning so we can apply it in practice for the benefit of the children. For example, new thinking about neuroscience, epigenetics, impulsivity, stimulation and growth and the impact on 2-year-olds’ brains. The brain of a 2-year-old is about 75% the size of an adult and will continue to mature through age and the experience and relationships we provide by forming synapses until we reach 25 years of age (Wilan, 2017; Featherstone, 2017; Tarry, 2022).

“

We need to think about how we consider slow pedagogy for 2-year-old rooms when we have so many transitions in the day. How can we design rooms with this in mind? How do we set up rooms even before the nursery opens with this in mind?”

Katerina Boletau, Nursery Manager, LEYF New Cross Nursery

The brain develops from the back to the front and, at aged 2, children are developing the part of the brain that controls memory, learning and relationships. This means they start to understand the consequences of their actions (Neaum, 2019). For example, they will learn from experience to stop pouring water into a cup just before it pours over the top. This is also the time they also begin to understand the thoughts and perspectives of others and begin to realise that what they want, think and feel may not be the same as everyone else.

The brain of a 2-year-old is about

75%

the size of an adult



This is called theory of mind (Mercer, Hupp and Jewell, 2020). This greatly helps them build friends and manage conflicts, a hugely important development stage. From that, 2-year-olds start to predict what you want, how you may act and how you might feel and respond to something that is supported through the setting environment and routine, and how we facilitate their ability to make and assert their independence in a safe and supportive environment (Owens and Barnes, 2023). Alongside this is the importance of helping children manage relationships and build friendships so they develop a sense of autonomy and resilience, strengthening their self-esteem, self-worth, confidence and self-acceptance.

At 2 years old, children are highly sensitive to the feedback they receive from adults and peers, and their self-esteem can be easily influenced by their interactions and experiences. They also rely on us to take a step back, give them time and space to try and fail and try again. However, they still need us to co-regulate with them as they are still learning emotional self-regulation. This means celebrating their achievements, encouraging their efforts and providing opportunities for them to succeed and feel proud of themselves. By fostering a positive self-image and instilling a sense of worthiness from a young age, we set the stage for healthy self-esteem to flourish throughout their lives.

“

Mirroring is a great part of 2-year-old children’s development. Sometimes we achieve more by watching them do something rather than telling them to do it. As well as them also watching and trying to copy each other. The teachers need to also be mindful of this during the daily routine. For example, during the play time, I like to start playing on my own with an activity where there are no children. Then I watch as they become curious and join me and begin to explore the activity.”

Anna Prados-Aulet, 2-Year-Old Room Manager, Stockwell Gardens Nursery

Being confident to monitor and assess 2-year-olds was also raised, including using formative assessment to differentiate the curriculum according to the needs of the individual child and summative assessment to share progress with parents. This was compounded by a lack of access to health visitors to help them complete assessments given the high level of children with additional learning needs.

Every respondent stated they currently had no contact with a health visitor, and they missed the opportunity to talk about wider issues including how to support good nutrition not just for health but to sustain life-long, healthy eating habits. There was a reference to tooth decay and resulting impact on development such as tooth removal impeding children’s ability to pronounce words and speak fluently.

The gap in supporting children’s nutrition was the catalyst for LEYF to establish a Chef Academy with a specific diploma designed to ensure that chefs cooking for children in nursery and school settings become better equipped to design healthy menus and provide advice for staff and parents. To learn more, read the [LEYF Chef Academy Impact Report 2023](#).

Action

Ensure staff leading 2-year-old rooms understand how to deliver a relevant pedagogy and can support their colleagues leading and working with 2-year-olds.



Leading learning spaces

The research highlighted the needs of an active toddler and the importance of the right environment underpinned by informed and appropriate practice in line with developmental milestones. Buildings and outdoor areas need to be designed using the development needs of the children and to support leaders to ensure high quality practice.

Malaguzzi (1998) describes the environment as the third teacher. If good environments can contribute to children, then, as Olds (1979) pointed out, poor environments can delay this process. The motivation to interact with the environment exists in all children as an intrinsic property of life, but the quality of the interactions is dependent upon the possibilities for engagement that the environment provides.

Quality provision must take account of the physical environment provided for 2-year-olds which also includes the outdoors. Children need regular access to the outdoors and are often much more confident in the outdoor space. They need freedom to practise and investigate outside, and connect with the world around them.

Children's ability to interact with their peers is more evident when they have regular access to an outdoor environment. The benefits of being outside, especially accessing nature-based creative play, are well known. Playing in nature supports children's holistic development, unlocks their imagination and fosters an appreciation and respect for the natural world.

Many children have limited access to play in natural spaces. For example, only 24% of children in the UK spend more than an hour per day playing outside. Only one in ten UK children regularly play in wild spaces compared with half of children a generation ago and one in ten do not visit a natural environment even once per year.

Being outdoors and better connecting with nature has also been shown to grow young people's interest in climate action and social activism. This may not be directly impacting on 2-year-olds but



it's a starting point for many apprentices and staff (Barkham and Aldred, 2016).

Curtis and Carter (2005) highlighted the importance of creating environments with a vision for childhood, talking about a time of wonder and magic when dreams and imagination get fuelled. Evans (2006) stated that the physical environment is linked to positive learning outcomes and the design of the interior space childcare setting may enhance children's learning and development.

For example, room size, layout, furniture, lighting, noise and the external environment and in the outside spaces, nature and play equipment. Learning spaces should appropriately meet the development needs of 2-year-olds and offer sufficient space for plenty of floor play with few tables and easy access to a stimulating outdoor learning environment based on a solid understanding of how children relate to space (Dudek, 2011).

Early childhood settings for 2-year-olds should be low stress. 'Toxic stress' occurs when children are repeatedly exposed to situations they can't control, such as adverse childhood experiences (ACEs).

This is different from tolerable stress, which is short-term and manageable, and positive stress, which can be helpful for growth and development. Environments that actively avoid toxic stress can buffer children against it through supportive relationships that facilitate adaptive coping (Shonkoff, 2010).

Good architecture combines the practical with something less tangible, a sense of delight in the whole space. It may even modify the moods of its users in a positive way. If design is skilful, buildings will help to make children's experience of their Early Years secure yet varied. Many nurseries and preschools try to make their environments as homely as possible, but Dudek (2011) warns us to be careful not to overlook the need for challenge.

Small buildings with small budgets are often designed to the lowest common denominator and in the worst case adopt the quaint adult perception of what children's architecture should be. This, according to Dudek (2011), patronises children and makes them feel as small as they obviously are. Children should be secure enough indoors and outside to be adventurous. Buildings should inspire their play in practical and subtle ways. A transparent drainpipe can show them running water coming off a roof, while a high platform lets them look down, empowering children who are used to everything going on over their heads. Make the environment not just clean and safe, but interesting.

“

I feel that in the typical standard set up, we have lost some imagination, creativity and fun when understanding the best way to provide a space for the 2-year-old to grow and develop. Staff can fixate on the safety element, which means they forget about making the environment risky, adventurous and fun.”

Bobbi-Jo Fryer, Manager, LEYF Playhouse Nursery



Language-rich environments

Creating language-rich environments is key to high quality 2-year-old provision and one mentioned by some respondents as something that they need to lead with more authority.

Two-year-olds undergo a remarkable phase of language development, marked by expressive growth, mutual understanding, symbolic representation and incipient verbal reasoning. Through attentive support and guided facilitation and narration, teachers/educators can foster the child's linguistic abilities and cognitive development, laying the foundation for continued language proficiency and intellectual growth in the years to come, marked by a significant growth in language and expression.

They transition from babbling to articulating meaningful words and simple sentences, and their vocabulary expands rapidly, encompassing nouns, action verbs and basic adjectives. Through observation and interaction, they acquire language patterns and structures, gradually forming coherent utterances to convey their needs, desires and experiences. While initially characterised by single words and short phrases, their linguistic abilities evolve rapidly, encompassing more complex sentence structures and a broader range of linguistic functions. This developmental stage lays the groundwork for future linguistic proficiency and serves as a testament to the remarkable cognitive growth occurring during early childhood.

However, while their expressive abilities flourish, the challenge lies in ensuring that their intended messages are accurately conveyed and comprehended by others. Two-year-olds employ various strategies to enhance mutual understanding, including gestures, facial expressions and vocal intonations. Additionally,



they rely on contextual cues and repetitive utterances to reinforce their intended meanings; ensuring that their intended messages are accurately conveyed and comprehended remains a significant challenge. Staff play a pivotal role in facilitating comprehension by attentively deciphering children's communicative attempts and providing responsive feedback, thereby fostering an environment conducive to effective communication and mutual understanding.

Given the significant focus on supporting children's ability to form relationships and learn to make friends, verbal and non-verbal communication is key, especially to conversation, negotiation and making the world understand you. A reason, no doubt, many staff who lead 2-year-old rooms teach the children Makaton, to give them additional skills to communicate their needs quickly.

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The importance of providing a narrative at this age is crucial for toddlers' language development. Some teachers find it difficult to keep talking to the children when they are not able to respond, but I really think this is one of the most crucial things for the 2-year-old's language development.”

Ana Prados-Aulet, Room Manager, Stockwell Gardens Nursery

Central to language development at 2 years old is the quest for effective communication and mutual understanding. Despite the remarkable progress in expressive language skills, symbolic play characterised by imaginative use of objects and role-playing scenarios serves as a tangible manifestation of this cognitive leap.

Through symbolic play, children engage in pretend scenarios, attributing roles and attributes to inanimate objects, thereby demonstrating their comprehension of symbolic representation. Moreover, their growing ability to comprehend pictures, symbols and gestures lays the foundation for later literacy skills, facilitating their transition from oral to written communication modalities. Staff and environments can be used to encourage this through role play, pretend play and creative skills.

Verbal reasoning emerges as an important skill in the development of a 2-year-old, albeit in rudimentary form. At this stage, children begin to demonstrate basic reasoning abilities through verbal exchanges, albeit constrained by their limited cognitive capacities. They engage in simple problem-solving tasks, such as identifying missing objects or completing familiar rhymes and sequences. Through these verbal interactions, they exhibit rudimentary logical reasoning and inferential skills, demonstrating an incipient understanding of cause-and-effect relationships and sequential order.

Early Years staff play a pivotal role in fostering verbal reasoning skills by posing open-ended questions, encouraging critical thinking and providing opportunities for children to articulate their thoughts and ideas. This could be seen by staff asking children questions or engaging in sustained shared thinking.

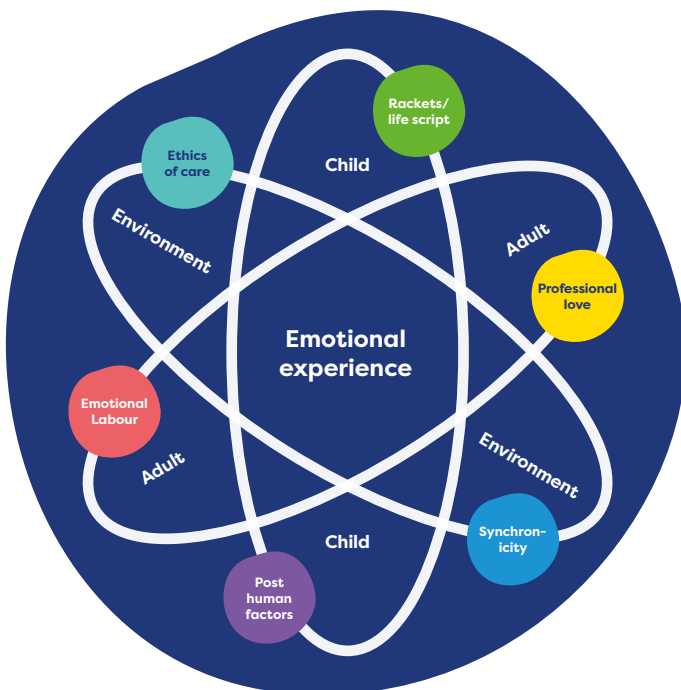


Emotional spaces

While there is much talk about the purpose and power of the physical environment, there is less focus on the emotional environment, which is often unconscious and rarely discussed or considered within the daily life of a 2-year-old.

The emotional environment is influenced and shaped by several factors including the ethics of the caring environment and the culture of the setting. Hannan (2024) designed an emotional ecology which describes how the emotional environment is created and shaped by three main domains (adult, child and the environment) and six aspects of practice, which are shown in the six coloured circles. These six aspects of practice energise the emotional experience of the staff and parents, and impact on the environment and practice (Hannan, 2024).

Diagram 4: The Emotional Ecology of Early Childhood Education and Care Space (Hannan, 2024)



Staff will choose how to care, when to care and how much to care based on their personal and professional values and attitudes, which also influences their emotional responses to the demands of the job. This can include love and anxiety to frustration and exhaustion. Staff will also fake emotions or suppress them in the name of professionalism and to protect themselves (Hannan, 2024).

Staff working with young children often have preferred emotional states and behaviour. For example, staff may rush children through sad/angry emotional states because they believe that being happy or calm should be the ideal state. While this is well meaning, it often means we find tolerating our own distress or the distress of others difficult and we dismiss emotions that are more challenging, such as annoyance or anger, and encourage children to move through these emotions so they can then be 'happy'. English (1971) calls this racket emotions, and when role modelled to another, it informs their life script, which is the emotional unconscious pattern they will later choose in similar situations.

All of this is set within the context of the competing demands placed on teacher/educators to serve the emotional requirements of nurturing attachments and loving each child (Elfer, 2015). This issue aligns with the work of Page (2017) who coined the phrase 'professional love' to describe the loving, nurturing and trusting relationships that staff nurture with the children and each other. Love is complex, multi-dimensional and difficult to legislate.

It is a contentious emotion within the setting. For example, staff are often warned against showing children too much affection or told to say, 'thank you' when a child says, "I love you". Interestingly, joy was found to be the most common emotion in ECEC alongside distraction, annoyance and submission. All this means is that the environment can be emotionally stimulating but also emotionally challenging (Hannan, 2024).

The rhythm of the emotional environment

Rhythms and patterns exist within the emotional environment. It's known as isomorphic matching, when neurons within our brains copy and mimic the behaviour, emotions and reactions of others. Erskine et al., (2011) refers to this as our unconscious emotions and behaviours, which shape our actions.



For example, when staff were highly engaged in play, this was mirrored by the children. Likewise, when staff were distracted by tasks or disrupted in play by messages being passed to them by other staff, children were more distracted. The brain is pre-wired and adapts to social synchrony through humans copying the behaviour of each other. This can be especially marked at certain ages; for example, it's not unusual for babies to start crying because another child is crying. What this means when working with 2-year-olds is that the emotional environment is mirrored between all parties, adults and children. For example, arriving at an environment with high levels of stress will mean you may feel stressed as a response.

Despite the importance of understanding emotions in the settings, it was raised as an area of concern by respondents who recognised that staff leading a 2-year-old room need to be emotionally literate, and staff who could demonstrate this level of emotional literacy were proving more difficult to recruit in a staffing shortage. Respondents were consistent in their views that for 2-year-olds, professional love provides a vital source of emotional support, validation and encouragement, which empowers them to explore, learn and grow in a safe and supportive environment. This means the ECEC environment contributes to the later unconscious emotions and behaviours, which shape the children's actions and develops behaviour that gains them social reward (Hannan, 2024).

Action

Staff working with 2-year-olds need access to supervision and staff meetings where they can reflect on the emotional elements as identified in the emotional ecology of Early Childhood Education and Care. For further information and a free training pack of materials, email emotionalecology@mail.com



Leading with parents

Many respondents rated working with parents very high on their list of quality features. They understood that children’s emotional well-being was greatest when parents and staff had a harmonious relationship and could tune into their social, emotional, communicative, cognitive and physical needs together.

Staff felt they needed to have a good understanding of how children develop and learn to be able to respond, support and plan for children’s needs in a way that reassures parents. Parents and staff agreed that the role of key person was critical in building trust from arrival to leaving, and the importance of understanding the theory and practice of attachment was considered hugely important by respondents.

Staff described parent engagement as daily informal conversations, pedagogical conversations, parents’ evenings, trips, events and outings, and focused projects such as working with dads. This aligned with parental research which found that parents liked nurseries where they received information about their child’s progress, especially a learning journey with lots of photos. In the research conducted by LEYF with parents, we found that parents liked book bags, reading lists and guidance about how their children learn. They appreciated the key person system and how the nursery operated as a catalyst for building friendships and networks. They liked the dads’ sessions, events and celebrations, and were particularly pleased with the support they received on good nutrition, recipes and opportunities to meet the chef (Whalley, 2007; Nutbrown and Clough, 2009; Miller, Cable and Goodliff, 2010; O’Sullivan, 2023).

“

I totally agree with the importance of pedagogical conversations and the role of the key person to create bonds with families. I particularly connect well with parents when we host nursery events like ‘Stay and Play’, workshops and celebrations. Parents are more relaxed and we have some great conversations about pedagogy.”

Anna Prados-Aulet, Two Year Room Manager, Stockwell Gardens Nursery

Respondents were comfortable designing activities but less confident about how to lead ‘pedagogical conversations’ and capitalise on the pedagogical moment of awareness when they captured parents’ interest and introduced a new idea or a learning snippet that better informed them about how their children learned and how they could take another step along the ‘home learning bridge’. The importance of being able to build a home learning bridge was highlighted also, especially finding ways of connecting the two to strengthen the child’s learning in the nursery and to gain an insight in their learning at home. Staff recognised that children often did more at home than they knew about in nursery.

There was also an acknowledgement that parents often had their own problems which could present challenges to younger and less-experienced staff

who were anxious about engaging with them. For example, they considered conversations about the 2-year-old assessment a potential negative trigger, especially if the child was not meeting milestones or showing signs of SEND.

Action

Staff working with 2-year-olds and key persons to be offered training on how to translate the casual conversation with parents into a ‘pedagogical conversation’, capitalising on the relationship with parents and their shared knowledge and interest in the child. All staff to be offered training to extend their knowledge of working in partnership with parents and opportunities for home learning.



Leading your own learning

We know that high levels of training improve professional expertise and the ability of staff to deliver quality outcomes for children. However, when we completed the research, we found that most training for under 3s was dominated by short-term day, twilight or evening training courses and less focus on it translating into practice.

Although in-house training with peers and more experienced staff was considered valuable, respondents noted that it was equally important for more opportunities to be made available to staff to raise their professional skills and qualifications, and some respondents requested some mental health training to better manage complex situations.

“

I think the ‘refresher’ element is often forgotten. Staff often think once they have attended a training course that is it, and it is not put into practice. For example, they may complete the online unit, but it is not communicated to the team. It would be great to see courses and refreshers which require an element of reflection and implementation, and then a review not just within our own setting but across different nurseries and across the boroughs. Being able to collaborate and reflect on what is and is not working is important.”

Bobbi-Jo Fryer, Manager, LEYF Playhouse Nursery

Setting leaders need to support staff to bring their hearts to their work by recognising and encouraging their contribution as ethical and emotional beings. In social pedagogy this is also known as ‘Haltung’, which roughly translates as the mindset, values or personal moral codes that shape the way we think and drive our behaviour and attitudes at work and at home (Eichsteller and Holtoff, 2011; Charfe and Gardner, 2020).

This is best delivered in a culture of ambition and growth mindset led by social leaders who build optimism, hope and empowerment. Dweck (2007) popularised the concept of the growth mindset, which describes the belief that our intelligence and abilities can develop over time, challenging the fixed mindset which regards intelligence or talents as unchangeable.



For staff working with children and apprentices from disadvantaged communities, we need to set the ambition bar high and maintain challenging yet realistic expectations. The importance of thinking big and having ambition for children from more disadvantaged families must begin early. In their work about how to cultivate social justice via education, Gorski (2017) found that a deficit attitude to teaching children from disadvantaged and poor communities was commonplace among teachers.

Teachers often saw poverty as the result of personal negative attitudes towards education and an unwillingness to work hard. They were surprised to discover that poor people had similar educational aspirations to those of more affluent families, but believed the structural factors that led to poverty overwhelmed their abilities.

“

A community of practice would be great. Maybe a meeting between Toddler Room Managers online once a term to share ideas?”

**Anlea Rode, Deputy Manager,
LEYF New Cross Nursery**

Action



Respondents requested regular pedagogy and curriculum refresher courses to strengthen child development knowledge, including understanding the theories of attachment, focusing on language acquisition and articulating different methods of assessment and effective interventions so children could achieve their milestones and more about home learning.

They also requested that CPD sessions include a focus on anchoring new learning in practice. This also included conversations, coaching, induction, performance management and more detailed leadership and management training for working with the 2-year-olds.

Respondents were keen to establish a ‘community of practice’ where staff could gain some mutual support, plan more action research and share new ways of working and learning about 2-year-olds. Collaboration rather than competition was the watchword.



Leading within the community

Research shows that multi-generational practice has a significant impact on our social benefits, and this deepens social capital for children and their families, especially where nurseries engage effectively with local communities through links across the generations (Putnam, 2000).



Studies also highlight how engaging older generations in activities with young children fosters positive social and emotional development, enhances communication skills, helps build empathy and provides a sense of community and continuity, which can promote social cohesion and improve emotional well-being, and fosters stronger community ties, especially in creating a supportive environment where children can learn from the life experiences of older individuals (Kuehne and Melville, 2014; Van Leer, 2018; Larkin and Newman, 2020).

Children need to find their own place in their communities. They are our youngest citizens but are entitled to recognition, respect and participation especially when applying an understanding of children's rights (Smith, 2010). Staff need to appreciate this and be able and willing to take them out and help them map their environment through community relationships in their local area.

Respondents gave examples of their multi-generational activities which build such relationships including local walking trips, involvement with local arts events, planting in the park, partners at the local allotments and connections with the local

elderly homes. Some settings have been involved in transforming unused green spaces within walking distances of their settings into ecologically thriving spaces. Some were also using their position as community catalysts to signpost parents for extra help and support, especially where they were connected to Family Hubs and schools.

“

Not having access to health visitors makes it difficult to make connections between home and nursery, as parents feel they are not getting the support from the health team.”

Bobbi-Jo Fryer, Manager, LEYF Playhouse Nursery

Respondents linked their confidence to build community relationships to their roles as leaders and their ability to influence their senior leadership teams to allow them to engage and grow external collaborative partnerships. Respondents were heartened by the increasing examples of settings which are established either in elderly homes or alongside them, which is broadening the conversation about multi-generational partnerships.

Action

Ensure 2-year-old leadership programmes include both the rationale and examples of how to build multi-generational community partnerships



Summary

While this report has been written through the LEYF Leadership Hexagon, the actions identified by respondents are interwoven and mostly hook around the need for specific learning for leading at 2-year-old room.

The importance of the emotional well-being of the staff and the children has been highlighted as well as their role in building and nurturing relationships with the children, parents, colleagues and the community.

There was a concern that no respondent had a relationship with a health visitor, although they all recognised this would help them with assessing and monitoring their children and building support structures for parents where their children may have additional learning and health needs.

The importance of how the environment was designed indoors and outdoors was given a lot of consideration. Using compassion to motivate sustainability-informed staff which widened their understanding of social justice, children's voices as citizens and well-being for the betterment of daily lived experiences was highlighted.

Staff working with 2-year-olds recognised the importance of the child finding their own place in the local community and this can only happen if the settings are connected through their multi-generational relationships and their understanding of the communities around them.



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About



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June is an accomplished leader with a proven record of driving social impact in Early Years Education and Care. As the creator of LEYF's sustainable business model and the LEYF Pedagogy for Social Justice, she has championed the belief that every child, regardless of background, deserves the opportunity to thrive. Known as an inspiring speaker, author and media commentator, June's expertise spans social business, child poverty and sustainability. Awarded an MBE in 2013 and an OBE in 2023 for her services to education, she continues to advise international governments and organisations on Early Years Education and Care (EYEC) to foster long-term social change.



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The London Institute of Early Years

The London Institute of Early Years provides high quality CPD and training for professionals in the Early Years sector where no membership is required. Its courses, led by experienced trainers with practical nursery backgrounds, aim to ensure the best outcomes for children, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

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