



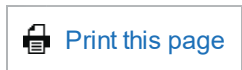
Research and analysis

Education recovery in early years providers: autumn

Published 16 December 2021

Contents

- [The picture overall](#)
- [Methodological note](#)
- [The current state of children's education](#)
- [Catch-up strategies](#)
- [Supporting staff](#)



The picture overall

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on children and early years providers is well documented. This time last year, we published a [series of COVID-19-themed briefings](#), which presented findings from research interviews with early years providers in the autumn term 2020. Providers had concerns about the financial impact of the pandemic, the effect that restrictions had had on children's personal, social and emotional development (PSED), and the deterioration of some children's behaviour when they returned to childcare.

We recognise the continuing challenges that the pandemic presents to early years providers, and the immense amount of time that providers and parents continue to dedicate to supporting England's youngest children to learn and develop in very different and uncertain times.

Much early years provision has been open since June 2020, including during the national lockdown at the start of 2021. Although this has provided continuity for children, it has not been without its challenges for providers and parents alike. We have amended our inspection handbook to reflect that our inspectors will take this into account.

This briefing draws together evidence from a sample of routine inspections completed this term. Many early years providers had prioritised the prime areas of learning (communication and language; PSED; and physical development), as this is where they had identified that children have been affected the most. Some childminders were creating networks to provide socialisation opportunities for children so they can learn and practise social skills.

Providers found that, while it may have taken a little longer than for previous cohorts of children, new starters were able to settle into childcare. There is a similar picture for those returning to childcare after lockdown or absence, demonstrating the success of providers' interventions and parental support.

We can already see the success of certain approaches, specifically in (re)settling children into early years provision. However, it is too early to see the full impact of other adaptations that providers had made, including the focus on prime areas of learning and on supporting children's development to help get them up to where they would be expected to be.

Methodological note

This briefing uses evidence gathered from routine inspections to show:

- how the pandemic continues to impact on children's learning and development
- how early years providers are helping children to catch up

Our inspections of early years providers give us insight into the approaches they are taking.

The findings in this briefing are based on evidence collected during inspections of 77 early years providers between 1 and 19 November 2021. This included 39 childminders and 38 providers on non-domestic premises. This is around 13% of all early years inspections carried out during this time. Collecting this information placed no additional demands on providers, children or inspectors.

We have looked at a sample of inspections, which means the findings are not generalisable but illustrate the challenges that some providers faced and the approaches they were taking.

The current state of children's education

Attendance

It appeared that attendance in early years providers was good. At the time of the inspections, most children were attending their settings and therefore not missing out on vital learning and development due to COVID-19 infections or restrictions.

Providers said COVID-related staff absence was low.

A small number of providers had noted that, this autumn, children appeared to have low immunity and were taking longer to fight off colds and infections.

The impact on children under 2

Children aged 2 have spent almost 80% of their life in the pandemic and those aged 18 months have spent 100% of their life in it. Providers noticed that this cohort of children showed different characteristics to those who started attending their settings before the pandemic. They attributed this to limited opportunities for children to socialise during the pandemic. Lockdowns, restrictions and reduced availability of parent and toddler groups had resulted in these children having a lack of interaction beyond their close family.

A few providers noticed that the language and communication skills of children born in the pandemic were not as strong as those they had cared for in the past. Some providers recognised that this was likely due to children not having had the opportunity to socialise with other children. They also found that some children had limited vocabulary when starting in childcare.

Providers also identified that the youngest children joining their settings were struggling with social skills. They particularly find sharing and taking turns more difficult than this age group used to. This could be attributed to children not having been in an environment where they have experienced sharing before.

Some children had struggled to separate from their parents. Some providers said that, understandably, many first-time parents were more anxious about leaving their child than first-time parents were before the pandemic.

Providers had also noticed that this cohort of children had struggled more than others to settle with unfamiliar people, and were more wary. Some were shyer and quieter, and some felt overwhelmed in larger groups. Again, providers attributed this to children's limited social interaction at home.

Despite these initial differences in settling, providers said that children soon grew in confidence and became more comfortable. This suggests that there is no long-term negative impact on children's ability to settle into childcare.

The impact on children over 2

Many providers said that older children returning to settings after periods of absence were initially anxious but that they quickly settled again. They also reported that some children appeared to be unaffected by the pandemic and the return to settings and had not shown any signs of anxiety or stress.

Most providers said that the pandemic had negatively impacted on children's learning and development in some way. They were particularly concerned that children were behind in the prime areas of learning.

Some providers found that children's behaviour and social skills were not as good when they returned from lockdown, and that they needed to practise sharing and turn-taking. Providers said that, due to a consistent routine, these were now improving.

Some providers reported that children had fallen behind with some independent skills, such as feeding themselves and toilet training. Children who were not secure with some independent skills before the pandemic needed extra help to get back on track.

Catch-up strategies

Providers identified that the key areas where children had fallen behind were the 3 prime areas of learning, with children aged 2 to 3 not where children of this age would normally have been pre-pandemic. Some providers had prioritised these areas of learning for the first half term of the school year for the 2 to 3 age range.

Catch-up strategies for communication and language

Many providers said that they were focusing on developing children's language and communication skills, as some children had limited vocabulary or were not talking confidently.

These providers said that they were creating a language-rich environment in which children had lots of opportunities to talk, including through using visual resources and prompts. Providers made sure children heard many words and participated in activities that prompted discussion. One example of this was a provider that had re-introduced group snack-time, where staff encouraged children to listen to each other and take turns in conversation. Another provider extended its opening hours so that staff could spend more time with children and address gaps they had identified in learning.

Catch-up strategies for PSED

Providers were spending more time on PSED to build children's social skills, especially turn-taking, sharing, and understanding boundaries and rules. Providers were adapting activities to support children to learn and develop these skills in their play through small groups and games, such as taking turns putting in pieces to complete a jigsaw puzzle together. One provider had introduced social-interaction groups each day, where staff worked with children to develop their social skills and confidence.

Many providers were seeking extra opportunities for children to get together and practise their social skills. Some childminders were forming networks with other childminders and continuing to take children to communal spaces, such as parks, so that their children could socialise with more children. Many had been eager to attend toddler groups and other community groups to help children's PSED. However, a lot of groups had only recently returned to operating and some had restrictions on the number of children that could attend. Providers also reported that some parents were not keen for them to start taking their children to groups yet, due to the ongoing pandemic.

Providers were also focusing on developing children's independence. One provider said that changes to its snack-time routine due to heightened hygiene procedures had resulted in children being less self-sufficient. It had recently been able to re-introduce its routine of children serving themselves and found that this helped to re-build children's independence.

Many providers said that they continued to spend more time settling children into their settings. For some, this included one-on-one time to build positive relationships and offer emotional support to children. Many providers had been cautious to reinstate the settling activities and provision they had pre-pandemic, including parents entering settings and siblings attending stay-and-play sessions, despite now being allowed to do this. However, some had used technology, such as apps, to build a partnership with parents and aid the settling process.

Catch-up strategies for physical development

Some providers said that they continued to focus on children's physical development.

Providers did not feel that children were now notably behind in their fine motor skills. Most were using the same activities, at the same frequency, to develop children's fine motor skills as they would have done pre-pandemic.

Providers were, however, more focused on developing children's gross motor skills. They often did this outside, as they knew that some children did not have access to outdoor space during lockdowns and, even where they did, they were limited to a smaller variety of outdoor spaces.

Some providers adapted their outdoor play areas and were teaching children to use a greater variety of play equipment outside, for example larger slides, more climbing equipment, bikes, and sand and water play areas. Some providers, specifically those in more deprived areas, had spent more funding than they would have pre-pandemic for this, as they recognised that these opportunities may be limited for children at home. Providers were also doing more structured sports outside, for example cricket, rounders, football, basketball, mini athletics and tennis, to keep children active and promote healthy lifestyles.

Catch-up strategies for ‘understanding the world’

In addition to the prime areas of learning, many providers also increased outdoor activities in the community so that children could have experiences that they missed during the lockdowns. This can also address gaps in children’s knowledge, such as road safety, which providers had seen as a direct result of lockdowns. While these types of visits and activities happened regularly before the pandemic, providers increased these as a way of developing the prime areas of learning and children’s understanding of the world.

Some examples of what providers were doing included:

- going on local walks, such as to the park/shops/a local school
- feeding ducks
- attending a playgroup
- visiting the local church
- using forest school provision

When they could not go out, providers continued to provide activities to introduce children to their local community. Examples included visits from a local dentist, visits from a fire service and supporting a food bank appeal.

Supporting staff

Staff training

Nursery staff and childminders had used more online resources to keep their statutory training (such as safeguarding and the Prevent duty), knowledge and skills up to date. They had also used online training to support them with children’s specific needs, such as by doing allergen training. Some local authorities also provided some online training for providers. A small number of providers commented on the positive impact of the pandemic in moving training online,

which made it easier for them to access.

A few providers were looking at training existing staff or recruiting new staff to further develop children's communication and language, especially for those who had fallen behind. As a result of the pandemic, a small number of providers had carried out mental health and emotional well-being training. This was focused on providing staff with knowledge and techniques to support both children and colleagues.

Staff well-being

Providers said that the challenges of the pandemic affected staff's well-being. Some felt that the increased emotional support that children needed, especially those settling into settings, had particularly caused strain on staff members.

Nurseries appeared mindful of the pressures staff had faced and the additional family commitments that some had had (and may continue to have). Some leaders increased the frequency of staff supervision to better understand and support staff's well-being.

Childminders were using online forums and networks as well as creating new networks to meet other childminders and seek support. They said they used these forums to share ideas, ask for advice, share good practice and support each other.

Is this page useful?

Yes

No

Report a problem with this page

Coronavirus (COVID-19)

[Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): guidance and support](#)

Services and information

[Benefits](#)

[Births, deaths, marriages and care](#)

Brexit

[Check what you need to do](#)

Departments and policy

[How government works](#)

[Departments](#)

[Business and self-employed](#)

[Childcare and parenting](#)

[Citizenship and living in the UK](#)

[Crime, justice and the law](#)

[Disabled people](#)

[Driving and transport](#)

[Education and learning](#)

[Employing people](#)

[Environment and countryside](#)

[Housing and local services](#)

[Money and tax](#)

[Passports, travel and living abroad](#)

[Visas and immigration](#)

[Working, jobs and pensions](#)

[Worldwide](#)

[Services](#)

[Guidance and regulation](#)

[News and communications](#)

[Research and statistics](#)

[Policy papers and consultations](#)

[Transparency and freedom of information releases](#)

[Help](#) [Privacy](#) [Cookies](#) [Accessibility statement](#) [Contact](#) [Terms and conditions](#)

[Rhestr o Wasanaethau Cymraeg](#) [Government Digital Service](#)

OGI All content is available under the [Open Government Licence v3.0](#), except where otherwise stated



© Crown copyright