

Case study: developing a successful child-led learning approach

Amy Baugh is the manager of Chuckles Day Nursery located in Bettws, Newport. The nursery opened in November 1999 and has an extensive reputation for providing children with high standards of care and education and has acted as a 'leader' setting within the Educational Achievement Service (EAS) consortia (the education improvement service for the five local authorities in South East Wales: Blaenau Gwent, Caerphilly, Monmouthshire, Newport, and Torfaen).

The nursery is registered for 70 places and provides full daycare for children, from 6 weeks until a child attends school full time. Chuckles Day Nursery receive nursery education funding for 3- and 4-year-olds and provide the childcare offer.

Chuckles prides itself as a homely, secure and uniquely situated nursery delivering high quality care through a child-centred approach. Set in an acre of land with half of that dedicated purely to outside play for all ages.

What does 'child-led' mean to you?

Listening to what the children are telling us, not just through their words, but also their actions – using observation to find out what the children are interested in and the things they like to do. It is a balance of using that knowledge alongside the understanding of what is beneficial to children's learning and development. It is not just following the children's lead, but also being considerate to ensure that children are learning, developing and experiencing new things. For us at Chuckles, child-led means that we understand what children *want* and what they *need* for their growth and development.

How have practitioners been supported to follow a child-led approach to play and learning?

We have spent a lot of time talking to our team. Spending time in the rooms with them and having open discussions has been really important. It is not an easy thing to understand initially, especially when you have been more accustomed to formal teaching and set routines. To be exposed to a style of teaching and learning that is more open ended can be a little scary. Challenging the mindset of some staff that had been with us for a long time was initially difficult. Thinking how to implement big changes in a way that wasn't going to overwhelm everyone. To

tackle these potential causes of anxiety, stress and worry, we spent lots of time with the staff, side by side going through the changes. We completed things together, discussed planning, observations and assessment with them in the moment it was happening. We did it in very small stages and did not rush the process. This process happened over one and a half to two years, rather than just expecting changes to happen overnight. We were lucky to have consistent staff at that time. This gave us the opportunity to embed this approach gradually.. It was important for us to spend this time with the staff and making sure that they were really comfortable with the approach and confident before we stepped back and let them run with it.

We had to make a conscious decision to prioritise time to make these changes. And we tried to ensure that there was always someone to support staff with questions or challenges. If one manager wasn't available, there was someone else that staff could go to. We worked as a team to put that support in place. This was important to us, as the sector has been faced with a lot of changes over the years and practitioners have to continuously adapt, whilst continuing to offer excellent care and development to children.

We did have some more formal training, through our education consortia and umbrella organisations, but for us the key was actually going into the rooms to support following any professional learning. The time spent focusing on discussions gave staff an opportunity to express any confusion or to share if they didn't understand something. We reassured staff that it was an ongoing process and not something that was going to happen overnight. Something that we would focus on for as long as it took for us to figure out how it would work for us. We explained that we may not have got it right the first time, but that is part of the process and we will reflect and move forward.

Child-led learning in action - where did you start?

The whole process started around 5-6 years ago. Our education consortia delivered 'Seize the season' training and that was the catalyst really. The training helped us to reflect on the more traditional parts of our planning, topics for example. After reflection, we felt they had no relevance to our children or their individual experiences. We began by doing a lot of work based on the seasons, special days and festivals that happened throughout the year. It was a big shift for our staff but that is where our planning and the way we thought about teaching and learning became more authentic and based on what the children were experiencing day-to-day.

There were drastic changes during the lockdown as we remained open and there was a shift in priorities. We spent time playing with the children. We were able to pause and reflect. That period of time helped to highlight how absolutely fundamental play is to children's learning and development. Staff could see it for themselves in the experiences they were having with children

day to day. We took that concept and built on that with the learning opportunities we offered and the environments we developed.

Following reflection, we decided to highlight core areas within the environment that we would have in all rooms across the nursery, from babies to preschool. We highlighted our six core areas - block play, role play, home corner, story area, investigation area and creative/craft area. These core areas appear in all our rooms with differentiation to match the developmental needs of the children within that room. When designing our environments, we start with those core areas and develop additional areas based upon our knowledge of the developmental needs of the children within the room. For example, sensory is an additional area for babies and woodwork is an additional area for preschool children. Throughout the year, we then use the information gathered through observations to review, adapt and improve the environments depending on the needs of the children.

Publication of the [curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings](#) felt like a 'lightbulb moment' as everything we had been working to develop was encouraged through the curriculum document. This boosted staff confidence levels and supported us as a setting to make the next step in developing our observation, assessment and planning processes.

What have been the success stories of this change/journey?

We have always been a setting which embraces the outdoors and this curriculum really emphasises the importance of outdoor learning for children. The focus on learning through play is fantastic and play that is unhurried, engaging and authentic. Focusing on the process, not the end result has been a really enjoyable shift in the way we approach learning and development. Every child's individual successes are celebrated. It has benefited the staff as well as the children and has even supported parents/families to be more involved in their child's learning.

Staff love being able to spend quality time with children, getting to know them, noticing things, understanding what they like, what they don't like, and understanding what they need. Our staff love their work. They enjoy making observations of children, they feel there is purpose to them. We appreciate the autonomy it gives to us as practitioners and feel valued and respected through the trust that is given to us to interpret the curriculum and to deliver it in a way that works for each individual setting. Not having a 'one fits all' approach is really important because how we deliver it in our setting may be completely different to how someone else down the road is delivering it. But it is personal to them, their setting and to their children. It allows us both to offer our children what they need to help them grow and develop. We are confident with what we're doing and we know it works, and that is a really nice feeling, for not just myself, but the staff as well. They feel they are making a positive impact on the children in our nursery.

How do you feel your approach to child-led learning and commitment to offering authentic and purposeful learning opportunities has impacted children's learning and development within the setting?

Overall, we feel children are showing a bigger range of skill acquisition and development. Children's independence skills are something that have vastly improved, including independence in their own learning. This means that we are able to include more opportunities within our environments as children have the skills to access them and continue to develop those skills and learn. This gives children more autonomy over their learning. Woodwork, for example, is not something that takes place at 3:00pm on a Wednesday, it is part of the environment and is constantly available for children to access. We're seeing more complex and impressive structures in block play, inspiring creations with loose parts and extended language and vocabulary being used when children are engaging in investigation or retelling stories. We are seeing so much more from our children than we ever have before.

How do you ensure that you support development across the five developmental pathways when following a child-led approach to learning?

We feel, the most important thing is to ensure staff understand what the developmental pathways are. You cannot hand staff the document on a Friday and then come Monday morning expect everyone to know what they are doing. There is a lot of information in the curriculum that staff need the time to be able to read, digest and think about how it looks within their setting.

When we look at our environments, we use the developmental pathways (Belonging, Communication, Exploration, Physical Development and Well-Being) as a guide to reflect on to ensure we're offering a holistic approach to children's learning and development. We then build upon this to consider what our enabling adults can learn from their observations and how they can support and scaffold the learning and development through connections, adapting the environments or planning engaging experiences.

When completing our assessments of children, we wanted to make sure that the staff really knew those children and understood them. To support this, our staff complete long observations. Observations are 20-25 minutes per child, once a fortnight. Staff time is protected to complete these observations. Carrying out these observations felt like a big turning point for us in understanding each individual child and how they access the learning opportunities available to them in relation to the five developmental pathways. Ensuring time to analyse the observations is really important and considering how that is going to influence planning and next steps in learning and development.

How do you feel these approaches and the curriculum support the development of children with additional learning needs?

The curriculum encourages focus on each individual child and their own needs which supports inclusive practice from the start. The process for supporting individual needs are embedded within practice and is not an 'add on'. The environment is more inclusive and children are able to access it independently. Children are not singled out to regularly complete additional work or taken away from the group, they are seamlessly included with the ongoing planning cycle. The curriculum supports staff to notice and respond to needs that may not have been highlighted previously and ensuring their needs are met.

Has the setting collaborated with other settings/schools to share good practice and setting-to-setting support? (Networks, case studies, LA meetings/training)

We often open our doors to other settings and schools to offer visits to share effective practice. We work closely with our education consortia and umbrella organisations to share effective practice through networks and events. We have also delivered presentations on our practice to a range of audiences within our local authority and across Wales.

With regard to visits, we are conscious about how the visits may impact upon the children and so we carefully consider visitors during open hours and limit the number of visits per term. We do not want the staff or children to feel they are constantly on show. So we are conscious to maintain a healthy balance of sharing our practice and prioritising our staff and children.

Is there any advice you would give to other settings who are trying to move towards a more child-led approach or are trying to incorporate more authentic and purposeful learning experiences for children?

One important thing to consider is how to involve parents/families in the process. Doing so can support the home-setting relationship, support parents'/families' understanding about their child's learning and development, and can help to reduce resistance to change that some parents/families can exhibit. You may find that some parents/families are able to support you through the process too.

But the most important piece of advice is to take your time. Do not try and change everything all at once. Take a step back, notice what the children enjoy doing and focus on those areas first. Really get to know the children by spending time with them and finding out what they like, what they don't like. Having that focused time to observe and notice. Make sure the changes you are making are right for your setting. It's easy to compare yourself with others, but everyone is different. It's

good to share ideas, but you need to pick and choose what works for you and continually reflect to ensure that you don't lose sight of your own ethos, children and staff.

For example, we spend a lot of time outdoors and we have the space and capability to do that. If you have a smaller setting that doesn't have an outdoor space of their own and has to walk across a road to a local park, the approach to outdoor learning will be different. Likewise, some settings have a wealth of real-life resources within their home corners including a whole rail of dressing up clothes. However, for us, as we are a large and busy setting, if we tried adding lots more clothes etc to our home corner because we have the room, our children would find it overwhelming. We have to think about how our environments work for our children and our setting. Reflect on your practice definitely, but when considering development of your practice and provision do not feel you cannot pick and mix ideas that you see, depending on how you feel they would work for you. Do not be afraid to trial and error too. It is all part of the reflection process.

Further support

- **Authentic learning** factsheet, NDNA Cymru: <https://ndna.org.uk/early-years-factsheets/>
- **Playful learning** factsheet, NDNA Cymru: <https://ndna.org.uk/early-years-factsheets/>
- **Creating engaging experiences: learning opportunities for younger learners factsheets**, NDNA Cymru, Hwb: <https://hwb.gov.wales/repository/resource/31667f80-e617-4c10-8e04-ced32b765c45/overview>
- A curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings: **modules and supporting information**, Hwb - <https://hwb.gov.wales/repository/resource/d34b921e-3b07-4524-87b5-e461540c5ff7/overview>
- Professional learning: foundation learning support for practitioners in schools and settings (Including **Authentic and purposeful learning online module**) – modules - <https://hwb.gov.wales/repository/resource/b8781f79-5eb7-4548-a20e-a17b0da88df2/overview>