

 Features

# Safeguarding in 2024 part 3: How to ensure new early years educators develop essential skills

26 March [Rachel Buckler](#)

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Rachel Buckler on strategies for supporting an emerging workforce to keep the children in their care safe.



Working with a new and emerging workforce can be both rewarding and challenging.

Leaders and managers will reflect upon the wealth of opportunities they have to develop and grow a new generation of early years educators and practitioners through various graduate pathways and apprenticeship schemes.

Many will also recognise the challenges that come with onboarding new employees who as students have yet to gain important knowledge and skills that enable them to be effective and safe practitioners.

With a growing need to address a shortfall in workforce capacity, it is vital that we think about the implications of securing effective and safe care for children by developing our up-and-coming cohorts of new learners.

The urgency to address this is highlighted in a report from the Early Education and Childcare Coalition, which concludes that 'as many as 50,000 new staff could be needed in 2024 and again in 2025 to maintain existing new provision and to provide the new entitlement'.

Professionals working in the sector, myself included, recognise that gaps in learning, or indeed the way that a young and emerging workforce approaches learning, requires some thought and consideration.

### **Strategies to strengthen the workforce**

There are a number of areas that I believe should be addressed to ensure that an emerging workforce is most effective when it comes to safeguarding and protecting children. They are:

- Uncompromising expectations

A clear and defined expectation of the role that practitioners play in keeping children safe is the foundation upon which to build other strategies.

Time and investment and a clearly defined interpretation of legislative and regulatory expectations cannot be underestimated. Verbal and written communication, while vital, contributes limited outcomes to the overall learning process.

Helping students to understand and decipher overarching expectations into practice and then deliver them in context is fundamental. This means that they can engage actively, consistently and confidently in safeguarding and child protection procedures, identify concerns and take timely action when needed.

- Creating and fostering the right learning culture

As children transition into adulthood, their learning experiences and approaches to learning change. Developing professional learners considers how students learn, as well as what they learn. The theory and principles of 'andragogy', referring to how adults learn (see References) is summarised by the following statements:

1. Personal experience is important to learning. Past experiences and present needs are the most important resource for further learning.
2. It is essential to create a supportive but challenging learning climate in which participants can give and receive support from learning colleagues and facilitators.
3. Learners should be involved in identifying, articulating and clarifying their learning needs.
4. There should be a mutual responsibility of learners and facilitators for managing and developing learning experiences.

A learning culture that supports safe practice should therefore explore personal perspectives and motivations. It should accommodate challenge and debate on perceptions or societal bias that are often associated with stigma or misconception.

More importantly, challenge should be evident across the whole workforce regardless of experience, age and/or professional status.

Learning should inform the development of policies and procedures and be seen as a reciprocal activity that strengthens practice across the whole setting.

Opportunities to recognise and identify areas of personal development such as those through professional supervision and appraisals should be taken to create competent, confident practitioners.

Learning should be self-directed and self-motivated. Areas identified for development by managers should be acted upon by providing learners with specific areas of responsibility to extend their skills and abilities.

An emerging and new workforce must be anchored in a successful learning community which recognises its strengths as a collective while being able to evaluate areas for further improvement. Such communities provide safe places to explore and build upon new concepts and ideas.

**Developing practitioners as critical thinkers and curious professionals**

The EYFS (2024) requires a 'high-quality workforce' that is focused on the 'health and safety' of children as well as their learning and development.

The quality of any workforce will be determined by many factors. Opportunities to develop the necessary skills in younger learners entering the early years workforce will help secure the best outcomes for children.

Recognising the cultural contexts for Generation Z, or Zoomers, which refers to those born between 1997 and 2013, is worth consideration when thinking about how learning is acquired and takes place within a younger workforce.

The influence of social media content and communication is concerning. Brief comments or snippets of content on Tik Tok by early years influencers does little if anything to support the notion that learning must be a reciprocal act and one that requires a concerted effort.

It is reassuring to know that other professionals, including myself, recognise the impact of social media on a new generation.

Early years academics from Edge Hill University have embarked upon a new research project, 'What does it mean to have an Early Years ethos for the TikTok generation?'

A Spaniard, a Greek and a psychologist tell their stories of care as higher education lecturers. Reflecting on the extent of care and support that students require to get them through academia and towards achieving a professional qualification, they began to explore some pertinent themes.

By considering the influence social media has on the current higher education (HE) generation, they hope to re-contextualise the notion of care in HE as the approach that can provide the support future early years practitioners need.

The aim of the project is to develop a framework that challenges the perception of care in HE as a non-emotional process and redefines what it means for practitioners to have an early years ethos based on the development of thinking and problem-solving skills that prioritise care.

It is imperative that we invest in promoting the necessary skills that encourage critical thinking and reflection as an ongoing process rather than an activity.

Child protection expert Professor Eileen Munro (2020) makes an interesting observation. She believes that on-the-job experience 'needs to be enhanced by critical reflection and discussion of what sense the student is making of the information'.

This can only take place when meaningful and well-thought-through processes happen and which aid learning. Critical thinking and reflection provide a necessary perspective for a workforce to be professionally curious.

### **INTERVIEW: Gill Mason, head, training & development, Kids Planet Training Academy**

**Rachel Buckler (RB):** How do you support and teach young apprentices to provide safe practices when working with children?

**Gill Mason (GM):** We provide access to relevant resources and materials, ensuring apprentices have access to up-to-date safeguarding resources, including written policies and guidelines, online training modules, and informational materials.

We also promote a culture of vigilance and accountability when it comes to safeguarding, encouraging apprentices to speak up if they have concerns about a child's safety or wellbeing, and ensure that there are clear reporting procedures in place for raising safeguarding concerns.

Apprentices cover a wide range of safeguarding and child protection topics in their learning.

Safeguarding is an integral part of learner reviews and revisited every eight weeks. We are acutely aware that safeguarding policies and procedures can change – it's important to ensure that our apprentices receive regular updates and refresher training to stay informed about any changes.

**RB:** What kind of skills do you expect apprentices to demonstrate when on placements and when they are working directly with children?

**GM:** We encourage reflective practice and critical thinking and for apprentices to reflect on their own attitudes and beliefs about safeguarding.

We expect them to understand and recognise signs and symptoms of abuse and neglect, to identify concerns and safely supervise children. They should understand ratios and safe working practices, being able to respond appropriately if they come across unsafe practice.

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Rachel Buckler's book *Developing Child-Centred Practice for Safeguarding and Child Protection*(2023) is published by Routledge

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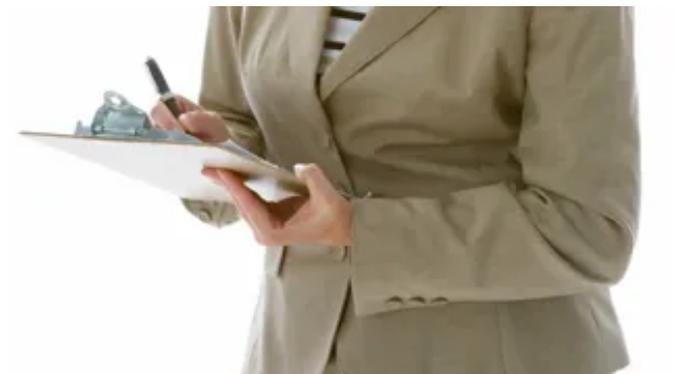
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