School-age Childcare – Beyond Quality Toolkit

A supportive toolkit to enhance quality development for school-age childcare providers.

2026 Edition - Produced by Cambridgeshire County Council Early Years, Childcare, and School Readiness Service (CambsEYC)

Cambridgeshire Early Years, Childcare, and School Readiness Service (CambsEYC) have named the revised Quality Framework, ‘Beyond Quality’ in reference to a book by Dahlberg, Moss and Pence, written in 1997, called ‘Beyond Quality in Early Childhood Education and Care: Languages of Evaluation’. In this book the authors are concerned that the search to define and measure quality has been reduced to a technical and managerial exercise leading to a tick-box approach carried out, and measured, by experts. This approach is based on concepts of certainty, objectivity, and universality all of which are underpinned by facts and truth. We, like the authors, believe that there are many ways to approach quality which embraces participation, dialogue, complexity, multiple perspectives and encourages creativity and a desire to experiment.

Our approach encourages playwork settings to gather documentation and artefacts in as many forms as possible – written, recorded, mapping, audio, photos, videos, art and craft work from the children – all to capture and describe what happens in the setting. This process is described by Dahlberg et al as “making practice visible”. Then through dialogue and discussion, interpretation, critique and evaluation, listening and reflection understandings can be deepened, evaluations made and team judgments agreed – for the present. Rather than this being seen as a one-off annual audit of quality, this collecting of artefacts and documents supported by discussion and dialogue, should be viewed as part of an ongoing process of continuous improvement. CambsEYC would like to acknowledge John Fitzpatrick, previously an Out of School Support Officer for the county, for their work in researching and producing this document.

Introduction

When you ask an adult to remember their play as a child, they mostly have no problem describing a whole host of times they engaged in – den building, chase, tag, hopscotch, climbing trees, ball games, skipping and role play. They will talk about times when they played on their own, with their friends, brothers and sisters and other relatives. They played at home, in gardens, at school, in the woods, parks, streams and on the streets. They can describe what they felt – the pleasure, enjoyment, the thrills, the excitement, the fear, the tears, the breathlessness, and the laughter. Often, they will say that there was not an adult around and they had the freedom to say and do things that they wouldn’t do in front of their parents. However, when asked to define play and to determine its value we all begin to struggle to capture its elusiveness. The impulse to play comes from within the child and is deliberate only in the sense of being about what interests’ children themselves at that time. Play allows the child a freedom where the interests of others, especially those of the adult world, recede into the background. The intrinsic motivation of play, the fact that for children play does not involve the pursuit of any external goal or reward, raises challenges when defining objectives for play provision aligned to external agendas. In this introduction to our new Quality Framework, we will explore definitions of play from a variety of perspectives; the role of play provision and that of the playworker; and finally, how those services that provide childcare and out of school provision can meet the requirements of the early years foundation stage (EYFS).

Children’s play The Playwork Principles are the professional and ethical framework for playwork and they describe play as “a biological, psychological and social necessity…fundamental to the healthy development and well-being of individuals and communities” and as a “process that is freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated. That is, children and young people determine and control the content and intent of their play, by following their own instincts, ideas and interests, in their own way for their own reasons”. Diverse disciplines from education, anthropology, and sociology to ecology, psychology and biology have their own definitions, viewpoints, claims and counter claims as to what play, and its essential purpose, is. Henricks, describe sociologist and the author of ‘Play Reconsidered’, to describe these elusive

qualities describes play as “the laboratory of the possible….to step sideways into another reality, between the cracks of ordinary life” (2006:1). There is now wide recognition that play is crucial to children’s healthy development and quality of life and in looking at what contribution play may make to children’s development and well-being Russell (2006:6) summarises the claims as:

- Practising adaptive skills needed in adult life.
- Cognitive development, problem solving.
- Development of identity and self.
- Exploration and curiosity.
- Adaptive potentiation.
- Brain potential and growth.
- Developing play skills and therefore social relations.
- Developing children’s folklore and cultures.

The EYFS statutory framework, published in July 2025 by the Department for Education and effective from Monday, 1 September 2025, sets the statutory standards for the learning, development, safeguarding and welfare of children from birth to five years in England. The framework applies to all Ofsted-registered early years providers and is issued in two versions: one for childminders and one for group and school-based providers.

The EYFS is underpinned by a clear commitment to ensuring that every child has the best possible start in life and receives the support they need to fulfil their potential. It recognises children as capable, resilient and confident learners, and places the child’s wellbeing at the centre of all practice.

Overarching principles

As with previous versions, the 2025 EYFS is structured around four overarching principles which continue to underpin all early year’s practice:

- Every child is a unique child, who is constantly learning and developing at their own pace.
- Positive relationships are fundamental to children’s wellbeing, resilience and development.
- Enabling environments support and extend children’s learning through thoughtful organisation of space, resources, routines and adult interactions.
- Children learn and develop in different ways, and practitioners must respond flexibly to individual needs, interests and abilities.

These principles remain central to the statutory framework and align strongly with the Playwork Principles, particularly in valuing the child’s agency, voice and entitlement to play.

Before- and after-school and holiday provision

The July 2025 EYFS continues to make a clear distinction between early years provision and out-of-school provision. As set out in the section "Before/after school care and holiday provision", providers caring exclusively for children before and after school or during school holidays are not required to meet the learning and development requirements of the EYFS. However, they must continue to meet all Safeguarding and Welfare Requirements set out in Section 3 of the framework.

This reflects the long-standing position within the EYFS and recognises the different purpose and ethos of play-based out-of-school provision, while maintaining children's safety, health and wellbeing as non-negotiable statutory responsibilities.

Playwork and the EYFS

Play provision is grounded in the concept of the unique, competent and motivated child and seeks to support children's independent, creative, experimental and resilient capacities through the provision of high-quality play opportunities. Central to playwork practice is the recognition of each child's choices, interests and developmental needs, alongside their right to freely chosen, personally directed play.

In line with the EYFS 2025 principles, playwork supports children to develop a secure foundation for life through emotionally supportive relationships and enabling environments that respect children's autonomy. While children may learn through their play, they do not play to learn. Learning outcomes are not the primary driver for planning and practice within play provision; instead, the emphasis is on ensuring access to rich, varied and inclusive play opportunities that respond to children in the moment.

This approach sits comfortably alongside the EYFS overarching principles, particularly the recognition that children learn and develop in different ways, and that wellbeing, relationships and environment form the foundations for all future learning.

Characteristics of Effective Learning (CoEL) and playwork

The CoEL continue to be referenced within the EYFS statutory framework (July 2025) as a way of understanding how children engage with their experiences, rather than what they learn. Although the detailed descriptors are now found primarily within non-statutory guidance, such as 'Development Matters' and 'Birth to 5 Matters', they remain influential in shaping professional understanding of children's engagement through:

- Playing and exploring.
- Active learning.
- Creating and thinking critically.

These characteristics closely underpin many experiences children have within play provision and align strongly with playwork theory and practice. They emphasise children's curiosity, persistence, motivation and capacity to make meaning through first-hand experience, rather than through adult-led outcomes.

Nancy Stewart, co-author of 'Understanding the Revised EYFS', describes play as being "freely chosen and intrinsically motivated, done for its own sake and not for external reward." This definition closely reflects the second Playwork Principle (Playwork Principles Scrutiny Group, 2005) and remains highly relevant within the current EYFS landscape. Stewart illustrates that a child who chooses independently to build a brick tower is engaged in play; however, if an adult directs the child to construct a tower, the activity no longer holds the same play value for the child, as the element of choice has been removed.

The role of the playworker

The core function of the playworker is to create and sustain an environment that actively stimulates children's play and maximises opportunities for a broad and rich range of play experiences. A skilled and reflective playworker enriches children's play both through the intentional design of the physical environment, including access to flexible, open-ended resources, and through the attitudes, values and culture that are fostered within the setting.

In keeping with the EYFS principle of enabling environments, playworkers support children's wellbeing and development by providing emotional security, time, space and permission to play freely. Without compromising the principle of low intervention, playworkers act as a channel to new materials, experiences and possibilities, and may act as a subtle stimulus that encourages exploration, creativity and discovery.

Playworkers are available to join children's play only when invited, and any intervention is guided by professional judgement and the Playwork Principles, selecting an intervention style that enables children to extend their play without directing or controlling it. This approach sits comfortably alongside the EYFS emphasis on responsive adult support and respect for the child's autonomy.

Balancing purpose, tensions and practice

While the primary purpose of play provision is to support children at play, it is recognised that play settings also fulfil wider functions, including safeguarding, inclusion, wellbeing support and partnership with families. It is therefore essential to adopt an approach that acknowledges tensions, flexibility and professional judgement, while remaining firmly rooted in core principles and the ethical integrity of playwork practice.

In defining our approach, it is important to recognise how this theoretical foundation translates into everyday practice – informing decisions about routines, environments, risk, adult roles and responses to children's needs. This ensures that play provision remains both principled and practical, capable of responding to daily operational demands while preserving children's right to freely chosen, meaningful play within the framework of the EYFS safeguarding and welfare requirements.

Section 1: Quality areas and standards

1. The play space.
2. Play opportunities.
3. Atmosphere.
4. Relationships in the setting.
5. Children’s rights.
6. Playwork practice.

1. The play space

The standard

Where children play has a significant influence on the quality of their play experiences. An interesting and challenging play environment can enrich and extend children's play. The playing child should be the prime consideration when planning and providing an indoor and outdoor quality play environment. Children are the experts in their play and should have a strong influence over shaping and adapting the content of the play space. A quality play environment offers a wide range of possibilities to children: to test and expand their interests and abilities; to make their own explorations and discoveries; to play without undue adult involvement; to interact, make change and transform their surroundings.

Consider

The statements below are prompts to help break down the standards. They are just suggestions and not a tick-list, so please be sure to include anything that you think helps illustrate how you meet this quality area.

Children's access to play spaces is limited to specific times and/or few choices.	Children can access physical, affective and transient play spaces with a variety of choices.	Children have regular access to outdoor natural environments and a variety of sensory experiences.
The play space is set up by adults and children's opportunities to modify it are limited.	Children can develop, adapt, manipulate and change the play environment.	Children can create, destroy, modify and experiment with a variety of play spaces.
Access to equipment and resources is limited to a small range and/or is by request.	Children have access to a range of equipment and resources to meet their diverse play needs.	Children regularly encounter new resources that stimulate their imagination and extend their freedom and control.

1. The play space	Please describe the ways in which you are working towards this quality standard and identify which indicators you meet providing evidence and examples.
Standards	
What further actions do you need to make to meet this standard?	
Standards we are working towards:	
Evidence for comments:	

2. Play opportunities

The standard

“Play is a process that is freely chosen, personally directed and intrinsically motivated. That is, children and young people determine and control the content and intent of their play, by following their own instincts, ideas, and interests in their own way and for their own reasons.” (The Playwork Principles, 2005). The playworker’s core function is to create an environment which will stimulate children’s play and maximise their opportunities for a wide range of play experiences supporting children’s imagination, curiosity, and independence. Skilled and experienced playworkers can enrich the child’s play experience both in terms of the design and resources of the physical environment and in terms of the attitudes and culture fostered within the play setting. The playworkers’ role in managing risk requires professional judgement regarding if, when and how to intervene in children’s play.

Consider

The statements below are prompts to help break down the standards. They are just suggestions and not a tick-list, so please be sure to include anything that you think helps illustrate how you meet this quality area.

Children have some options, but the variety of play opportunities is limited.	Children can engage with a range of play types and play experiences.	Children have access to an increasing range and diversity of play experiences and opportunities.
There is a choice of activities, but they are mainly designed, led and controlled by adults.	Children can control the content and intent of their play.	Children can introduce their own ideas to develop and create novel and stimulating experiences for themselves.
Children have interesting opportunities but limited access to test out, experience challenge and engage with risk.	Children have stimulating opportunities to experience challenge and engage with risk and there are opportunities for graduated progression.	Children feel confident and are supported to experiment with opportunities that further extend and test out their own boundaries and capabilities.

2. Play opportunities	Please describe the ways in which you are working towards this quality standard and identify which indicators you meet providing evidence and examples.
Standards:	
What further actions do you need to make to meet this standard?	
Standards we are working towards:	
Evidence for comments:	

3. Atmosphere

The standard

Playworkers consider the ambience and feel of the play environment and recognise children need a range of emotional and sensory experiences. The setting should be emotionally warm and welcoming, inclusive and accessible to the children. Children's ability to play is strongly influenced by an explicit or implicit sense of what they are allowed, or not allowed, to do. In providing a play centred setting, care must be taken to be aware of the messages communicated by the playworkers that may inhibit children's play. Observation and reflective practice are important tools in supporting playworkers' understanding of how the setting impacts on different children and on the interrelationship between children, playworkers and the environment.

Consider

The statements below are prompts to help break down the standards. They are just suggestions and not a tick-list, so please be sure to include anything that you think helps illustrate how you meet this quality area.

There is a welcoming and friendly atmosphere.	There is a 'playful' feel to the setting.	The setting continually adapts to ensure that diverse and changing play needs are met.
The setting has a statement of its aims.	The setting has a vision that is play centred.	The setting advocates the importance of play with all users and with a range of partners.
There is sensitive supervision of all areas	Children and adults feel safe and secure and can ask for help if needed	Caring, assertive, respectful and playful behaviours are modelled by all practitioners

3. Atmosphere	Please describe the ways in which you are working towards this quality standard and identify which indicators you meet providing evidence and examples.
Standards:	
What further actions do you need to make to meet this standard?	
Standards we are working towards:	
Evidence for comments:	

4. Relationships in the setting

The standard

All settings for children and their carers should take account of and promote equality, diversity and inclusion whilst recognising that each child is unique. Play is essential in how children build and develop a sense of self, make relationships, manage feelings and behaviour, increase self-awareness and build self-confidence and develop emotional resilience. Play enables children to experiment with uncertainty, creating and solving problems, winning and losing, making and breaking up with friends, negotiating, disagreeing and dealing with conflict and adapting to change. Settings need to recognise the importance of allowing children to explore their own cultures, develop their own identity and experience independence within a supportive environment.

Consider

The statements below are prompts to help break down the standards. They are just suggestions and not a tick-list, so please be sure to include anything that you think helps illustrate how you meet this quality area.

Children are welcomed and supported through settling in, transitions and endings.	There are responsive, inclusive, warm, supportive and respectful relationships in the setting.	The setting is committed to feedback, self-assessment and continuous improvement to maintain and develop relationships with children and families.
There are opportunities for children to understand and value difference, diversity and inclusion.	Difference, diversity and inclusion are reflected in the environment, resources and practices of the setting.	There is a strategy to promote inclusion, diversity and difference which recognises and removes barriers and supports children and families.
There are clear, fair and consistent expectations about the way people should behave towards each other.	Children are supported and encouraged to manage their own behaviour, deal with conflict and to develop shared agreements.	Playworkers develop and implement strategies that promote resilience and assertiveness.

4. Relationships in the setting	Please describe the ways in which you are working towards this quality standard and identify which indicators you meet providing evidence and examples.
Standards	
What further actions do you need to make to meet this standard?	
Standards we are working towards:	
Evidence for comments:	

5. Children's rights

The standard

The individual play needs and preferences of children should inform the on-going planning and adaptation of play spaces. Children should be supported, according to their age, needs and abilities to make personal choices and experiences and to be actively engaged in making decisions affecting their lives. Children's rights, including their right to play, as stated in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) should be respected, promoted and integrated throughout the setting.

Consider

The statements below are prompts to help break down the standards. They are just suggestions and not a tick-list, so please be sure to include anything that you think helps illustrate how you meet this quality area.

The setting is aware of individual children's play needs and preferences, likes and dislikes.	Children are consulted on their play needs and preferences, likes and dislikes using a range of methods.	The setting gathers feedback from children, parents and other professionals to inform plans.
Children's rights are respected in the setting.	Children's rights are promoted and communicated in the setting.	Children's rights, and particularly their right to play, are promoted within and beyond the setting.
Children are listened to and appropriate responses given.	Children are actively encouraged to express their views and feelings in a range of ways.	Policies, procedures and playwork practice are reviewed to ensure full consideration of the range of children's rights.

5. Children's rights	Please describe the ways in which you are working towards this quality standard and identify which indicators you meet providing evidence and examples.
Standards:	
What further actions do you need to make to meet this standard?	
Standards we are working towards:	
Evidence for comments:	

6. Playwork practice

The standard

The role of the playworker is to support all children and young people in the creation of a space in which they can play – The Playwork Principles, 2005. Playworker enables or facilitate play opportunities, and this is characterised as 'low intervention, high response.' Playworkers should do everything possible to ensure that the choice and control of their play stays with the child. Playworkers choose an intervention style that enables children to extend their play which requires significant skills both in observation of children's play and reflective practice to improve the play environment, provision and playwork practice. Playworkers recognise their own impact on the play space and the impact of children and young people's play on the playworker.

Consider

The statements below are prompts to help break down the standards. They are just suggestions and not a tick-list, so please be sure to include anything that you think helps illustrate how you meet this quality area.

Playworkers are aware, alert and attentive to all children in their setting.	Playworkers make observations individually and as a team and use these to reflect on their own practice.	Playworkers reflect, analyse and evaluate their playwork to develop future practice.
Playworkers allow play to continue uninterrupted.	Playworkers choose appropriate intervention styles.	Playworkers review and develop strategies that sensitively enhance children's self-directed play.
Playworkers support and facilitate the play process.	Playworkers recognise and respond to play cues in a way that supports children to extend their play.	Playworkers use their knowledge of the play process and relevant theories to support the playing child.

6. Playwork practice	Please describe the ways in which you are working towards this quality standard and identify which indicators you meet providing evidence and examples.
Standards:	
What further actions do you need to make to meet this standard?	
Standards we are working towards:	
Evidence for comments:	

Writing the Action Plan

An action plan is a vital tool which enables settings to plan the improvement and development of their early years and childcare provisions. It is important that your action plan is a working document. Here is some guidance for completing each section of the action plan:

Standards to address	Once you have red, amber, or green (RAG) rated the criteria in the 'expected standard', choose some key standards to address and list these on the action plan. You can use the wording directly from the 'expected standard' descriptors.
Tasks	When identifying the tasks, make sure that they are practical, realistic and affordable. Write them in a way that is clearly understood by all involved. It is useful to consider the sequence in which tasks will be actioned and record them on the plan in that way, for example, audit current resources, research and cost new resources, purchase resources, introduce new resources to the classroom monitor use of the new resources. When writing tasks, start with a verb, for example, 'observe…', 'monitor…', 'review…', 'audit…', and so forth. You may need to amend tasks or add new ones throughout the year. Consider adding these in a different colour to demonstrate a continuous approach to improvement.
Timescales	Be realistic about timescales and be as specific as possible. A timescale of 'ongoing' will mean that an action may never be started. Agree a completion date for tasks to keep momentum going.
Lead	Make sure that everyone identified in the action plan is clear about the tasks they need to complete. It may be possible to identify a lead person for each area that is being addressed through the action plan. They can ensure that actions are being implemented effectively.
Resources, training and support	When looking at resource, training or support implications, be as precise as possible. Resources may include equipment needed or staff time required. When undertaking quality improvements, it is likely there will also be some cost implications, so add these where you can.
Progress and Impact	When judging whether improvement has worked always consider the impact on the children and talk to them about the changes. Also consider how it has affected all aspects of the provision, for example, the staff, environment, parents, etc. Set regular review dates for your action plan, at least every term. Once an action has been fully implemented, consider how the quality improvement will be maintained. Sometimes, for a variety of reasons, planned actions either do not happen or do not have the expected impact. Important lessons can be learned from these experiences, and they should be used positively.
RAG	Each term, RAG rate each task so that it is clear to see progress and the remaining tasks that require input.

School-age childcare action plan – the play space					
Written by		**Date**		**Dates to be reviewed**	
Reflective prompts					
Standards to address					

Tasks	Timescale	Lead	Resources/training/support	Progress and impact	RAG

School-age childcare action plan – play opportunities					
Written by		**Date**		**Dates to be reviewed**	
Reflective prompts					
Standards to address					

Tasks	Timescale	Lead	Resources/training/support	Progress and impact	RAG

School-age childcare action plan – atmosphere					
Written by		**Date**		**Dates to be reviewed**	
Reflective prompts					
Standards to address					

Tasks	Timescale	Lead	Resources/training/support	Progress and impact	RAG

School-age childcare action plan – relationships in the setting					
Written by		**Date**		**Dates to be reviewed**	
Reflective prompts					
Standards to address					

Tasks	Timescale	Lead	Resources/training/support	Progress and impact	RAG

School-age childcare action plan – children's rights					
Written by		**Date**		**Dates to be reviewed**	
Reflective prompts					
Standards to address					

Tasks	Timescale	Lead	Resources/training/support	Progress and impact	RAG

School-age childcare action plan – playwork practice					
Written by		**Date**		**Dates to be reviewed**	
Reflective prompts					
Standards to address					

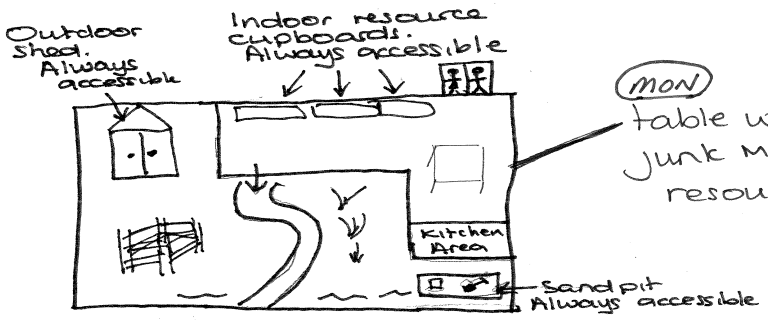
Tasks	Timescale	Lead	Resources/training/support	Progress and impact	RAG

Aspect	Useful resources
Inclusion	SEND Support: Resources Cambridgeshire Development Journal 2024. Size: 1,064KB File format: pdf OAP Audit Tool Final. Size: 966KB File format: pdf EY SEND Toolkit What is Inclusive Practice? Supporting Inclusive Practice
Playwork	The Playwork Principles - Play Wales Play Wales Play England Play Scotland
Behaviour, attitudes and establishing routine	Supporting Positive Interactions Talking Together in Cambridgeshire - Practitioner resources Early Years Transitions Toolkit 2026
Children's welfare and wellbeing	Help for early years providers : Health and wellbeing Physical Development in the EYFS Forest School Cambridgeshire HAF & Wraparound Providers - Knowledge Hub Cambridgeshire Early Years and Childcare: Designated Safeguarding Lead for Early Years & Childcare (PVI) - Knowledge Hub

Example of what your planning sheet may look like at the beginning of the week.

Weather: MON TUE WED THU FRI

Week Beginning 9.9.13



MON
table with junk model resources

Obs
- children created junk model monster
- JJ asked for black paint which he could not find in cupboard
- paint provided by playworker (BB)

Action
- Ask parents for further donations of junk
- Make all colours of paints accessible

Example of what your planning sheet may look like midweek.

