

OFSTED INSPECTIONS IN CHALLENGING TIMES

101 AUDIT QUESTIONS

to evaluate your practice and prepare for inspection
after COVID-19

By Pennie Akehurst

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INTRODUCTION

During the height of the coronavirus pandemic, early years providers made significant changes to what they do and provide for children to ensure that they could maintain safe and emotionally secure learning environments. These changes were made in response to government and Public Health England guidance, and the pace of change during the first 8 months of the crisis was staggering; all but essential visiting stopped, systems for infection control were significantly enhanced, and practice, routines and learning environments were adapted to reduce possible routes of transmission.

But as the pace of change reduces, and life starts to slowly return to some sort of normality, it is time to review the things that needed to change and to ask ourselves whether what we are currently doing is meeting the needs of our children and whether all aspects of our work currently meet the statutory requirements of the Early Years Foundation Stage.

Ofsted inspections were paused during the most challenging periods of the pandemic as government felt that providers would not be able to meet all the requirements of the early years statutory framework. Temporary legislative modifications were even made to the EYFS to remove some of the pressures felt by settings during this period, however, providers were under no illusion that once restrictions were relaxed and maintained, the grace period would end, legislation would revert to its original form and inspections would resume.

As we start to think about readying ourselves for inspection, we need to be balanced in our approach. There are a great many things that the sector has done exceedingly well during this period and it would be very easy for these to be overlooked and to simply focus on the aspects of our provision that could be better. The intention of this book is, therefore, not only to help leadership teams to identify possible inspection vulnerabilities or gaps in practice, but to also help providers to recognise the good and to take the opportunity to celebrate the things that have gone well.

There are so many amazing things that have been achieved during this period – the sector has never been more innovative, creative and supportive of its children, and many providers have gone above and beyond to support their families and local communities.

For many settings, this period has also provided an opportunity to strip practice back to basics and to focus on the things that really make a difference to children, staff and families. The impact of ‘stripping back’ had been powerful and has reshaped curriculum delivery, pedagogy and routine.

These changes now need to be carefully evaluated to ensure that we have a clear rationale for the changes that we intend to keep and that adaptations to our curriculum and/or educational programmes now meet the revised requirements in the EYFS.

This book is dedicated to the early years and childcare sector whose contribution to society and the economy could not truly be measured until the onset of the pandemic crisis.

Thousands of leaders, managers and practitioners working in nurseries, preschools and playgroups left the safety of their homes and childminders continued to open their doors to answer the government's call to provide safe learning spaces for the children of critical workers and vulnerable children. This was later extended to include all early years children whilst the vast majority of school-aged children remained at home for some considerable time.

They took great risks to provide safe learning spaces for their children and were often the last to be considered when frontline staff were being afforded PPE, testing and vaccines.

They enabled huge numbers of critical workers to continue to provide the country with vital services such as food, medical care, care for the elderly, and they provided places for some of our youngest and most vulnerable children to ensure that they remained safe from harm. Our country owes you a huge debt of gratitude.

I would also like to recognise the brave local authorities that did not wait to be told what they could or could not do to support their providers. Whilst many hung back waiting for direction from the Department of Education, a small number of local authority teams immediately started to put things in place to support their providers and went above and beyond to do what they could to provide physical, emotional and financial support, as well as guidance that helped to unpick the constantly evolving government guidance. Your providers are very lucky to have you.

SAFEGUARDING: TAKING A CLOSER LOOK AT WHAT WE DO

Safeguarding: Taking a closer look at what we do

Safeguarding has always been a critical part of an inspection. How we keep children safe and the effectiveness of our safeguarding practices permeates much of what inspectors look at and for during an inspection. We should also remember that safeguarding is such a vast topic that Ofsted produced a separate inspection handbook to provide inspectors with comprehensive guidance (Inspecting safeguarding in early years, education and skills settings, 2019). The pandemic crisis has, however, placed an even greater emphasis on safeguarding for several reasons:

The first is that as the months of local and national restrictions continued, concerns have grown about the numbers of vulnerable children that have been locked away behind closed doors. Amanda Spielman, speaking at the launch of Ofsted's annual report in December 2020 said:

"Teachers are often the eyes that spot signs of abuse and the ears that hear stories of neglect. Closing schools didn't just leave the children who - unbeknown to others - suffer at home without respite, it also took them out of sight of those who could help.

When nurseries and schools closed in March, they were told to remain open to the most vulnerable – which of course meant those whose need was already identified. And even of these, we know that relatively few actually attended. The rest stayed at home – some, inevitably, in harm's way!"

Government was quick to latch on to the lack of attendance from vulnerable children early on in the pandemic which prompted directives for providers to contact Children's Social Care if those known to be vulnerable did not attend regularly or simply stopped attending (DfE, 2020a.).

But those fears began to extend beyond groups that were already known to be vulnerable as the nation came to the realisation that the fight against COVID-19 would be slow. Weeks of restrictions quickly turned into months and then terms. As time rolled on, frontline services and charities started to understand the impact that the virus was having on families and concerns started to grow about children that may have become newly vulnerable as a result of the crisis, many of whom were hidden away at home because their parents were not critical workers.

The impact of both the virus and the knock-on effect on the economy has led to many families experiencing:

- Job losses,
- Escalating debt,
- A decline in mental health and wellbeing due to long periods of social isolation,
- The stress of caring for your own children whilst trying to work from home,
- An increase in domestic violence,
- An increase in drug and alcohol misuse,
- Separation due to the stress of living in the same household day-in, day-out without respite,
- The loss of loved ones,
- Declining mental health leading to attempts to end life,
- The stress of having to care for shielding family members as well as looking after children, working and running a house,
- And for some, the long-term impact of contracting the virus.

There have also been grave concerns about the worryingly low number of safeguarding referrals that have been made during the pandemic crisis highlighted by the Children's Commissioner for England in a report titled 'Too many at-risk children are still invisible to social care' in January 2021. In the same month, government also released a deeply disturbing report which showed a significant increase in the number of children that were either seriously injured or killed during the first lockdown (Children & Young People Now, Jan 2021).

It is, therefore, understandable that Ofsted will take a keen interest in what we have done to support the vulnerable children already known to us and to identify those who may be newly vulnerable.

Audit questions **SAFEGUARDING: TAKING A CLOSER LOOK AT WHAT WE DO**

IDENTIFYING VULNERABLE CHILDREN		YES		NO
1. Have you spent any time with your team reviewing your understanding of the types of circumstances that may make a child vulnerable, given the impact of COVID-19? <i>Think about:</i> <i>The pressures being experienced by many of our families may make children vulnerable in ways that we haven't experienced or seen before. The impact of social isolation, crippling debt due to job loss or a reduction in work and fears about how safe it is to walk outside your own house may be impacting on parenting capacity and the ability of adults to meet even the basic needs of their children.</i> <i>It is, therefore, essential that we spend some time with our teams talking about what this may look like. As previous cases have taught us, safeguarding concerns are more difficult to identify if we do not know what to look at and for.</i>		Evidence		
ASSESSMENT	EMERGING	DEVELOPING	ADEQUATE	SECURE
		YES		NO
2. Have you reviewed the ways in which you reach out to/communicate with your existing parents to try and understand the methods of communication that work best for them? <i>Think about:</i> <i>Maintaining genuine relationships with parents has been a challenge during periods of restriction. To reduce the spread of the virus, many settings significantly reduced access to their building and pushed many forms of communication into the virtual and/or digital world. Whilst technology is all around us, and many are finding it much easier to communicate with parents this way, there will still be a number of parents who struggle with technology or who do not have the money to keep up with the technology that will enable them to download the apps or software being used by many settings. So, have you done anything to try and understand the types of communication that work best for your parents? Have you put different options in place for anyone who struggles or doesn't have technology?</i>		Evidence		
ASSESSMENT	EMERGING	DEVELOPING	ADEQUATE	SECURE

Meeting the needs of children

Although children are remarkably adaptable and show great resilience in difficult times, both the short and long-term impact of the pandemic remains unknown. Each child will have had a different set of experiences, some of which may stay with them for many years to come. Any of the following could be impacting on how children feel, on their behaviour and/or disposition toward learning and whether they regard your setting as a safe place:

- reduced opportunities to be with their friend,
- reduced opportunities to be around adults who take a keen interest in what they do and who truly tune in to their thoughts, ideas and play due to busy working schedules,
- conversations about lockdown that have happened over children's heads may have created anxiety/worry about going outside, being with other people excluding their own immediate family or how safe the world outside really is,
- different expectations for behaviour around mealtimes, for example, allowing children to eat with their fingers, to walk around holding food and to not have to eat at a table,
- lack of consistency/little routine or logic to the day,
- reduction in opportunities to be independent because it is quicker and easier for parents or those that are older and more able (inclusive of older siblings) to do things for the child,
- reduction in the number of physical opportunities (both fine and gross),

- parents trying to work from home whilst looking after their children, which means that some children may have been left to their own devices for long periods of time and some of that time may have resulted in excessive amounts of screen and/or tv time,
- not being able to see close members of their family outside their own home such as grandparents, aunts and cousins, or to only be able to see people they love from afar, but not truly being able to comprehend why they cannot run to that special person and hold/hug them, possibly leading to feelings of rejection,
- exposure to fights or arguments between adults due to the stresses of living in close proximity for long periods of time without respite,
- experiencing bereavement or the worry of important members of the family being seriously ill,
- missing meals due to a lack of income or not having enough food and feeling hungry for sustained periods of time,
- experiencing abuse or neglect.

How adults have been able to support their children will have a massive impact on their ability to bounce back. Resilience is likely to be higher in households where there are:

- secure attachments,
- adults have been able to deal with uncertainty with some level of positivity,
- where children have received reassurance and adults were able to act as co-regulators in response to the child's worries and concerns.

There will, however, be households where adults have:

- struggled to manage their own worries, anxieties and concerns,
- found it difficult to connect with their child in a meaningful way because they are processing their own emotions,
- not been able to act as a co-regulator,

which will undoubtedly have impacted on the child and cause prolonged periods of stress. It has, therefore, never been more important for staff to have a good depth and breadth of knowledge of children's social and emotional development, cognitive development and the importance of self-regulation, executive function and co-regulation.

What do we need to be aware of?

THE REQUIREMENTS OF THE EYFS REFORMS FOR EARLY ADOPTERS	WHAT INSPECTORS WILL BE LOOKING AT AND FOR
The revised educational programme for PSED "Children's personal, social and emotional development (PSED) is crucial for children to lead healthy and happy lives, and is fundamental to their cognitive development. Underpinning their personal development are the important attachments that shape their social world. Strong, warm and supportive relationships with adults enable children to learn how to understand their own feelings and those of others. Children should be supported to manage emotions, develop a positive sense of self, set themselves simple goals, have confidence in their own abilities, to persist and wait for what they want and direct attention as necessary. Through adult modelling and guidance, they will learn how to look after their bodies, including healthy eating, and manage personal needs independently. Through supported interaction with other children they learn how to make good friendships, co-operate and resolve conflicts peaceably. These attributes will provide a secure platform from which children can achieve at school and in later life." P.9.	"63. Inspectors must spend most of the inspection time gathering first-hand evidence by observing the quality of the daily routines and activities of children and staff. These observations enable inspectors to judge the contribution practitioners make to children's learning, progress, safety and well-being." P.15. "88. Inspectors will gather evidence of the effectiveness of staff supervision, performance management, training and continuing professional development, and the impact of these on children's well-being, learning and development." P.19. The Good grading guidance from leadership and management "A well-established key person system helps children form secure attachments and promotes their well-being and independence. Relationships between staff and babies are sensitive, stimulating and responsive." P.38.

	YES		NO
54. Have you spent any time with your team discussing what we mean when we talk about children's wellbeing and defining what it is, what this means for practice and your expectations for the role of the adult? <i>Think about:</i> <i>Even though practitioners work with documents like Development Matters which focus on personal, social and emotional development and the unique child on a daily basis, individuals within our teams are likely to have different perspectives on what wellbeing is, what it looks like and the things that we can do to support children's wellbeing. These conversations are likely to highlight the extent of each practitioner's knowledge and the possible need for additional training to ensure that:</i> ■ all adults understand the importance of developing secure attachments, ■ adults can identify when a child's mental health and/or wellbeing is declining, ■ adults understand self-regulation and executive function and are able to act as co-regulators to support children to manage their feelings and behaviour, ■ and that everyone working with children has some awareness of the impact of their own behaviour.	Evidence		NO
ASSESSMENT		DEVELOPING	
			SECURE
	YES		NO
55. How are staff helping children to understand what has been going on? <i>Think about:</i> <i>Children will undoubtedly continue to have questions about the pandemic and its impact on their family and their wider world for some time. They will hear adults talking, see pictures on social media/the news that they find worrying or that need to be explained. So, how are staff creating genuine opportunities to talk about things that are important to the children? Have you discussed this with your team and found out what staff members are comfortable to talk about? (Thinking here about the need to be sensitive to the individual experiences of staff members during the pandemic crisis.) Have you also talked about when maybe the best time to have these conversations?</i>	Evidence		
ASSESSMENT		DEVELOPING	
		EMERGING	
			SECURE

	YES		NO
56. How is your team helping children to manage their feelings and behaviours? <i>Think about:</i> <i>There are hundreds of reasons why children may be struggling more than usual to manage how they feel and behave. Some of these instances could be attributed to worry or stress, a lack of opportunity due to being stuck in their own four walls for long periods of time or because of change or uncertainty. The role of the adult is to ensure that they are tuning in to what is going on for the child, acknowledging their feelings and then helping the child to identify, name and manage their feelings. Whilst some of these things will come naturally to us, there is still a need to access training to ensure that we understand theories of development as well as strategies that will make a significant contribution to the way in which we meet the needs of our children. Understanding brain development, theories of attachment and how children develop resilience plays a critical part in how effectively adults are able to meet children where they are and provide the emotional support they need. In addition, you may wish to invest in the Leuven scales which will support staff to monitor children's levels of emotional wellbeing and involvement in-depth.</i>	Evidence		
ASSESSMENT		DEVELOPING	SECURE
	YES		NO
57. Have you made any changes to your settling-in arrangements as a result of the pandemic? And do these changes meet the emotional needs of your children? <i>Think about:</i> <i>All settings made significant changes to their visitor's policy during the height of the pandemic to reduce the number of people coming into the building. This meant that many settings had to rethink their approach to settling-in new or returning children. As things start to return to normality, it will be important to review your settling-in arrangements, to see what can be learned from your experiences. Are there any of those changes that you would like to keep because they have had a positive impact on practice or children? What evidence do you have of things that need to change? Is there evidence that new starters or returners are settling well?</i>	Evidence		
ASSESSMENT		DEVELOPING	SECURE
		ADEQUATE	SECURE