smalltalk

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Issue 156

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Belonging in a Modern Wales

- Every Child Needs to Know They Belong
- Seeing Someone Like Me
- Moving Beyond the Tick Box
- Whose Experiences Are Missing?
- More Than Welcome

Early Years Wales
Blynyddoedd Cynnar Cymru

Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government

Editorial

Belonging in a Modern Wales

This edition began with a question: What does belonging really look like in practice?

Belonging is a simple word, but it carries enormous significance.

Every day, children enter our settings bringing with them their own identities, experiences, families, languages, cultures and stories. As practitioners, we work hard to create environments where children feel safe, valued and able to thrive. Yet belonging asks us to go one step further. It challenges us to consider whether children and families truly feel seen, heard and represented within the communities we create.

That question sits at the heart of this issue of *small***talk**.

Throughout these pages, contributors explore belonging from many different perspectives. From representation in books, media and learning environments, to anti-racist practice, disability inclusion, LGBTQ+ visibility and meaningful partnerships with families, a common thread emerges: belonging cannot be reduced to a single display, celebration day or policy statement. It is built through everyday interactions, relationships and decisions.

Belonging is not simply about being welcomed into a space. It is about being recognised, understood and valued. Ultimately, belonging is not something we provide. It is something people experience.

Together, our contributors encourage us to reflect on an important question: If every child and family who uses our setting looked around today, would they be able to see themselves?

The answers will look different in every community, but the challenge is one that belongs to us all.

As *small***talk** continues its transition towards a Journal of Practice, Research and Reflection we have refreshed the design of the publication to create a cleaner, more contemporary and reflective reading experience.

The new design aims to give contributors' voices greater space, encourage deeper engagement with professional discussions and better reflect the thoughtful, practice-focused content that our readers value. We hope it feels both familiar and fresh, retaining the warmth of smalltalk while strengthening its role as a professional journal.

As you read this edition, I encourage you to consider not only how belonging is experienced by children, but also by families, colleagues and wider communities. Belonging is not something we can simply declare. It is something people feel. Thank you to all the contributors who have shared their expertise, experiences and reflections for this issue. Their collective insight reminds us that when belonging is placed at the centre of practice, everyone benefits.

I hope this edition inspires discussion, reflection and, above all, meaningful action.

Thank you for reading
Charlotte – Editor

Behind *small*talk

Editor & Design:
Charlotte Davies
charlotted@earlyyears.wales

Sub-Editor:
Matt Anthony
matthewa@earlyyears.wales

Social Media

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Registered Office:

Early Years Wales
Unit 9, Centre Court,
Treforest,
Rhondda Cynon Taff
CF37 5YR

T: 029 2045 1242
E: info@earlyyears.wales
W: earlyyears.wales



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Every Child Needs to Know They Belong

Written by:
Sue Atkins
Childhood. Conversations. Connection.



> *Sometimes the smallest conversations create the biggest impact.*

Why inclusion begins with the everyday conversations we have with children

Children are always listening.

Not only to the stories we read or the things we deliberately teach them, but to the casual comments, the labels, the assumptions and the silences that fill an ordinary day.

They notice who appears in the books on the shelf. They notice whose family is shown in the pictures on the wall. They notice which children are encouraged to be adventurous, which are praised for being helpful and who is expected to play with what.

Long before children understand words such as representation, identity or inclusion, they are already absorbing messages about who matters, what is considered “normal” and where they fit.

That is why inclusion in the early years cannot simply be an attractive display, a carefully chosen book for a particular week or a policy tucked away in a folder. Those things matter, of course, but genuine inclusion is something children need to feel in the ordinary rhythm of their day.

It is in the welcome at the door.

It is in the pronunciation of their name.

It is in whether we are curious about their family, their culture, their language and their experiences.

It is in the freedom to explore who they are without being squeezed into somebody else’s expectations.

Seen, heard and valued



At its heart, representation is about belonging.

Every child needs to be able to look around their setting and receive a quiet but powerful message: **There is a place for me here.**

In a modern Wales, children may be growing up with different languages, cultures, faiths, family structures, abilities and ways of expressing themselves. Some live with one parent, two mums or two dads. Some are raised by grandparents, foster carers or blended families. Some communicate differently, move differently or experience the world differently. Some children hear Welsh at home, some English, and others one or more of the many languages spoken within their communities.

The aim is not to make every difference into a lesson. Children do not want to feel as though they are an "example" of diversity. They want the people and experiences that matter to them to be woven naturally into everyday life.

When they are, children gain more than recognition. They develop confidence in who they are — and curiosity, empathy and respect for people whose lives may be different from their own.

Conversation is where inclusion comes alive

Resources are important, but it is conversation that brings them to life.

A book showing a range of families becomes meaningful when a practitioner says, "Families can be made in lots of different ways. Who is important in your family?"

A child choosing clothes from the dressing-up box can be supported with a relaxed, "You can choose what feels right for your game," rather than being steered towards what adults think a boy or girl ought to wear.

A question about somebody's skin, hair, body, accent or wheelchair can become a gentle opportunity for learning, rather than something to hush away in embarrassment.

Children are naturally curious. They are not born knowing which questions adults find awkward. If we shut those conversations down, children may learn that difference is something uncomfortable or forbidden. If we respond calmly, simply and honestly, we teach them that difference is part of being human.

We do not need perfect words. We need to be present, open and willing to listen.

Useful responses might be:

- **"That's an interesting thing to notice. What made you wonder about it?"**
- **"People and families can be alike in some ways and different in others."**
- **"There isn't only one way to be a boy, a girl or yourself."**
- **"Everyone should feel safe to be who they are here."**
- **"I'm not sure of the answer, but we can find out together."**

These are small conversations, but they carry big messages.



Looking beyond the resources

Creating an inclusive setting involves more than checking what is visible. It also means becoming curious about the assumptions we may not realise we carry.

Who do we expect to comfort a doll or build the tallest tower? Do we describe lively boys as confident but lively girls as bossy? Do we assume every mother does the caring and every father goes to work? Do our songs, stories and celebrations reflect the real community around us — or a narrow version of childhood?

And what do children see when they look at the adults working in the sector?

Representation matters in the workforce too. Children benefit from seeing that care, kindness, creativity and expertise do not belong to one gender, background or identity. Men in childcare, LGBTQ+ practitioners, disabled professionals and colleagues from different cultures and communities all widen children's understanding of who can nurture, teach and lead.

The early years sector should be a place where children and adults are able to bring their whole selves — safely, confidently and without feeling they must fit a single mould.

Curiosity over criticism

This work is important, but it should not be driven by fear of saying the wrong thing.

Practitioners are human. We all have blind spots, inherited assumptions and moments when we could have responded differently. Inclusion grows when teams feel able to reflect honestly, ask questions and learn together — without shame or defensiveness.

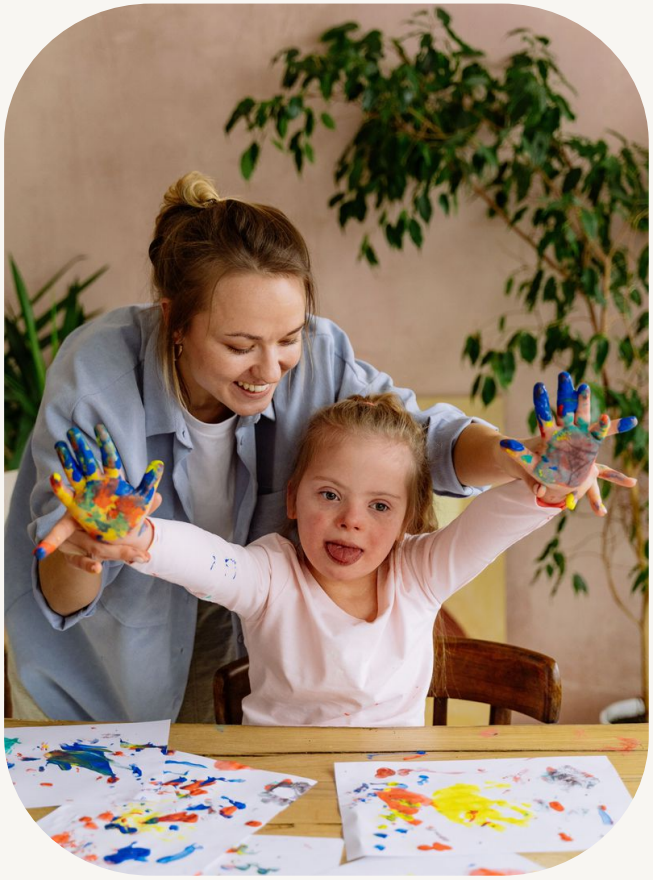
Instead of asking, “Are we getting everything right?” perhaps we can ask:

- **Who can see themselves here easily?**
- **Who may have to search harder?**
- **Whose experiences are missing?**
- **What messages are our routines, language and environment giving children?**
- **Are families invited to share what belonging looks and feels like to them?**

This is not about ticking every box or displaying every possible identity at once. It is about paying attention to the actual children, families and community we serve.

Inclusion is not a finished display. It is an ongoing relationship.





The message every child needs

The early years are when children begin forming their ideas about themselves and other people. The messages they receive now can become the inner voice they carry forward.

So let that voice say:

You are seen.

You are heard.

Your family matters.

You do not have to become someone else in order to belong.

We create that feeling through the environments we build, the people we welcome, the assumptions we challenge and, most of all, the conversations we have every day.

Because when a child feels truly free to be themselves, they are not only included.

They belong.

About Sue

Sue Atkins is a parenting author, former Deputy Headteacher and President of Montessori Society AMI (UK), broadcaster and creator of Together at the Table™, a movement dedicated to putting conversation back at the heart of childhood.

Useful links:

www.navigatingthedigitaljungle.com

www.thesueatkins.com

Belonging begins with us:

supporting anxious adults in early years settings

Written by:
Jayne Carter, Early Years Programme Development Lead,
Partnership for Children

What if one of the most important questions we need to ask in early years settings is not whether children feel they belong, but whether the adults do?



> *Belonging does not begin with the child. It begins with the relationships that surround them.*

Belonging has become an increasingly important concept in early childhood education. We recognise that children flourish when they feel seen, valued and emotionally safe. We invest time in creating welcoming environments, building nurturing relationships and supporting children's wellbeing because we understand that learning grows from connection.

But belonging is not something we create for children alone.

Belonging is relational. It is experienced by everyone who enters a setting: children, practitioners, leaders and families. When adults feel valued, supported and emotionally safe, they are better able to create the conditions in which children thrive. When adults feel anxious, isolated or overwhelmed, those feelings can subtly influence the relational climate of the entire setting.

This matters because children do not simply learn within environments. They learn within relationships.
The emotional experiences of adults therefore become an important, though often overlooked, part of children's experience of belonging.

When adults stop feeling heard

Practitioners enter the profession because they want to make a difference to children's lives. Yet for many, recent years have brought increasing emotional demands.
Staff shortages, growing complexity of need, accountability pressures and the challenge of doing more with less can leave practitioners feeling stretched. Conversations about anxiety, stress and emotional exhaustion have become increasingly common across the sector.
Most practitioners will recognise the colleague who quietly says, "I'm fine," while carrying far more than anyone realises.

They will also recognise those days when everyone is working hard but connection feels more difficult. Conversations become shorter. Reflection disappears. People move quickly from task to task with little opportunity to pause.
Nobody chooses this.

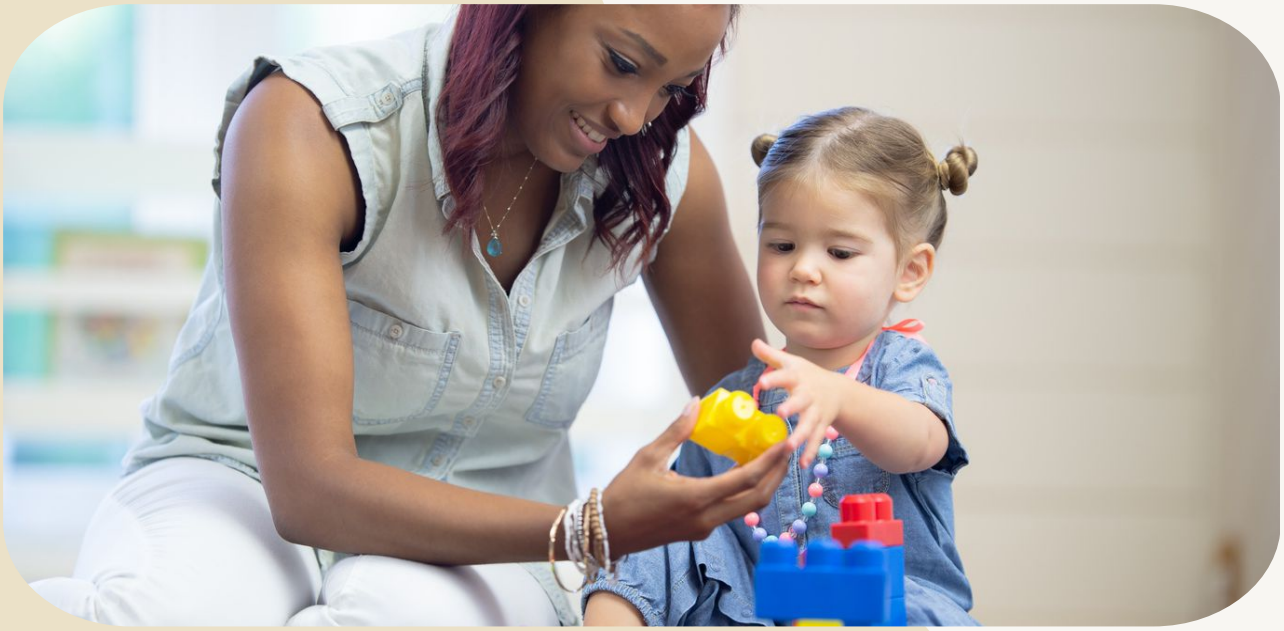
Anxiety is a natural response to uncertainty and pressure. Yet when anxiety becomes a dominant feature of professional life, it can begin to affect the relationships that sit at the heart of early years practice.
Our attention narrows. Our capacity to remain present diminishes. Curiosity becomes harder to sustain. We become focused on managing rather than connecting.
The challenge is not simply that practitioners may be struggling. It is that anxiety can quietly weaken the conditions that allow everyone to experience belonging.

Children experience the emotional climate around them

Children are remarkably sensitive to relationships.

Long before they fully understand language, they interpret facial expressions, body language, tone of voice and emotional availability. They notice whether adults seem calm or distracted, connected or preoccupied.
A sense of belonging develops through countless small interactions.
The smile that says, "I'm pleased to see you."
The practitioner who kneels down to listen.
The adult who notices a child's fascination and stays with it a little longer.
The relationship that communicates, "You matter here."

When practitioners are emotionally available, these moments happen naturally. When anxiety becomes overwhelming, they can become harder to sustain.
This is not about blaming practitioners. Rather, it is about recognising that relational practice depends upon emotionally supported adults.
If we want children to experience belonging, we must consider how belonging is being experienced by the adults around them.



> ***"The emotional experiences of adults become an important part of children's experience of belonging.***

See also:
Joy Detectives: an exploration of joy as the emotional foundation of learning, with a focus on the role of the adult as co-player and co-regulator, *small***talk**, (Issue 155) pg 10 - 12



The role of emotionally attuned leadership

This is where leadership becomes particularly important.
While leadership is often discussed in terms of systems, accountability and outcomes, early years leadership is also deeply relational work.
Emotionally attuned leaders understand that people need more than guidance and direction. They need trust, connection and understanding.
They notice when someone appears withdrawn. They create opportunities for honest conversations. They listen without immediately trying to fix every problem.
Most importantly, they appreciate that belonging cannot be created through policies alone. It develops through everyday interactions that communicate respect, compassion and recognition.

The concept of psychological safety is helpful here. ***Psychological safety exists when people feel able to express concerns, ask questions, share uncertainty and seek support without fear of judgement.***
In psychologically safe settings, practitioners do not feel they must hide their struggles behind a professional mask. They can speak honestly about challenges and learn collaboratively from one another.
Just as children need emotionally safe environments to grow and develop, adults need emotionally safe environments to think, reflect and flourish professionally.

Belonging and inclusion

The conversation becomes even more important when viewed through the lens of inclusion.
Inclusion is often discussed in terms of access, participation and representation. While these are essential, true inclusion also depends upon belonging.
People can be present without feeling that they belong.
Children can be included in activities without feeling recognised and understood.
Practitioners can be part of a team without feeling psychologically safe.

Anxiety can make inclusive practice more difficult because it reduces our capacity to remain curious.

When we feel overwhelmed, we often seek certainty and quick solutions.
Yet inclusive practice requires us to embrace complexity, wonder about children's experiences and remain open to different ways of communicating, learning and being.

Emotionally supported practitioners are better able to respond with curiosity rather than judgement. They have greater capacity to ask, "What is this child communicating?" rather than "How do I manage this behaviour?"
In this sense, belonging is not simply an outcome of inclusion. It is the foundation upon which inclusion is built.

Beyond children and practitioners

Families experience the relational climate of a setting too.
When practitioners feel connected, supported and emotionally available, relationships with families tend to be characterised by trust, partnership and mutual respect.
Conversations are more likely to involve collaboration rather than simply the exchange of information.
Where anxiety dominates, relationships can become more transactional and problem focused.

This reminds us that emotional safety does not benefit only individuals. It strengthens the entire early years community. Its influence extends across every relationship within a setting.



A culture of collective care

The Curriculum for Wales places wellbeing, relationships and holistic development at the heart of children's learning journeys. Those aspirations cannot be separated from the emotional experiences of the adults who support them.
If we want children to feel emotionally secure, adults must feel emotionally secure too. If we want children to experience acceptance, practitioners must experience acceptance. If we want children to know that they matter, the adults around them must know that they matter as well.

Supporting anxious adults is therefore not separate from children's wellbeing, inclusion or learning. It is fundamental to all three.
Because belonging does not begin with the child.
It begins with the relationships that surround them.
And those relationships are strongest when everyone, children, families and practitioners alike, feels safe enough to belong.

For more information:

- https://www.partnershipforchildren.org.uk/what-we-do/programmes-for-schools/funded-projects/
- https://www.partnershipforchildren.org.uk/what-we-do/wellbeing-activities/

About Jayne:
Jayne Carter is Early Years Programme Development Lead at Partnership for Children. She helps practitioners develop children's emotional language, resilience and self-regulation, supporting emotionally positive early years environments.

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Do I Belong Here Too?

Why belonging in the early years needs to include parents, not just children

Written by:
Jaziea Farag, founder of Courage to Climb

There's a particular kind of chaos in the minutes before leaving the house with young children. There's a missing shoe, a rejected piece of toast and the question of whether you've filled the water bottle. Then, somehow, you arrive at nursery. You hand over the bag, mention a restless night, give one last kiss and leave your child in someone else's care.

Everyday we do this, but it is an enormous act of trust. We're handing over our most precious thing in the world, our child we know so well: the one whose silence tells us something is wrong, who uses a special word for Grandma, who holds it together all day before falling apart at home.

As a parent and professional, I think about that handover often. We rightly put thought into whether children can see themselves in our books, displays, languages and play. But what about the adults standing on the other side of the door? Do they feel they belong too?

A warm welcome isn't always belonging

Early years practitioners work incredibly hard to build relationships with families. There are newsletters, stay-and-play sessions and celebrations. These matter! However, inviting parents to participate isn't quite the same as helping them feel they belong.

A parent might attend every event yet dread raising a concern. Another might have to miss every coffee morning but feel comfortable asking questions. Parent involvement is often about what we invite families to do. Parent belonging is about what it feels like to be part of the setting. I like to say

participation is about showing up and belonging is about being seen.

Perhaps the real test of belonging isn't whether families attend the events we organise but if they feel able to speak openly and honestly, disagree and be themselves when they do.

And that feeling can turn on surprisingly ordinary moments.



The things we notice when we're unsure

I've been reading psychologist **Gregory Walton's** *Ordinary Magic*, and his work on belonging uncertainty has stayed with me. When people are unsure whether they belong, an ambiguous interaction can carry more weight. They may find themselves wondering what it says about how others see them.

Imagine a parent who's worried about their child's communication. They've rehearsed what they are going to say, but the morning is hectic. A practitioner, busy settling another child, replies, "We'll talk later." It's a reasonable response on a busy morning. However, if that parent has previously felt dismissed, they might hear something else: Am I making a fuss? Do they think I'm difficult? Should I have kept quiet? Walton's research wasn't about nursery handovers, and we can't know what every parent thinks, but it gives us a useful question: what might this moment mean to the person experiencing it? Families arrive with histories, some feel at ease with professionals; others have had to work hard to be heard. Those experiences don't disappear at the nursery gate.

You may also be interested in:
Flexible E-learning: Anti-racist practice in the early years - Building Belonging Through Everyday Practice with Jaziea Farag
www.earlyyears.wales/en/flexible-e-learning

"But they're fine when they're here"

I suspect many of us have said this, with the best intentions. A parent tells us their child is struggling at home and we rush to reassure them: "Honestly, they're absolutely fine here!" Perhaps they are, but how is this received by the parent? have we reassured them, or accidentally closed the conversation?

Through my work with communication and additional learning needs, I've met parents who sense something is difficult for their child but can't yet explain why. They know the difference between tired and overwhelmed. They know which words their child uses at home, which noises are too much and what helps after a difficult day. An All About Me form is extremely useful, and a great exercise if done collaboratively but it can't hold all of that knowledge. What if, instead of immediately reassuring, we asked, "What does that look like at home?" Or said, "Tell me more. Shall we work it out together?" We don't have to have every answer, we do have to make room for what families know and show that we value it.

> ***"Children don't arrive separately from their families.***

A conversation about me, without me

If you've attended one of my training sessions, you may have heard me share something that happened to me as a parent. Without speaking to me, someone had assumed English wasn't my first language. Let me be clear: English as an additional language is a superpower, being able to move between languages and cultures is something to celebrate. What hurt wasn't the idea of speaking another language. It was discovering that a conversation had taken place about me without me. Nobody had thought to ask. I found myself wondering what else had been decided about me. What did people assume about my family? Was I being seen for who I was, or for who someone imagined me to be? It completely changed how I felt in that space. I felt judged, and less certain that I belonged. I share this in training because I don't assume anyone intended to exclude me, despite this, intention doesn't erase impact. And it reminds me, as a professional, to notice when I might be filling in gaps about a family instead of asking them.

If we're talking about families, shouldn't we be talking with them?

Ordinary magic in a busy setting

Walton's *Ordinary Magic* shows how small experiences can change the meaning we make of situations. That doesn't mean a kind word can undo discrimination or inaccessible systems. It does mean we shouldn't underestimate ordinary interactions.

Remembering a parent mentioned a difficult night and asking about it later, learning to say someone's name correctly, explaining an acronym without prompting and taking a parent's concern seriously even when we see something different in the setting. None of these things require a new initiative just a reminder for us to remain curious rather than certain.

We can have wonderfully diverse books and displays while still expecting families to communicate or engage in only one way. Do we cater for the individual needs of our parents as well as our children? Can they communicate with us in a way that suits them? We need to also spend time as a team discussing whose concerns do you take seriously first, whose family fits our forms, who feels able to disagree without fearing that it will affect how we treat their child?

The Doorway Test

Tomorrow, before families arrive, stand at your setting's entrance. Imagine you're a parent who isn't sure they'll be understood. Ask yourself:

Am I expected here? Can I see that families like mine have been considered?

Am I known here? Do you know something about us beyond a completed form?

Is what I know about my child valued? Do you listen even when my experience differs from yours?

Can I ask questions or disagree? Will our relationship still feel safe?

When I hand you my child, do I trust that you really see them? Not only their needs, but who they are.

Choose one thing to try differently. Perhaps a question you haven't asked or a name you need to practise. Then notice what happens. Children don't arrive separately from their families. They bring their languages, relationships, stories and the people who know them best. As a parent, I don't need practitioners to know everything about my children, I need to know we can work things out together. Perhaps the measure of a reflective setting isn't only what children see when they look around the room, it's also what their families feel when they stand at the door. Handing over your child will always involve a little leap of faith, so the least we can do is make sure parents don't feel they're taking it alone.

References

- Walton, G. M., & Cohen, G. L. (2007). A question of belonging: Race, social fit, and achievement. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 92(1), 82–96.
- Walton, G. M. (2023). Ordinary Magic: The Science of How We Can Achieve Big Changes Through Small Acts.

About the author

Jaziea Farag is the founder of Courage to Climb, an educational consultant, specialist teacher and children's author. Her work focuses on belonging, communication, inclusion and anti-racist practice. She is also a mother of five.



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Belonging: Helping children, families and practitioners feel seen, valued and included.

Written by:
Kelcie Stacey, Early Years Education Officer

> *You belong here*

These three simple words can have a powerful meaning for a young child and their family. A sense of belonging is not simply about being welcomed through the door. It is about feeling that you are recognised, valued and accepted for who you are, and that you have a meaningful place within the community around you.



For young children, developing a strong sense of belonging is an important part of their early experiences. Children need to see themselves, their families, their communities, languages, cultures, interests and experiences reflected in the environments they spend time in. They also need opportunities to learn about and appreciate the lives and experiences of others. **"Belonging is important to shaping children's sense of who they are and who they can become and, as such, should underpin the ethos of all settings in Wales"** (WG, 2022).

So how can we can provide opportunities for children to develop their sense of belonging? we can do this by:

- Displaying a photograph of their family (at their level)
- Speaking their home language
- Singing their favourite song
- Providing familiar objects within the environment
- Listen to their views and opinions

These everyday experiences help children to develop a sense of connection.

The 'curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings' provides us with the guidance to understand **"from the child's viewpoint to ensure that provision focuses on the needs, interests and curiosity of three- and four-year-olds"** (WG, 2022). The developmental pathway; belonging highlights the importance of showing genuine care and emotional support to help build children's sense of belonging (WG, 2022).

Children also need opportunities to see differences represented positively. This might include books featuring a wide range of families, dolls and figures with different skin tones and abilities, photographs showing different communities, or resources that reflect a range of cultures, languages and lived experiences. However, representation should feel authentic and meaningful to the children. Rather than introducing diversity only as a specific topic or celebrating a festival for one day. Instead, practitioners should consider how it can be naturally woven throughout the provision and experiences we provide for children.



Families need to feel that they belong too

A child's sense of belonging is closely connected to the experiences of their family. Families are their children's first and most important educators, and creating genuine relationships with families is an essential part of inclusive practice.

Families should feel that they are welcomed into the setting community, regardless of their background, culture, language, family circumstances or level of confidence in communicating with practitioners.

Sometimes the smallest changes can make a significant difference. Here are a few things to consider:

- Could your welcome signs be displayed in the languages spoken by the families within your setting?
- Are important notices available in accessible formats?
- Do photographs around the setting reflect the families and communities you work with?
- Are families invited to share their knowledge, experiences, traditions, interests or skills?

A photograph of a family displayed within the setting can send a powerful message to a child:

The people who are important to you are important to us!

Families might be invited to contribute photographs, favourite recipes, songs, stories, objects or information about places that are meaningful to them. This should always be approached as an invitation rather than an expectation. Families should never feel that they have to represent a particular culture or explain their identity.

It is also important to remember that not every family will look the same. Inclusive representation might include single-parent families, foster families, adoptive families, extended families, same-sex parents, stepfamilies and children living across more than one household.

Image:
Books for illustration purposes
Morais, N. (2023) Betty. (A. Magloire. Illus) Llyfrau Broga Books
Wilson, J (2023) A Year of Black Joy (J. Orlando. Illus.), Lucky Cat Publishing
Henry-Allain MBE, L. (2023) My Family, Your Family.(G. Medeiros. Illus), Penguin Random House UK



Visibility matters

A setting can be full of resources representing different people and communities, but if these resources are placed on a display and rarely used or discussed, they may have little impact. Consider how representation appears throughout your settings environment. Here are some top tips:

Consider displaying:

- photographs of significant people, places and pets in the children's lives
- photographs of children and practitioners together
- photographs representing different family structures
- photographs of the local community
- photographs of children engaged in real experiences

Photographs can also become a starting point for conversations. A child might point to a photograph of their family and begin to share a story. Another child may notice similarities or differences between their family and someone else's. These moments provide opportunities for children to develop language, relationships and understanding.

If children and families speak languages other than English or Welsh, consider how these languages can become visible and valued within the setting.

This might include:

- welcome signs in different languages
- greetings displayed around the setting
- key words used during everyday routines
- dual-language labels
- books in children's home languages
- songs and rhymes from different languages
- recordings of families saying words or phrases
- visual prompts alongside words
- learning and using children's names correctly



Photo credits: Caseys Little Cubs Childcare

It isn't realistic for practitioners to become fluent in every language represented within their setting. Instead, it is about showing children and families that their language is welcome. Learning to pronounce a child's name correctly is a very good starting point.

Welsh should also be naturally visible and heard throughout the setting, supporting children to experience Welsh as a living language that belongs within their everyday experiences.

What about practitioners?



Belonging is not only something we consider for children and families. Practitioners need to feel that they belong too. When practitioners feel valued, listened to and respected, this can influence the culture they create for children.

Things to consider within your team:

- Do practitioners feel able to share ideas?
- Are their experiences and expertise recognised?
- Do they feel comfortable asking questions or acknowledging that they do not know something?
- Are different perspectives welcomed?
- Are they happy to share photographs of their families and experiences and do they have opportunities to do so

Practitioners bring their own experiences, cultures, interests, languages and identities into the setting. These can become valuable resources for children when shared appropriately. When practitioners share their stories, songs, talk about their experiences and share meaningful objects it supports children to recognise that they belong to a wider community.

Belonging is built through relationships

Ultimately, belonging is not created by a display, a photograph or a sign. These are tools that can help communicate belonging, but it is the relationships within the setting that make the greatest difference.

- A warm greeting
- An adult who knows a child's favourite thing
- A practitioner who takes time to listen
- A family who feels comfortable asking a question
- A child who hears their name spoken correctly
- A practitioner whose ideas are genuinely valued
- A team that reflects
- A child whose voice feels heard

These everyday interactions build a culture where children and their families know that they matter. Practitioners feel valued and included. Belonging is therefore not an additional part of practice. It is woven through everything we do.

Perhaps the most useful question we can ask ourselves is a simple one:

> ***"If you were a child, family member or practitioner entering this setting for the first time, what would tell you that you belong here?***

Reference

https://hwb.gov.wales/curriculum-for-wales/curriculum-for-wales-supporting-materials/assessment-arrangements-for-funded-non-maintained-nursery-settings/

Am I seen in my setting?

Why children need to be seen in spaces of learning.

Written by:
Dr Sharon Colilles, Playful Foundations



Why children need to be seen in spaces of learning.

Creating an inclusive early childhood setting is dependent on ensuring that 'all' children can recognise how learning experiences relate to them. What helps children develop a positive sense of self and belonging stems from an understanding that they rarely 'fit in boxes' (my personal belief), particularly in terms of how they engage in learning processes.

The importance of ensuring that settings truly reflect the children, families and communities they inhabit is fuelled by my research findings that indicate young children already possess a strong awareness of their own unique individuality, demonstrate understanding about the people, places, and routines in their lives, as well as being acutely sensitive to the environments they occupy. It is therefore important to unpack ideas about how adults impact on the safety, confidence and life chances of children beyond educational outcomes. How educators situate children is a key consideration when developing programmes that acknowledge they will have differing leaning journeys, needs and dispositions but may also need the additional support in developing a strong sense of self, belonging and 'fit'. For me, ensuring children are seen begins with thinking about their early experiences. It starts from a stance that acknowledges and respects children's pre-existing cultures, 'lived' experiences and the relationships that will have already shaped how they view themselves and 'others', as well as how they learn.

Key message:

How the relationship between children's knowledge, identity and sense of belonging work together will shape the contexts in which they experience their learning.

Curating a culture of inclusion

How we view children shapes the support we provide for their early learning experiences. A helpful starting point is to adopt standpoints that recognise the cultural significance and meanings associated with different cultures, traditions and festivals. The ability to adapt teaching practices to support the 'unique individual child' (Colilles, 2020) and curate a culture of inclusion is not without challenge. Principally because individuals may bring into their 'classrooms' values and beliefs about what pedagogical practice should look like. It may also be the case that educators 'are not fully informed, misunderstand or reflect cultural traditions incorrectly in their practice (Boyd, 2025).

Weaving shared cultural activities into curricula programmes throughout the academic year supports children to recognise similarities and differences to own cultural practices, as well as enabling educators to move beyond 'cultural tokenism' (Boyd, 2025:7). In doing so it encourages children to not only share ideas about culture, identity and belonging, it also ensures the growth of meaningful and inclusive learning experiences where everyone (children and educators) can flourish together. Essentially, how educators situate their values, beliefs and attitudes towards children's experiences offers a unique view of the dispositions they want for children in the future (Colilles, 2026).

The perspectives of children (funds of knowledge):

Many children are active and deeply inquisitive learners who seek connection, meaning and opportunities to express their ideas about what they are experiencing. How the 'voice' of the child is heard and responded to in their learning will shape how they are celebrated. It might be helpful to understand that children first develop cultural knowledge at home, then expand it through wider communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Their existing thoughts, what research terms as their 'funds of knowledge' (Moll et al, 1992) stem from the shared and learned values and beliefs about themselves and others.

To curate an inclusive practice that values children's ideas require the culture of the setting to recognise and where reasonable incorporate the social contexts that have shaped children's views and capacities to engage. Children need adults who demonstrate a willingness to co-construct new ways of knowing beyond what is taught. This can be achieved by integrating children's reflections about their lived experiences (developed outside of the educational space) into intentional learning activities.

> *"Children's funds of knowledge anchors learning in meaning, culture, and identity (Colilles, 2026).*

The value of an enabling adult:

Underpinning children's learning & development are the significant relationships that shape their social world. Fundamental to the development of a positive sense of self are warm experiences with enabling adults. Early childhood educators play an influential role in advocating for and developing authentic and ethical inclusive practice. Purposeful measurement of early childhood development can be highly nuanced with a tendency to be dependent upon the quality of an educators knowledge about child development across different ages and stages of learning (Irvine, 2026). Correspondingly, when curriculum frameworks measure outcomes by deficit judgments of what children cannot do rather than knowledge based on deep understanding of holistic child development the result can often be a deficit view of children needs. Irvine helpfully guides the enabling adult to turn to equitable strategies when considering the needs of 'all' children. Particularly methods created in 'culturally sustaining practices that value and uphold each child's identity and lived experiences' (2026:98).

Inclusive practice therefore recognises that some children need more-or different-support than others. Enabling educators understand the holistic nature of child development, they are guided by children's interests and demonstrate skills that respond to the individual unique needs of the children they work with. Embedding inclusion into the culture of the 'classroom' will require 'time' and 'space' for creating opportunities to genuinely reflect the diverse experiences of children into curricula programmes and spaces. It also requires daily reflection on children's interactions, close observation of how they engage in play, and monitoring their wellbeing.

Key message:

In culturally rich curriculums children are literally 'playing to learn' (EE, 2026:50).

Enabling adults:

- Respect children as citizens with rights to be heard and to have their views taken seriously (Article 12, UNCRC,1979).
- Listen and respond to children's thoughts and ideas.
- Foster relationships of reciprocity and trust (Conkabyr, 2022).
- Respect that play-based experiences give children control of their learning, as well as opportunities to demonstrate what they can do.

> *All children deserve opportunities where they are valued and celebrated for simply being who they are!*

Children making sense of the world: The learning environment and culturally appropriate resources:

How children make sense of the world is through movement of their bodies, curiosity, imagination and exploration, they literally need to move to experience connectedness. Because children are playing to learn (EYC, 2026:50) an enabling environment with representation of 'someone who looks like me' (EYC, 2026:28) is essential for exploring the types of cultural practices, traditions and celebrations that children engage in. Enabling environments should ideally create contexts in which children are encouraged to reconnect with: 'who they are', 'how they see themselves and others', how they can contribute, and 'how they fit'. That said it is also equally as important for children to understand differences in settings with little to no diversity.

Children's existing knowledge and understanding can be strengthened by incorporating 'culturally appropriate resources' (Colilles, 2020) into learning programmes. Culturally responsive materials create opportunities to nurture and value children's contributions. They facilitate exploration, enable participation and connection with home-setting cultures, and support reconstruction of knowledge about similarities and differences to self and others. Carefully considered artefacts help young children to see themselves and their lived experiences in environments of learning.

Key message:

'Play and particularly movement in play makes knowledge active, embodied, and joyful (Colilles, 2026).





Creating space for story and storying to support identity formation in early childhood:

Complexities and challenges can arise when trying to address issues surrounding identity and culture in the early year's context. The problem is not that children necessarily have difficulty in understanding and making meaning of their cultural identity, challenges arise in societal contexts when some differences are valued as positive and others as negative. It could be reasonably argued that children's cultural identities from perception of self to being valued and belonging to a group is extremely important.

This where stories and storying can support children to make sense of their expanding world and their place in it. Storying continues to influence everyday lives, either in the form of children's books or stories that are handed down orally through generations. Although these rich stories are not static and will change over time, they can provide powerful images that can linger in the mind long after the story has been told (Colilles, 2011:4). Historic scholars such as Shelley argued that stories develop 'a common tradition, a frame of reference that is necessary to understand our world' (1990:10).

Therefore, narratives about perceptions of identity and belonging help us all to understand the many ways in which children relate to and describe their own identities and the identity of their peers/family members. Similarly, shared dialogic conversations in playful activities extend children's thinking and deepens their understanding about their own and others' cultures, origins and identities, which is particularly important when working with children from diverse backgrounds. Stories therefore create an effective vehicle for educators to encourage children to lead in, explore, and share stories relating to their ethnic origin and cultural identities. Educators can then mirror these experiences into their everyday practice. Fundamentally, when thinking about whether educational practices are inclusive for 'All' children, approaches that ask children to share their lived experiences creates the ideal conditions for inclusion.

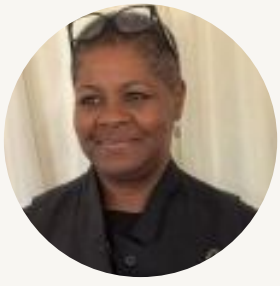
Key message:

'Interactions, where stories are shared help children to build upon and interpret ideas about a positive sense of self and belonging' (Colilles, 2026).

About the author

Sharon is Reader (Associate Professor) in inclusive early childhood education at Bath Spa University, a Trustee on Froebel Trust Council, and a Vice Chair on the Executive for Early Childhood Studies Degrees Network (ECSDN)

You can connect with Sharon on LinkedIn: dr-sharon-colilles-sfhe-cipd-68233163



Final thoughts:



All children deserve opportunities where they are valued and celebrated for simply being who they are! Not as commodities of the future but as individuals with 'unique personal identities' (Colilles, 2020) in the here and now.

For me being seen means valuing children's ideas and constructing reciprocally respectful relationships in culturally rich and enabling environments so that they can flourish as confident, connected learners.

Creating affordances for children to be seen in settings also means ensuring that they can express themselves in embodied ways of being, particularly where play encounters help the pedagogue to learn about children beyond just spoken language.

That said, interactions where stories are shared helps children to build upon and interpret ideas about a positive sense of belonging. By nurturing that belonging, we set them up for a lifetime of meaningful connections and confidence in who they are and how they 'fit' in the world.

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Beyond the Display Board

What happened when we stopped asking whether we were inclusive and started asking whether children and families felt they belonged

Written by:
Sam Maitland-Price
Little Lambs Childcare

For many years, we would have described ourselves as an inclusive setting.

We welcomed every child, valued every family and celebrated the diversity within our community. We invested in books, resources and activities designed to reflect different cultures and experiences. Like many early years settings, we believed that every child should feel they belonged.

But a few years ago, we began asking ourselves a more challenging question:

> ***"Is believing we are inclusive enough, or can children and families actually see, hear and feel that they belong when they walk through our doors?***

That question has shaped our journey ever since.

Moving Beyond Celebration

A turning point came when our leadership team attended the DARPL conference in 2024. The event challenged us to think more deeply about anti-racist practice and what genuine inclusion looks like in everyday early years environments.

We realised there is a difference between celebrating diversity and embedding it.

It's relatively easy to organise a cultural celebration, purchase a selection of multicultural books or plan an activity linked to a particular country. These experiences can be valuable, but we began to ask ourselves whether diversity was visible every day or only during specific events.

If children only encounter representation during themed weeks, what message does that send about belonging?



Looking at Our Environment Differently

Following the conference, we invited **Jamel Carly Campbell** to work with our entire team. Those conversations encouraged us to look at our environments through a different lens.

We started asking:

> ***Who can children see here? And, perhaps more importantly, who can't they see?***

We reviewed books, toys, displays and resources across all our settings.

New books became part of the solution, but we quickly realised representation had to extend beyond the bookshelf.

Role-play areas began to include cookbooks reflecting a range of cultures and traditions. Construction areas featured images of different architecture from around the world. Dolls, photographs and small-world resources were reviewed more intentionally.

Crucially, these resources weren't introduced for special occasions. They became part of everyday life.

Ref: BAME ed network



Looking at Inclusion More Broadly

Our learning didn't stop there.

As our understanding developed, we continued seeking opportunities to challenge our thinking and reflect on our practice. One important moment came when we welcomed **Ian Timbrell** to speak at our annual early years conference.

His session explored the experiences of LGBTQ+ children, families and communities, creating further opportunities for leaders and practitioners to reflect on representation, language and belonging.

Once again, we returned to our settings asking similar questions:

Who feels visible here?

Who feels represented?

Who might still be missing from the stories we tell?

Ref: morethanflagsandrainbows



The conversations reinforced something we were already beginning to understand. Inclusion cannot focus on just one aspect of identity. Children and families bring many different experiences, family structures, cultures, languages and lived realities into our settings, and our environments need to reflect that complexity.

As a result, we continued reviewing books, resources and displays, ensuring that family diversity was represented naturally within everyday practice rather than being reserved for a particular awareness week or celebration.

The goal wasn't to have all the answers. It was to develop the confidence to have conversations, challenge assumptions and create environments where every child and family could recognise themselves.

Creating Curiosity Through Everyday Experiences

One simple example has been snack time.

At Little Lambs, children sometimes explore foods from different parts of the world, creating opportunities for conversations about culture, language and family traditions.

The aim isn't to teach children everything about a country in one sitting. Instead, it's about building curiosity and making different experiences visible and valued.

Food has a remarkable ability to bring people together.

Sometimes a familiar dish, language or tradition allows a child to become the expert. Suddenly, their knowledge, culture and experiences become something to share with others.

Those are powerful moments of belonging.



Photo credits: Little Lambs Childcare



> *Sometimes inclusion isn't about adding something. It's about noticing a barrier you couldn't see before.*

Inclusion Is Not a Resource

Perhaps our biggest learning has been recognising that inclusion cannot be purchased.

Books matter
Resources matter
Training matters.

But belonging is created through relationships, conversations and culture.

One example came through reflecting on something as ordinary as messy play. Activities involving sand, water or paint can present practical challenges for some children with Afro-textured hair.

Rather than expecting children or families to adapt, we introduced satin hair protection to support participation.

It was a small adjustment, but it represented a much bigger shift in thinking.

The child shouldn't miss out.

The family shouldn't have to choose.

Instead, we adapt the practice, not the child.

Learning From Families

One of our most important resources has proved to be much closer to home: our families.

We began asking more intentional questions during enrolment.

Where is your family from? What languages are spoken at home? What would help your child feel welcome? What matters to you?

These conversations have transformed our understanding of the communities we serve.

Across our settings, children now hear simple greetings and words from languages represented within their families, including Welsh, Portuguese, Igbo and Russian.

The impact of hearing your home language spoken by a practitioner or friend can be enormous. It communicates something simple but significant:

We see you.
You belong here.

Still Learning

One of the most important things we've learned is that this work is never finished.

Communities change. Families change. Children change. Our understanding continues to evolve.

For us, inclusion is no longer something we think about occasionally or revisit during a themed week. It has become part of our ongoing reflection as a team.

We continue to ask difficult questions, challenge assumptions and learn from the children and families around us.

Because inclusion is not about getting everything right.

It's about being willing to listen, reflect and change.

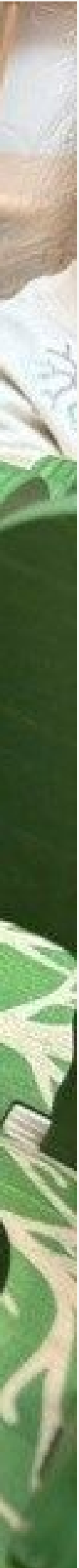
And perhaps that's where belonging begins.





Rooted in Belonging

Written by:
Jacqui Gill,
Apple Tree Tots
Home-based Early Years



> *That tree taught us that belonging doesn't need to be complicated, and that sometimes all it takes is a wall, some photographs and the belief that every family deserves to be seen.*

The Family Tree

Walk into our main playroom and the first thing you will notice is our family tree. It covers most of one wall, a big, bold mural with branches stretching wide and, on every branch, there are families. Real families. Our families.

Each child who comes through our door has their photograph on that tree, surrounded by the people who matter most to them; mums, dads, siblings, grandparents and, in quite a few cases, the family dog too.

We put it up because we wanted every child to walk in and see themselves, but we didn't fully expect what happened next. Even our youngest children, toddlers who were only just finding their words, would stop at the tree, point and smile, saying "mamma" or "dadda". Then they'd look at the other pictures and point at their friends' families with just the same delight.

Belonging Begins Before a Child Starts

For us, inclusion doesn't start on a child's first day. It starts before they've even walked through the door.

Before any child joins us, we sit down with their family to talk and to listen. We want to understand who they are, how their family is made up, what home life looks like and what matters to them, because every family is different and we never want to assume.

Over the years our families have come from Italy, Holland, China, Scotland, Ireland and the south of England, as well as from right here in our Welsh-speaking community in Rhos-on-Sea. Each one has brought something with them, whether that's a different language, a different tradition or a different way of seeing the world, and our job is to make sure their child walks into our setting and sees something of themselves reflected here.

Seeing Yourself in the Environment



You can see that in the books we choose, the dolls on our shelves and the pictures on our walls. We think carefully about what children see around them every day because representation really does matter.

When a child picks up a book and recognises a family like their own, or finds a doll that looks like them, they start to feel that this place is for them too.

The same applies to play. The home corner is just as popular with the boys as it is with the girls, and our books show doctors, builders, explorers and carers. At disco time, which the children absolutely love, they pick the songs themselves and every one of them is up dancing together. Through laughter, fun and freedom, children are naturally encouraged to join in and be themselves.

Every Child Matters

We have also had the privilege of supporting children with additional needs from a very young age, walking alongside them and their families through some of the most important years of their development.

Watching those children grow in confidence, find their voice and thrive with us before moving on to mainstream school is one of the most rewarding parts of what we do. For those families especially, knowing their child is not just accepted but genuinely celebrated makes all the difference.

To us, inclusion is about the child who arrives on their first morning nervous and unsure, then leaves on their last day knowing they really mattered here.

The Power of Language

For children joining us from other countries, we've gone a step further and learned key words and phrases in their home languages as a team.

They're simple things, a greeting or a few words of reassurance, but they mean a child can feel heard in the language they know best. When a little one is finding their feet somewhere new, hearing something familiar can make a huge difference.

Language is something we think about a lot and, as a setting in North Wales, the Welsh language is part of who we are and part of what we offer every child, every day.

We use Welsh greetings, songs and phrases throughout the day, indoors and out. Children hear Welsh woven naturally into their play as they name plants, count, sing and explore the world around them. We're proud to have a Welsh-speaking practitioner on our team because Welsh is not something we dip into occasionally, it is part of the daily life of the setting.



Photo credits: Apple Tree Tots



> *The home corner is just as popular with the boys as it is with the girls*

Belonging Through Flying Start

We are also proud to be an approved Flying Start setting, delivering the Welsh Government's Dechrau'n Deg programme within our community.

Flying Start has grown significantly in recent years, meaning more families than ever can access funded, high-quality childcare from the age of two. It exists to give every child the best possible start in life, and we're proud to play our part in that locally.

For our Flying Start children, that sense of being seen goes even deeper.

Each child has their own personalised learning and development record book, which we build through careful observation and conversations with families. Where we've agreed that there is an area we'd both like to support, we work on that together so the book reflects both home and setting.

These aren't templates or tick lists. They are records of who that child is, what makes them laugh, what fascinates them and the moments that take your breath away. We call these their WOW moments, and they belong entirely to that child.

For us, Flying Start means more than meeting a standard. The values at the heart of the programme; inclusion, quality and a commitment to children's wellbeing, are the same values that shape everything we do.

A Right to Belong

At the heart of it all is a simple belief: every child has the right to belong.

Not just to attend, or to fit in, but to truly belong.

The UNCRC is clear on this. Article 2 tells us every child has the right to be treated fairly, whoever they are and wherever they come from. Article 8 recognises a child's right to their own identity. Article 31 reminds us that children have the right to play, rest and leisure, the very conditions in which a genuine sense of belonging can grow.

You can see those principles in everyday life at Apple Tree Tots. They are there in the family tree on our wall, in the books on our shelves and in the words we've learned in Italian, Dutch, Mandarin and Welsh.

They are there in the conversations we have with families before their child even starts, and in the way we celebrate difference as something to value rather than something to manage.

When a child feels they belong, everything else follows. They gain the confidence to explore, the courage to try and the security to be exactly who they are.

Belonging Beyond the Setting

Inclusion doesn't stop at the back door.

Our outdoor space is a central part of daily life here, rooted in a Forest School ethos, and it is a place where every child, whatever their ability, background or language, can explore, discover and simply be.

Nature has a wonderful way of levelling the playing field because outside, children aren't defined by where they come from or what they can or cannot do. They are simply children playing together.

> ***The mud, the sticks, the leaves and the sky belong to everyone.***

In that shared space, some of the most powerful moments of connection happen naturally, without any of us needing to plan them.

What Belonging Feels Like

In the end, ***inclusion is less about documents and tick boxes and more about how it feels.***

It's what a child feels when they walk through the door and see their family on that tree.

It's what a parent feels when they realise their whole child is welcome here.

It's what you see when a little one hears a familiar word in their home language and their whole face lights up.

None of those feelings happen by accident. They're built carefully through the resources we choose, the conversations we have and the time we take to really get to know our families.

We don't just want children to attend Apple Tree Tots. We want them to arrive every morning knowing this place is theirs, that they're seen, that they matter and that they belong.

Because that settled sense of belonging is the foundation for everything else we want for our children, every single day.





Belonging Through Community

How one nursery school is helping children and families see themselves reflected in everyday life

Written by:
Nicola Brinning
Grangetown Nursery School

At Grangetown Nursery School, belonging begins long before a child walks through the door.

As an inner-city nursery at the heart of a richly diverse community, we are privileged to work alongside families from many different backgrounds, cultures and faiths. Our community languages include Bengali, Pushto, Arabic, Portuguese and many more. We see this diversity not as something to manage, but as one of our greatest strengths.

Before children begin with us, we visit families at home and take time to understand who they are, what matters to them and what helps their child feel safe and secure. We ask about family life, culture, language and identity because every child arrives with a unique story and we want that story to be recognised from day one.

Photo credits: Grangetown Nursery School

Language plays a vital role in this.

For many of our children, English is an additional language. We know that being able to connect through language helps children feel safe, valued and understood. During home visits, families share important words that can help ease transitions into nursery, whether that's a comforting phrase or something as simple as a familiar word for a family member or everyday routine.

One of our learners summed this up beautifully when they proudly announced:

> *"I'm Welsh, but I'm Muslim too.*

For us, that simple statement captured exactly what belonging means.

Children should never feel they have to choose between different aspects of their identity.

Instead, they should **feel confident celebrating all of them.**

More Than Representation



Representation matters.

We think carefully about what children see around them every day, whether that's through books, role-play resources, photographs or conversations. Our domestic role-play areas reflect different homes and cultures, while our resources celebrate the many backgrounds and experiences represented within our community.

However, we've learned that belonging requires more than simply providing diverse resources.

Children need opportunities to experience inclusion through relationships, conversation and shared experiences.

Following the disruption caused by Covid-19 and the growing influence of digital technology on children's communication and social development, we've invested heavily in experiences that encourage children to connect with others through movement, music, songs, action rhymes, puppets and play. These experiences help all children participate, regardless of language or communication differences, while strengthening wellbeing and relationships.

Family group times have also become an important part of our practice, helping children develop secure attachments with key people and reinforcing their sense of safety and belonging within the setting.



Families at the Heart



Parents and carers are children's first and most important educators.

We therefore work hard to ensure families feel as welcome and valued as their children.

Relationships at our school are built on mutual respect and trust. Staff use first names and we work hard to break down barriers between home and school. Families are regularly invited into the setting, not as visitors, but as active members of our community. One of the highlights of our year is our annual **Cultural Food Festival.**

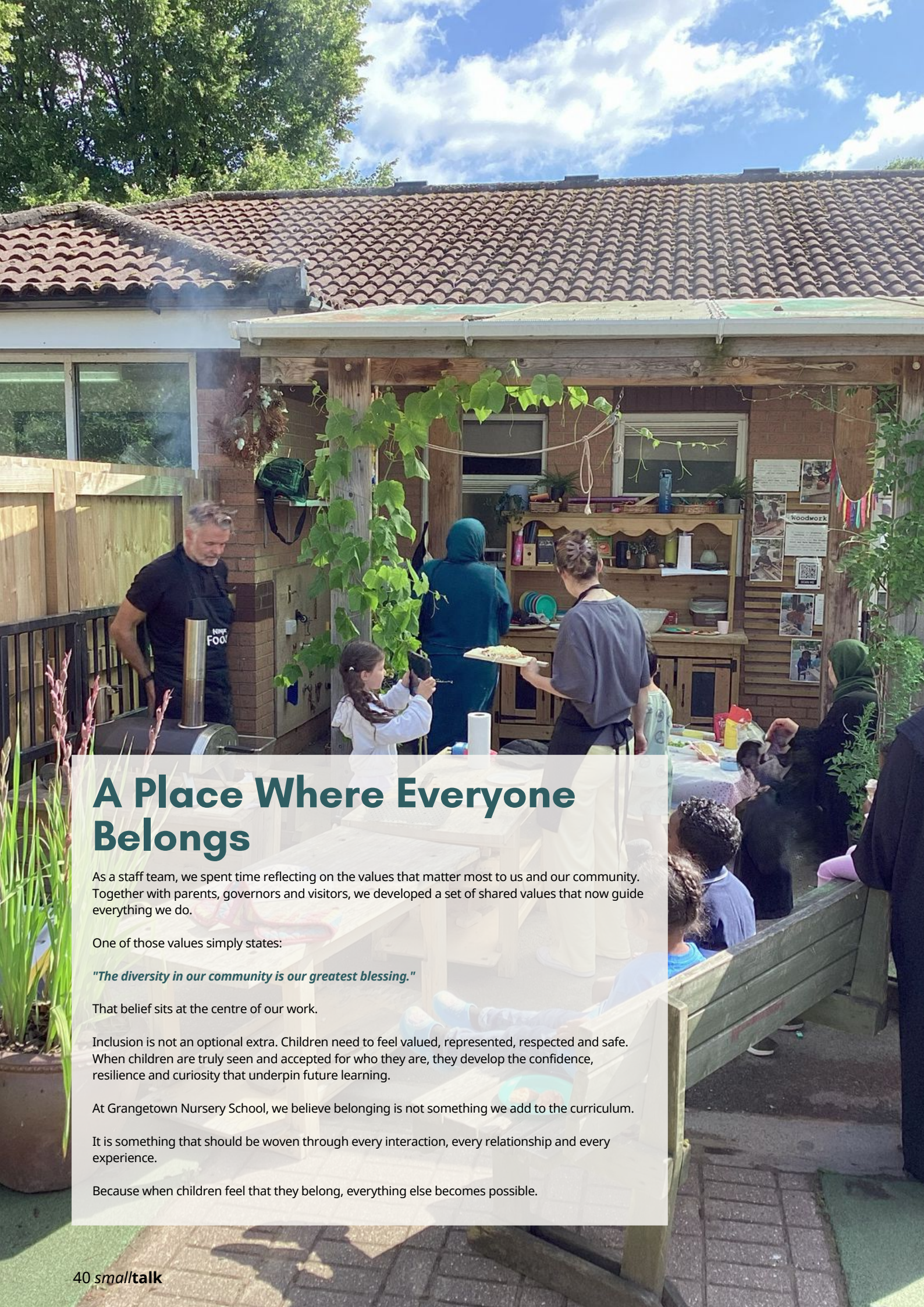
Families and staff bring dishes that are important to their heritage and culture. We share food, stories, traditions and memories together.

What starts as a meal quickly becomes something much more powerful.

It creates conversations, builds understanding and helps children see that difference is something to celebrate rather than something to fear.

Alongside this, our St David's Day celebrations and community festivals help children understand both their local identity and their place within a wider, diverse community.





A Place Where Everyone Belongs

As a staff team, we spent time reflecting on the values that matter most to us and our community. Together with parents, governors and visitors, we developed a set of shared values that now guide everything we do.

One of those values simply states:

"The diversity in our community is our greatest blessing."

That belief sits at the centre of our work.

Inclusion is not an optional extra. Children need to feel valued, represented, respected and safe. When children are truly seen and accepted for who they are, they develop the confidence, resilience and curiosity that underpin future learning.

At Grangetown Nursery School, we believe belonging is not something we add to the curriculum.

It is something that should be woven through every interaction, every relationship and every experience.

Because when children feel that they belong, everything else becomes possible.

BBC CBeebies PARENTING



Belonging begins with being seen:

Helping children feel represented, included and valued with BBC CBeebies Parenting

BBC CBeebies Parenting shares stories from families about why representation matters for children's confidence, identity and sense of belonging.



Seeing yourself matters.

"I always knew that when I had children I was going to be intentional in ensuring they would see representations of themselves." - Georgia

(bbc.co.uk/tiny-happy-people/articles/zm9bsk7)

The BBC CBeebies Parenting website supports families and practitioners with free, evidence-based resources designed to help children develop communication, confidence and positive relationships. Through stories from families across the UK, one message appears again and again: children thrive when they feel seen, valued and represented.

For LGBTQ+ families, representation can mean seeing a family like their own reflected in a storybook or classroom conversation. One parent explains:

> ***Families may be different, but they all have one thing in common – they love each other. - Lew*** (bbc.co.uk/cbeebies/parenting)



Books can be a particularly powerful starting point. Stories featuring a range of family structures help children understand that there is no single "normal" family and that every family's story matters.

For other families, belonging is closely connected to language, culture and identity.

Ghazal Abdeh, a parent raising bilingual children, describes the importance of helping children feel proud of who they are while also celebrating the wider communities around them. Teaching children their home language, sharing cultural traditions and valuing different experiences helps children develop confidence in their identity and respect for the identities of others.

(bbc.co.uk/tiny-happy-people/articles/ztpkcmn)

Representation also matters for children encountering disability and difference. Parents featured by CBeebies Parenting describe the importance of children seeing people who look like them, communicate like them or experience the world in different ways represented positively and naturally.

These stories remind us that belonging is rarely created through one-off celebrations or themed weeks. It grows through everyday experiences, relationships and conversations.

Practitioners can help children feel they belong by:

- Choosing books and resources that reflect diverse children, families and experiences.
- Creating environments where different identities and backgrounds are visible and valued.
- Using everyday conversations to model positive attitudes towards difference.
- Supporting children to develop confidence in their own identity while learning about others.



When children see themselves represented in the stories, resources and conversations around them, they receive a powerful message:

"We teach them to be proud of who they are and their own personal strengths." - Herrai (bbc.co.uk/tiny-happy-people/articles/zm9bsk7)

How BBC CBeebies Parenting can support your practice

BBC CBeebies Parenting can support practitioners in three simple ways:

- Explore the many family stories and experiences that help children understand difference, belonging and identity.
- Access evidence-based guidance, activities and resources to support communication, relationships and children's emotional wellbeing.
- Signpost families to the website for trusted, jargon-free information covering a wide range of parenting experiences and family circumstances.

CBeebies Parenting offers stories, advice and resources on:

- LGBTQ+ families
- Representation in children's books
- Home languages and cultural identity
- Disability and parenting
- Children's individuality and confidence

Listen to the CBeebies Parenting podcast, LGBTQ+ Parenting with TikTok couple Caitlin and Leah, where they discuss raising children in a same-sex relationship and answering questions such as, "Who's the real mum?"



Listen here:
https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/m002vdtk

Scan here to visit the website bbc.co.uk/cbeebies/parenting

CBeebies photography and branding used with permission



Do our early years settings truly reflect the families they serve?

Written by:
Matt Taylor-Roberts, Founder and CEO, Proud 2 b Parents

Every child deserves to walk into an early years setting and receive a simple but powerful message:
you belong here, and so does your family.

For LGBTQIA+ families, belonging is often shaped by small, everyday experiences: the language on a registration form, the families shown in books, how practitioners ask about home, and whether a child with two mums, two dads, a trans or non-binary parent, or another diverse family structure sees their life reflected around them.

At Proud 2 b Parents, families regularly tell us how important it is for children to see and meet families like theirs. Our annual consultation found that **76.4% of families felt less isolated, 86% felt more connected and 89.3% reported improved wellbeing** through accessing our support.

So, what can early years settings learn from this?

Inclusion is in the everyday

Most exclusion experienced by LGBTQIA+ families isn't deliberate.

It might be a form asking for “mother” and “father”, a practitioner automatically asking “Where's Dad?”, or an activity based around one particular family structure.

These experiences can seem small, but collectively they can leave parents repeatedly explaining their family or correcting assumptions. Our work with families consistently identifies language, forms, systems, professional assumptions and limited representation as barriers.

Moving beyond assumptions doesn't require practitioners to know everything about every family structure. It begins with **curiosity rather than assumption.**

Ask about parents, carers or important people at home rather than automatically asking about “Mum and Dad”. Allow families to describe themselves in their own words.

Remember too that families may have been formed through birth, adoption, fostering, donor conception or surrogacy.

Challenging our assumptions

Practitioners want families to feel welcome, but good intentions alone don't always create inclusive practice. Sometimes we don't recognise our assumptions because they are embedded in language and practices we have always used.

Professional development can help.

Proud 2 b Parents has developed specialist **e-learning for professionals working with LGBT+ parents, carers and their children.** It supports practitioners to increase their awareness of LGBT+ families, understand different routes to parenthood, challenge assumptions and consider how everyday practice can create belonging or unintentionally create barriers.

Our wider work also recommends practical, lived-experience-led learning that develops practitioners' confidence around inclusive language, family structures and respectful communication.

The e-learning can be completed individually or across whole teams, helping settings turn their commitment to inclusion into everyday practice. Organisational discounts are available.

Explore Proud 2 b Parents e-learning
training.proud2bparents.co.uk/



One parent told us:

> ***It's important to us that we use LGBT services – it gives us a sense of belonging, particularly showing our son that there are plenty of other families like ours.***

Another said:

> ***Tailored services help me feel more comfortable as a family and give children the chance to be around more families like theirs.***



Representation should be ordinary

Meaningful representation is about much more than displaying a rainbow during Pride Month.

Children learn about the world through books, play, displays and conversations. When these consistently present only one family structure, children whose families look different can receive an unintended message about which families are considered "normal".

A book featuring two mums doesn't always need to be about having two mums; they can simply be the parents in the story. Role-play resources can enable children to create different families. Displays can naturally include adoptive, foster, single-parent, blended and LGBTQIA+ families. Inclusive practice isn't about replacing one definition of family with another. It is about **ensuring every child can recognise their family within the ordinary life of their setting.**

Books for LGBT+ Families
proud2bparents.co.uk/booksext

Look through a child's eyes

A useful exercise is to walk through your setting through the eyes of a child whose family doesn't fit a traditional mum-and-dad model.

Look at your books, displays and role-play resources. Consider your forms and communications. Think about Mother's Day and Father's Day activities. Would staff confidently respond if a child said somebody couldn't have two mums or two dads?

Most importantly, ask:

is family diversity visible when we aren't specifically talking about diversity?

Belonging starts early

Early years practitioners are among the first people outside a child's home who help them understand who belongs in the world.

The environments we create can quietly tell children: families look like this.

Or they can tell them: families look lots of different ways – and yours belongs here too.

That requires more than avoiding discrimination. It means examining our language, resources, forms and conversations, listening to families and being willing to challenge our own assumptions.

Perhaps the most useful question for any setting is therefore:

If every child and family who uses our setting looked around today, would they be able to see themselves?

Representation isn't an optional extra. For a child, it is part of knowing that their **family matters, their family is valued and their family belongs.**



Diverse families should appear naturally in books, displays, communications and ordinary conversations, rather than inclusion being confined to a particular celebration or event.

It is also important to remember that LGBTQIA+ families aren't one homogeneous group. A child might have two dads and also be adopted. They may have a trans parent, live with foster carers or have joined their family through donor conception or surrogacy.

Inclusive practice means allowing families to tell us what matters to them rather than deciding what their experiences must be.

About the author



Matt Taylor-Roberts (he/him) is the Founder and CEO of Proud 2 b Parents, a charity supporting LGBTQIA+ parents, carers and their children. Drawing on both professional expertise and lived experience as an adoptive parent and foster carer, Matt has spent nearly two decades championing greater inclusion,representation and support for LGBTQIA+ families.

Matt was also the Family Consultant for the BBC children's programme Rafi the Wishing Wizard, helping to ensure LGBTQIA+ family life was represented authentically, positively and naturally on screen.

Alongside leading Proud 2 b Parents, Matt works across adoption, fostering, health and community services, helping organisations develop more inclusive policy and practice. He is passionate about ensuring LGBTQIA+ families are not only visible, but genuinely heard, represented and included in the services and communities that shape their lives.

For more information, support and guidance visit: proud2bparents.co.uk

Follow on social media: @proud2bparents

> ***Specialist spaces remain important, but LGBTQIA+ families shouldn't have to access specialist provision simply to experience inclusion. Universal services should feel like they were designed with their family in mind too.***

Seeing Someone Like Me

Written by:
Rebecca Nuttall, Little People UK

Identity begins in the early years

For young children the early years are a time of discovery and curiosity as they are beginning to understand who they are whilst recognising similarities and differences between people, forming ideas about the world around them, often long before they have the language to fully articulate it.

The external influences such as environments, books, toys, conversations and relationships experienced during these formative years all contribute to their developing sense of identity. For children with dwarfism, positive representation and inclusion during these early years can be particularly important.

Little People UK is a nationwide charity which supports people with dwarfism, their family and friends. Through our work we see the importance of children, those with dwarfism and those without, growing up knowing that being 'different' doesn't mean being less.



Understanding dwarfism and the importance of belonging

There are over 700 different types of dwarfism, with the most common being achondroplasia (around 70%). However, each form of dwarfism and even individuals with the same form of dwarfism, can experience different physical characteristics and medical issues which may impact their daily lives, some more than others. Furthermore, most instances of dwarfism are the first in the family, as such 80% of people with dwarfism have average height families, often with little to no experience of dwarfism.

Outside of events provided by Little People UK and other supporting charities, many children and adults with dwarfism do not see someone 'like them' on a regular basis, often being the only person with dwarfism in any given situation, which can be isolating. Instilling the sense of positive identity, with regards to being a child with dwarfism, is an integral aspect of children progressing and reaching their full potential.

Making difference part of everyday learning

Children naturally notice differences and are curious to these differences, they notice height, hair colour, skin colour, physical difference such as disabilities and even whether someone requires mobility aids. Adults can often feel uncomfortable when children point out these differences, but these moments can be valuable opportunities for learning.

When dwarfism and disability are represented naturally and positively within an early-years environment, children begin to understand that disability is simply part of everyday life, the same as common physical differences such as hair and eye colour.

Representation does not always need to involve a formal activity about disability. It can be presented quietly and consistently through books featuring characters with differences, dolls and figures that represent disability, photographs and displays showing diverse families and communities and conversations that challenge stereotypes, in an age-appropriate manner.

For a child with dwarfism, seeing somebody who looks like them can send a powerful message; "I belong here too".

And for children without dwarfism, positive representation helps establish an equally important understanding, people come in many different shapes, sizes and abilities, and everyone should be treated with respect.

Building confidence through positive conversations

Children with dwarfism may become aware from an early age that they are shorter than their peers and they may find some tasks more difficult, shying away from or dismissing this would not be beneficial. They may experience questions, comments or unwanted attention from other children and adults. How adults around them respond can significantly influence how they understand those experiences.

Early years professionals can have an important role in helping children develop confidence in who they are. This can mean using positive and accurate language, accepting and calmly answering children's questions and avoiding assumptions about what a child with dwarfism can or cannot do.

It also means recognising the child is more than their diagnosis. ***A child with dwarfism is not simply "the child with dwarfism". They may have many interests and hobbies, their dwarfism is part of their identity, but it does not define their personality.***



> ***Representation does not always need to involve a formal activity about disability.***

Photo credits: Little People UK

Importance of inclusion that encourages independence

True inclusion is more than ensuring a child can physically enter a nursery or classroom, although these adjustments can make a huge difference to a child's independence, a step stool, lower coat pegs or considering the height of resources can allow a child with dwarfism to participate alongside their peers rather than continually having to ask for assistance. The most effective adjustments should support independence while avoiding unnecessary separation.

Practitioners should work closely with families and importantly, listen to the child themselves. Every person with dwarfism is different, and there is no single approach that will work for every child, even one with dwarfism may have very different 'needs' to another child with dwarfism. Many children with dwarfism are resourceful, problem solvers and can often find a solution to many situations, given a little time, understanding and encouragement, these skills will be of huge benefit in a child's future, when they encounter the world built for people who are average height.

Creating a more inclusive future

Early years settings are an opportunity to establish attitudes that all children may continue throughout their lives.

Children who grow up seeing disability and difference represented positively are more likely to understand that inclusion is normal rather than the exception. They can learn that curiosity is natural and this is to be encouraged, but staring, pointing, laughing or using hurtful language is not acceptable. Importantly, children can learn that difference does not need to be feared, hidden or treated as something negative.

At Little People UK we aim to support in such a way that children with dwarfism grow up confident in their identity, surrounded by people who recognise their abilities and encourage them to reach their full potential. We also want their peers to grow up understanding that height has no bearing on a person's value.

Early years professionals are in a great position to support this, helping create that change, given the part they play in a child's formative years. Every accessible classroom, inclusive story, thoughtful conversation and positive representation contributes to a child's understanding of themselves and others, whether they're a child with dwarfism or not.

When inclusion begins in the early years, we are creating a generation that understands everybody deserves to see themselves represented, to participate and to belong.

> *Children who grow up seeing disability and difference represented positively are **more likely to understand** that inclusion is normal rather than the exception.*



Further reading and resources

Creating truly inclusive environments begins with understanding. The following books, organisations and resources can help practitioners, families and children explore difference, identity, representation and belonging in meaningful and positive ways.

Children's books

- **Mummy, There's A New Girl** by Danielle Webb (written by a person with dwarfism)
- **Not Too Big Not Too Small – Understanding Dwarfism** (written by parents)
- **Dad Mops** by Roisin Leahy and Celia Ivey (illustrated by a person with dwarfism)
- **The Smallest Girl In The Class** by Justin Roberts and Christian Robinson
- **Little Lucy Big Race** by Matt Roloff (written by a person with dwarfism)

Little People UK maintains a recommended reading list on its website, covering a wide range of ages and regularly updated with new titles. It provides a valuable resource for practitioners and families seeking books that promote representation, inclusion and positive identity.

To keep up to date with the latest publications: Little People UK – Promoting Inclusion and Acceptance

Inclusive dolls

- Representation through play is just as important as representation in books. Developed in collaboration with disability advocate Sinead Burke, the **Lottie Doll** range includes a doll with proportions reflecting a person with achondroplasia, helping children encounter difference naturally through play and storytelling.
  Learn more: Lottie Doll and Sinead Burke
- **ToyLikeMe** is an arts and play not-for-profit organisation starting playful conversations with children about disability.
  Discover more: toylikeme

Websites

Charities supporting children and families with dwarfism:

- **Little People UK:** www.littlepeopleuk.org
- **Dwarf Sports Association (empowering through sports):** www.dsauk.org

Charities and organisations supporting disabled children and their families:

- **Changing Faces (supporting everyone with visible differences):** www.changingfaces.org.uk
- **Sibs (for brothers and sisters of disabled children and adults):** www.sibs.org.uk

Little People UK

- **Little People UK** maintains a dedicated page of Frequently Asked Questions about Everyday Life with Dwarfism, offering practical information, examples of adaptations, equipment and everyday experiences of living with dwarfism.

  Further information: Little People UK FAQs
- **Little People UK** has also developed School Guidance to support education settings in creating inclusive environments for children with dwarfism. While much of the guidance focuses on primary and secondary education, it also provides useful information about dwarfism, terminology and inclusive practice that may be valuable for early years practitioners.

  Further information: Little People UK School Guidance

We're always looking to expand our collection of recommended reading and resources. If you have a favourite book, podcast, article or resource that has influenced your work with children and families, we'd love to hear from you.

Email your suggestions to Charlotte at charlotted@earlyyears.wales



More Than Welcome

How one setting makes every family feel they belong

Written by:
Janet Lloyd, Manager
Victoria Gems, Jewels and Treasures

At Victoria Gems Jewels and Treasures in Wrexham, we are fortunate to work with children and families from a wide range of cultures and nationalities. Based within Victoria Primary School, our setting reflects the diversity of the community it serves, and celebrating those different backgrounds has become a natural part of everyday life.

Walk across our playground and you will hear many different languages being spoken. You'll see families chatting, sharing experiences and learning from one another. This rich mix of cultures helps create a welcoming environment where everyone feels they belong.

We're also fortunate to have staff who speak a range of languages. This has proved invaluable in supporting children and parents for whom English is an additional language. Many families arrive feeling nervous, particularly when they are new to the area or unfamiliar with local services. Being able to communicate in their home language often helps them feel more confident and reassured.

Many parents have told us that this simple connection makes a huge difference. It helps them feel valued, listened to and able to approach staff when they need support.

Technology also helps us maintain strong communication with families. Most of our messages are shared through ClassDojo, which includes a translation function, and staff regularly use translation apps when needed. These tools help remove barriers and ensure information is accessible to everyone.

Photo credits: Victoria Gems, Jewels and Treasures

Representation in everyday practice

Our approach to inclusion isn't something we add as an afterthought or incorporate for a particular celebration day. It is woven throughout our provision and can be seen across every area of our environment.

Our book area includes familiar children's favourites alongside books in Arabic, Portuguese and Polish. Some include English translations, while others are shared in children's home languages by staff.

The impact can be remarkable.



Children who may previously have shown little interest in books often become engaged and enthusiastic when they hear stories in a language they recognise.

Music also plays an important role. Children regularly hear music from around the world and have access to a range of traditional drums and percussion instruments. Familiar sounds from home can help children feel comfortable and secure while introducing all children to different cultures and musical traditions.

One of our favourite projects has been the creation of a digital nursery rhyme book featuring songs from around the world. Families helped us choose the rhymes, and hearing children confidently singing them, often with better pronunciation than the adults, brings us enormous joy.

Parents frequently tell us how much it means to see their languages and cultures reflected in the setting.





You may be interested in:

Natures Notes / Nodau Natur
A musical journey around the world

Nature Notes (Nodau Natur) is a multilingual music resource adapted by Early Years Wales from an original Mudiad Meithrin project. Combining Welsh rhymes with songs in Polish, Romanian and Urdu, it celebrates the cultural diversity of Wales through music. Each song is paired with a creative activity to help children explore language, culture and nature in an engaging, playful way.

Download your free pack:
earlyyears.wales/nature-notes-nodau-natur

Learning from families

Our home corner provides another opportunity for children to see their lives reflected in play. Alongside familiar household resources, children can access Chinese bowls and chopsticks, Indian cookware and a Turkish tea set.

We regularly see children recreating experiences from home, preparing meals they enjoy with their families and sharing traditions with their friends.

The same principle runs through our small world resources, dolls and dressing-up area. Costumes and jewellery from Africa, India and Kurdistan sit alongside traditional Welsh dress, allowing children to explore different cultures naturally through play.



> ***"One memorable moment involved a child arriving proudly dressed in a beautiful sari.***

Before long, other children wanted to dress up too and "be the same". It was a wonderful example of how curiosity and admiration can help build understanding and connection between children.

Throughout the setting, opportunities for cultural exploration emerge naturally. Construction resources include images of buildings from around the world, atlases and maps that encourage discussion about different countries and communities.

We also maintain a family photo album containing photographs contributed by families. Children enjoy revisiting these images, spotting friends and learning about each other's lives and traditions. For families, seeing themselves represented in this way helps reinforce a sense of belonging.





Belonging goes both ways

Simple things often have the greatest impact.

Our welcome sign includes many different languages, helping children and families recognise their own language and writing as soon as they enter the setting.

A world map shows where our families come from, while our culture table includes books, artefacts and objects contributed by parents. Families are often eager to share items that are meaningful to them and explain their significance.

These conversations become valuable learning opportunities for children, staff and families alike.

At the same time, we remain committed to celebrating Welsh language and culture. Interestingly, ***we have found that families are often more enthusiastic about embracing Welsh traditions when they know their own cultures are respected and valued too.***

More than celebration days

Our commitment to cultural inclusion extends beyond the walls of the setting.

Children have visited both our local church and a local mosque, where they had the opportunity to meet the Imam and learn more about Muslim faith and traditions. It was a valuable experience for staff and children alike and reinforced the importance of building understanding through genuine connections.

Food also brings people together. Families regularly share recipes and ideas, helping us introduce traditional dishes from different cultures during snack times. Some parents have even offered to cook for us.

Of course, we enjoy celebrating festivals such as Diwali, when our setting becomes a vibrant mix of music, dancing, food and celebration. Staff proudly wear traditional clothing and families often tell us how much it means to see their culture recognised and valued.

But for us, inclusion is about much more than festivals and special events.

It is about creating an environment where children can see themselves, their families, their languages and their experiences reflected every day.

> ***When representation becomes part of everyday practice, children learn that their identity matters, families feel welcomed and valued, and everyone has the opportunity to belong.***





It's Not as Easy as It Looks!

Reflections from my first year as a childminding assistant

Written by:
Anthony Austin
Caseys Cubs Flexible Childcare

When I became a childminding assistant in October 2025, I thought I knew what I was getting into.

After all, I'd watched my wife Samantha run her childminding business for years. If I'm being completely honest, I assumed it couldn't be that difficult. I have never been so wrong.

Almost a year later, I have a completely different appreciation for what early years professionals do every day. Childcare is about so much more than playing with children. There are risk assessments, planning activities, preparing food, paperwork, school runs, safeguarding responsibilities and constant decision-making. Then, just to keep things interesting, there is everything the day throws at you that you never planned for.

One of the biggest lessons I have learned is that ***relationships are at the heart of everything.***

I naturally like to have fun and make people laugh. My first instinct is often to be the clown. The children have certainly worked that out and, if I'm honest, they've probably played me a few times because I'm a soft touch! Over time, though, I've learned that every child is different. Some love the jokes and silliness, while others need something calmer and more reassuring. Understanding those differences and responding to them appropriately is one of the most important parts of the job.

Being one of the few men working in childcare has also been interesting.

I've attended events where I've been the only male in the room, and people have sometimes made assumptions. I've even had comments suggesting that pushing a buggy doesn't suit me.

What I've discovered is that ***children don't see things that way.***

They respond to kindness, consistency, fun and trust. They need positive relationships with adults, and those adults don't all need to look the same, sound the same or come from the same background. There is absolutely a place for men in childcare, and I think children benefit from seeing a range of different role models around them.

The biggest surprise of all has been how rewarding the work is.

Watching a child grow in confidence, learn a new skill or achieve something for the first time never gets old. Those moments make the hard work worthwhile.

So, nearly a year in, would I do it again?

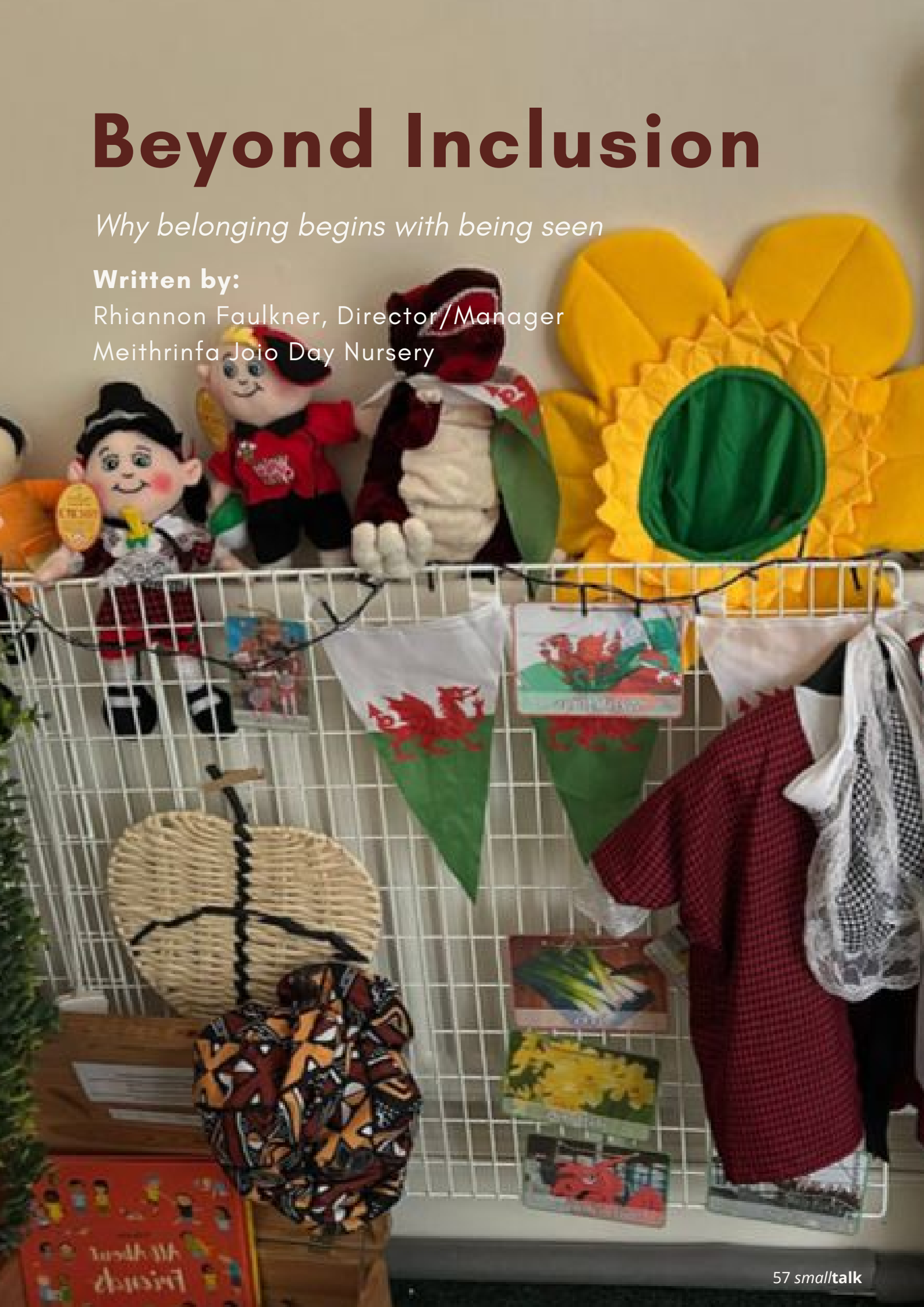
Absolutely.

Photo credit: Caseys Cubs Flexible Childcare

Beyond Inclusion

Why belonging begins with being seen

Written by:
Rhiannon Faulkner, Director/Manager
Meithrinfa Joio Day Nursery



> *Is being included the same as feeling that you belong?*

As part of my professional development as a nursery leader, I completed the DARPL Enhanced Leadership Series (ELS), a programme designed to strengthen understanding and leadership practice in relation to diversity, anti-racism and inclusion.

When I began the programme, I already considered myself to be inclusive. At Joio, we had always been mindful of children's languages, cultural backgrounds, family traditions, religious celebrations and dietary requirements. I wanted every child and family to feel respected, valued and supported.

However, DARPL challenged me to ask a more difficult question:

Is being included the same as feeling that you belong?

I realised it isn't.

That question has influenced my thinking ever since and has encouraged me to look more deeply at what belonging really means for children, families and practitioners.

Beyond policies and posters

Inclusion can sometimes become something we can see on paper.

We can have an equality policy, celebrate different festivals, provide dolls with different skin tones and display posters showing diverse families.

All of these things are important. But DARPL encouraged me to think more critically about whether these actions alone are enough.

A child may be included within a setting without ever seeing themselves reflected in it. A family may be welcomed through the door without feeling genuinely understood.

For me, belonging is about how a person feels, not simply what a setting provides.
It is the feeling that:

"I am known here. I am valued here. I don't have to leave parts of myself at the door."

That shift in thinking has influenced how I view our environment, our relationships and the messages we communicate every day.



Representation matters

One of the most powerful aspects of the programme was exploring the relationship between culture, curriculum and community.

It encouraged me to think more carefully about representation and the messages children receive through the resources and experiences we provide.

Who appears in our books? Who is represented in our photographs? What types of families do children see? Which cultures are visible in everyday life rather than only during special celebrations?

Most importantly:

Who is missing?

Children learn about difference through everyday experiences. ***They should not have to wait for an inclusion week or cultural celebration to see themselves represented.***

Representation should be part of ordinary play, stories and conversations.

The things children see repeatedly influence what they understand to be normal, familiar and valued. When children see people who look like them, families like theirs and experiences they recognise, they receive a powerful message:

People like me belong here.



Belonging and identity

DARPL also encouraged me to think differently about identity and our work to develop Welsh language provision.

At Joio, our journey towards becoming a bilingual setting has never simply been about teaching vocabulary. It is about helping children develop a sense of identity, connection and belonging.

We have embedded Welsh throughout the day through songs, routines, stories, greetings and everyday interactions. We have also worked to build staff confidence, encouraging practitioners to use Welsh naturally, even while they are still developing their own skills.

> ***Children should not have to wait for an inclusion week to see themselves represented.***



At the same time, DARPL encouraged me to reflect on whose Wales we represent.

A child does not need generations of Welsh heritage to feel Welsh. A family does not need to speak Welsh at home to be part of the Welsh-language journey.

Welsh identity, like all identity, should be inclusive and evolving.

Our work around language, culture and anti-racist practice is connected because all three are ultimately about belonging.

Families are part of the story

Another important lesson has been recognising the role families play in creating belonging.

Families bring languages, traditions, experiences, skills and knowledge that enrich our setting. They are not simply recipients of information; they are active members of our community.

When families contribute to nursery life, children see their identities and experiences valued.

It also sends a powerful message to parents:

Your knowledge matters here. Your experiences matter here. You belong here.





A different lens

Perhaps the most valuable aspect of DARPL is that it has not provided an endpoint. Instead, it has given me a different lens through which to look at practice.

"DARPL has not provided an endpoint. It has given me a different lens through which to look at practice."

I still ask whether children are included.

But I now also ask:

- Who feels represented?
- Who feels heard?
- Who feels understood?
- Who feels that this place reflects something of who they are?
- Who might still be missing?

These questions have changed how I think about leadership, environments, resources and relationships.

Inclusion is not a finished destination. There is always more to learn, more perspectives to consider and more opportunities to improve.

Ultimately, the goal is simple.

When a child walks through our doors, I want them to know:

You are welcome. You are valued. You are seen. You belong.

Photo credits: Meithrinfa Joio Day Nursery

The Black Nursery Manager

Belonging As Daily Practice in the Early Years

Written by:
Liz Pemberton
The Black Nursery Manager

> ***Can we treat each child with equal concern if we don't appreciate the powerful effect of stereotypical thinking and behaviour on policy and practice?***
>
> ***Babette Brown, Unlearning Discrimination in the Early Years (1998)***



As my work supporting early years educators to embed anti-racist practice has continued to develop, I have been thinking about how much the landscape has changed over these past six years: politically (because yes, the early years IS political), socially, technologically and ecologically. There is a lot that concerns me about a sector to which I have dedicated my entire professional life and, arguably, a large part of my personal life too. My mom, whose nursery business was our family's business for nearly 40 years, retired earlier this year and it's thrown me into an even more reflective state.

I have been very aware of a shift that has happened in the language that we use particularly when we are talking about inclusive practice and how it has come to be understood as a way of actually not talking about wholly inclusive practice at all, rather a shortcut to only discuss SEND (or ALN, as it's known in Wales). The irony of this is not lost on me. As **Dr Muna Abdi** notes in her blog: *Anti-racism work: Moving past the silence* "You cannot name something you do not have the language for" (Abdi, 2021). So concepts like racism and Whiteness not only need to be understood but must be named before action-focused conversations can start.

My work as an anti-racist educator situated within the early years sector has endeavoured to do this but in order to do this successfully accountability and acceptance need to come first as well as the very important question that should also be interrogated: What is it that we want children and families to be included in?

If you are reading this then I'm going to guess that you, like me, work in the sector and have a vested interest in this subject matter too. One thing that I have been reminded of whilst researching for this piece and in doing my work more generally is that the work of anti-racist practice in the early years is not new and that there is a clear pattern and history of academics, activists, educators and parent groups alike who have not only written about anti-racist practice but also about some of the things that I am interrogating here: belonging, diversity, discriminatory practices and how inclusive practices have been shaped. One thing we know for sure is that this does not begin and end with SEND without intersecting it with numerous other protected characteristics.

In his seminal 1971 book *How the West Indian Child is Made Educationally Sub-normal in the British School System* **Bernard Coard** astutely critiques the British education system about how it routinely ensured that ableist and racist policies were simultaneously used to marginalise and label Black children which added to the disenfranchising they would go on to experience within a racist and classist society. It is important to remember that although Coard's focus was on older children that disenfranchising starts much younger for racially minoritised families and by extension their children once they are within this system of education and the early years is a part of that. In her 2008 book *Young Children and Racial Justice*, **Jane Lane** makes clear that young children are not too young to absorb racist ideas, and that settings have a responsibility to act on this ensuring that it really is inclusive.

> "You cannot name something you do not have the language for (Abdi, 2021)



My work frequently brings me into contact with educators across the UK and internationally and the one question that persists speaks to this desire to be ***"more inclusive".***

> ***"Liz, I don't want my work to feel tick boxy or to feel like it isn't meaningful! How do I avoid making it like this?***



The issue is more about the framing of how we are encouraged to look at our **"diverse books"** as a mark of success and our ability to celebrate as many festivals as possible throughout the year as a tick box. Once Diwali is over we pack away our Diwali resources and get ready for the next one on the calendar and that undoubtedly reinforces tick box culture. As a former nursery manager I know how easy it is to fall into the trap of behaviour that on the surface feels as though you're doing something, proving something and then when 6:00pm comes and we start thinking about the next day.

I understand that the early years sector is one fraught with a multitude of structural issues which all have a direct impact on educators and nursery managers and owners trying to do the single most important thing which is to provide a loving, safe and caring environment for all children to thrive in, but this work is about embedding. Instead of the once a year celebrations **how do we look more intentionally at how Black and global majority people are represented throughout our entire curriculums?** How is bilingualism and multilingualism supported beyond perhaps having objects in the nursery labelled in Welsh and English (which is a great start but needs to be extended) Have you also considered Urdu, Twi, Polish, Farsi or any other language spoken by your children and families at home and then actively encouraged parents to speak and share their home languages with you and their children in the setting. This speaks to whole team attitudes towards differences and how actively you are invested in belonging as daily practice.

So what does it look like to move beyond the tickbox? This is where my framework, the **4E's of Anti-Racist Practice,** comes in.

Closing thoughts

The Welsh Government has pledged to make Wales an anti-racist nation by 2030, and the early years have a vital part to play in that. **Standard 16** of the refreshed **National Minimum Standards** still asks that every child is treated with equal concern and now gives the child's voice as *"Everyone is treated fairly, and I can join in no matter who I am."* So I come back to this, belonging and mattering in early years settings is being seen, named and valued and it has to be a considered intentional act, an anti-racist muscle is how I think of it , one that needs to be exercised every single day.

> ***"having objects in the nursery labelled in Welsh and English is a great start but needs to be extended.***

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Liz Pemberton, aka The Black Nursery Manager is an early years anti-racism consultant, keynote speaker and writer. Based in Birmingham, she works with organisations across the UK and internationally to support meaningful, embedded anti-racist practice across policy, practice, culture and leadership in early years and education.

Learn more: theblacknurserymanager.com and follow @theblacknurserymanager



Known Well Enough to Belong

How a Froebelian approach is reshaping our understanding of inclusion

Written by:
Sarah Parker, Early Years Lead
The Federation of Blenheim Road Community and Coed Eva Primary Schools

Rethinking Participation

We've all been guilty of it: assuming participation looks like a child sitting nicely on the carpet or completing a task exactly as we've asked them to. For some children, that is how participation looks. For many others, it isn't.

If these are our only measures of engagement, we risk overlooking children whose communication styles, sensory needs or ways of learning look different. Since adopting a Froebelian approach in our Early Years classrooms, we've shifted our thinking from *"How do we get this child to participate?"* to *"What does participation look like for this child?"*

Froebel saw every child as unique and capable, with development supported through relationships, play, self-activity, freedom with guidance, and meaningful experiences. This shift in perspective has become one of the most important aspects of our journey towards developing Froebelian practice.

Looking beyond behaviour

One child in our setting did not use spoken language. She built towers and knocked them down and would sometimes knock down towers built by other children, often impulsively. She became distressed when a drawing didn't look as she wanted it to and would scribble over her work. She didn't always respond to her name or make eye contact.

It would have been easy to see this as disruptive behaviour, evidence that she wasn't listening, or something that needed to be redirected. Instead, as a team, we slowed down and observed more closely.

Although she didn't use spoken language, she communicated with us constantly.

She showed us what interested her, what frustrated her, and what mattered to her. We noticed that she was exploring disconnecting and trajectory schemas and needed more opportunities to do this safely. She loved art and, once shown where the paints were kept, could confidently pour out the colours she wanted, making her own creative choices and feeling empowered within her environment.

The more we slowed down and watched, the more we noticed all that she *could* do.

A Froebelian lens invites us to begin with curiosity and observation. What are children returning to? What are they trying to understand? What is their behaviour communicating?



Curiosity changes everything

Another child in our setting threw almost everything we introduced to him. New resources were often launched across the room.

If we're honest, our first reaction was that he was being disruptive.

But we stopped ourselves. We slowed down and observed.

We noticed that, on only a few occasions, he was throwing things to seek connection. More often, he seemed fascinated by movement. He watched objects as they travelled through the air and carefully observed how they landed. He would then retrieve them and repeat the process. Over time, he began attaching objects to tissue paper and string, exploring how they moved in different ways.

> ***What could easily have been labelled as disruptive behaviour was actually a deeply rooted fascination with trajectory and movement;*** a curiosity that needed nurturing rather than redirecting.

When we shift our mindset in this way, we change how we see children.

This little boy, who might once have been described as *"disruptive"* or *"always throwing things"*, was actually a wonderfully curious child who needed adults who trusted him and recognised his capabilities.

We joined his investigations, commenting on what we noticed and helping him put language to his discoveries. Through thoughtful adult interactions and open-ended resources, we supported his fascination as it developed into pulley systems, parachutes and increasingly complex explorations.

Although this learning was important, the relationship we built with him was even more significant.

He felt safe. He began telling us that he loved us. The connection-seeking behaviours that had sometimes been expressed through throwing reduced dramatically because his need for belonging was being met.





The invisible shift

Creating a truly inclusive classroom means creating an environment that is flexible enough to respond to the children within it. It means open-ended spaces, thoughtful resources and adults who are curious enough to pause and ask, *"What am I actually seeing here?"*

It requires us to question our own assumptions and gently challenge one another's.

A Froebelian approach does not provide neat answers. In many ways, it encourages us to ask more questions and to continually consider the relationship between the child and their environment.

Our recent **Froebel Trust case study** captured many aspects of practice that are immediately visible: our relationship with nature, cooking, woodwork, sewing, clay, block play and real-life experiences.

Yet I believe the most significant change has been almost invisible.

It is the way we see our children.

Watch the case study here:
www.froebel.org.uk/training/films/

Known well enough to belong

Inclusion is often discussed in terms of what we add: adapted resources, visual timetables, specialist interventions and targeted support. All of these can be important for some children.

But perhaps belonging begins somewhere more fundamental. It begins when a child experiences adults who are genuinely curious about them.

Adults who recognise communication long before words arrive. Adults who see enquiry where others may see disruption. Adults who are willing to adapt their environments, expectations and interpretations before expecting a child to change.

I'd encourage every Early Years practitioner to reflect on the following questions:

- Whose communication do we recognise?
- Whose play do we value?
- What behaviours might we interpret differently if we slowed down, observed more closely and became truly curious about what a child is telling us?

> ***Perhaps our responsibility is not simply to create a place where every child is included. Perhaps it is to create a place where every child is known well enough to belong.***



Photo credits: federationbrce.com

Bright, busy and beautiful – but inclusive?

Why the sensory environment matters for inclusion

Written by:
Dr Gemma Goldenberg, Deputy Director
Institute for the Science of Early Years (ISEY),
University of East London



> ***Walk into an early years setting and you'll usually find colourful displays, children's artwork, photographs and resources designed to make the space stimulating and welcoming.***

We prepare environments in this way with the best of intentions: we want to celebrate children's achievements, reflect their identities and help them feel they belong. But could some of these things actually make it harder for some children to learn and regulate?

When we think about inclusive environments, we might focus on representation: whether children see themselves, their families, languages and cultures reflected in the setting. This is essential. But inclusion also means considering how children experience their environment, and whether its sensory demands create barriers to participation.

When a welcoming environment becomes overwhelming

Young children's brains are still developing the ability to filter out irrelevant information and understand what they are supposed to focus on. Imagine trying to focus on listening to a story while colourful displays, hanging decorations, nearby toys and movement from others around the room compete for your attention.

Researchers sometimes describe this competing information as visual noise. Just as background chatter makes it harder to hear someone's voice, too much visual information can make it harder to know what to pay attention to. In one experiment, five-year-olds received lessons in both highly decorated and streamlined classrooms. Children were more distracted and learned less in the decorated classroom (Fisher et al., 2014).

Other research found that more visual clutter and colour variability in classrooms were linked to more off-task behaviour (Godwin et al., 2022).

The message isn't that rooms should have completely bare walls, but that the amount, organisation and relevance of visual information matters. Displays might be particularly distracting if they are positioned behind where an adult usually stands or sits when reading a story for example, or are very close to children - for example, on the wall right next to a child when they are sitting on the carpet.



Who thrives in our environments?

Not all children experience sensory environments in the same way. Some find it particularly difficult to filter out background information, while others experience certain patterns, lighting or levels of stimulation as overwhelming.

Research suggests that visually busy environments can be particularly challenging for autistic children. Hanley et al. (2017) found that wall displays drew children's attention away from the teacher, with a particularly pronounced effect among autistic pupils. More recently, Jones et al. (2026) investigated how visual displays and background noise affected children's engagement during learning activities.

Autistic children spent 17.2% of their time off task when displays were present, compared with 4.4% in the condition without displays or noise. Neurotypical children were also more distracted by displays, although the effect was smaller.

These findings raise an important question: if some children have to work considerably harder than others to filter out irrelevant visual information, are we unintentionally creating environments in which they are disadvantaged?

> ***Rather than always expecting children to adapt to the environment, perhaps we should consider how the environment can adapt to them.***

Belonging beyond the setting walls

One possibility is to think beyond the classroom walls. Many indoor environments are visually dense, noisy and crowded. Outdoor spaces can offer more room to move, greater separation between children and activities and fewer competing visual demands.

There is also evidence that outdoor environments can support children who find regulating their behaviour and attention indoors particularly challenging (Goldenberg et al, 2024; Atkinson et al, 2024). Our recent review explored how differences in noise, movement, light and other environmental features might impact children's ability to regulate their attention and behaviour (Goldenberg & Wass, 2026).

This doesn't mean that all outdoor environments are automatically calmer or more inclusive. Busy playgrounds, unpredictable noises, bright sunlight and unfamiliar spaces can present their own sensory challenges. Nor does the evidence establish that outdoor learning benefits all children with additional learning needs equally. However, offering different environments might give children more opportunities to find conditions that work for them. ***Inclusion isn't necessarily about creating one perfect environment, sometimes it's about providing meaningful choices.***





Five ways to make your sensory environment more inclusive

1. **Look through children's eyes.**
Sit at child height and consider what children can see during stories, group activities and play. Are displays or resources competing with the information you want them to focus on?

2. **Make displays meaningful.**
Celebrate children's identities, families, languages and achievements, but avoid filling every available space. Prioritise displays children use and engage with, rather than purely decorative materials, and think carefully about positioning.

3. **Reduce unnecessary visual competition.**
Use consistent backgrounds and borders, stick to a simple colour scheme, and organise resources clearly, Avoid overly patterned learning materials. Consider lighting, glare and strong contrasts, particularly in areas used for focused activities.

4. **Provide different sensory environments.**
Create less stimulating indoor spaces where children can retreat to and provide opportunities to learn and play outdoors. Consider which children might benefit from more space, fewer distractions or opportunities for movement, recognising that individual preferences vary.

5. **Involve children in designing their environment.**
Ask where they feel comfortable, which displays they enjoy and which spaces they avoid. Observe children who communicate their preferences through behaviour rather than words. Their experiences should inform decisions about the environment.

Inclusion is about more than what children can see

A genuinely inclusive setting should help every child feel represented, valued and able to participate. That means thinking about the messages our environments send, but also the demands they place on children's developing sensory systems.

Sometimes, making a setting more inclusive isn't about adding something new. It's about removing barriers, offering choices and recognising that different children may thrive in different environments.



ISEY - Institute for the Science of Early Years and Youth is a child development research institute at the University of East London, you can read more about their work at www.isey.org and follow them on Linkedin and Instagram @isey_uel.

You can also follow Gemma's research on learning environments on Instagram @phd_and_three



Celebrating uniqueness:

Supporting children to express who they are

Written by:
Dr Poppy Gibson and Emma Jones
The Open University

The importance of identity

Take a moment to reflect back at your childhood and your times in school. Did you always feel seen for who you were? Were your strengths recognised? Were your challenges supported?

With so many unique learners in every class, and only so many hours in the school day, it can be difficult for educators to make time and space to learn about each child's unique ways, but the more that we learn and understand, the more meaningful relationships we can have and the safer spaces we can create.

Helping children know that they are perfect just as they are can lead to better positive self-image and better levels of wellbeing later in life.

Being seen and feeling valued should be the norm, and helping children to express who they are is a key part of celebrating diversity.

In this article, some strategies to help children understand and express who they are, even through the early years, are shared.

Ways to help children express who they are

Strategy 1: Individual picture frames

External praise has its place and can be both lovely and important for children. It is at least as important, though, to teach them to self-identify their achievements and measure themselves against their own values. Whilst this takes far longer, it can support children to know who they are and find their own reasons to feel proud without relying on external input. A simple way to encourage this in a group learning environment is to provide each child with a named, displayed picture frame. Ask them to identify when they feel proud and put evidence in their frame. This could be a piece of work, a photo of an action, or even just a single word.

The child should be the sole judge of what goes in the frame because the point is for them to feel proud by their own measures. It is always wonderful watching children recognise that seemingly small things are, for them, an achievement, and there are few things more delightful than seeing the child who's most lacking in confidence finally pick their first proud moment!

Strategy 2: Offer agency

Children are more likely to explore and express their identity when they know that their thoughts, values and choices matter. Giving children meaningful choices in all aspects of their daily life, and respecting and acting upon those choices, teaches them that they have agency. The scale of these choices can vary, from selecting their own snack to influencing curriculum topics or the design of the spaces where they learn and play.

Of course, there will always be times when we can't act upon children's choices. Chocolate for breakfast or replacing the pre-school with a bouncy castle aren't very feasible. In these moments, clearly acknowledging the child's choice and explaining why it's a 'no' helps show that their wants and needs matter, even if they don't always lead to chocolate and bouncy castles. Our interactions around age-appropriate choices enable children to explore their identity and how to express themselves.



Strategy 3:
Find relatable book characters

One way to help foster conversations around difference, diversity, and being proud of who we are is through reading books where a child may see a character with similar skills, disabilities, background or family life like their own. The characters don't even need to be human, and books with animals can help provoke reflection and conversations too. BookTrust have a list of inclusive books suitable for early years and upwards that help us appreciate diversity which you can access here: Inclusive books | BookTrust

BookTrust have several other book lists on other themes too that are worth exploring via their website!

Strategy 4:
Feelings chart

A feelings chart can be a way for children to let you know how they are feeling without having to communicate with you verbally or directly. Create a poster divided into sections with different feelings and emotions on it, such as 'happy' with a happy face emoji, or 'tired' with a picture of a yawning face. Print a photo of each child's face or write their names on pegs or small piece of card, and ask them to put their face/name on the section of how they are feeling. Asking children to do this as they come into class can be a useful gauge of how everyone is feeling. Don't forget to have staff faces or names on there too and role model how we all move through different emotions during the day, and that's ok.

Strategy 5:
Build time to listen

Working with children in groups is brilliant, but natural group dynamics can mean that some children get missed. Teaching each child that they matter to you as an individual lays the groundwork for understanding that they matter in society. Making small pockets of time to work 1:1 with every child, be it sharing a story, completing a jigsaw, or even just skipping around the garden, allows you to listen and gives them little moments of feeling seen. This feeling of belonging and mattering is key to helping children develop the desire and confidence to express themselves, both now and in the future.

Conclusion

Ask adults what they're good at, what they're proud of, or even what they care about, and many will respond with an embarrassed grimace. This isn't a natural characteristic of adulthood, but a behaviour learned in childhood. Making time to listen to children, teaching them to love themselves as individuals, and supporting them to express themselves are all key to creating happy, confident children who grow up to be self-assured, expressive adults. We've shared five quick strategies to help achieve this, but there are many ways to celebrate their uniqueness and support children in expressing who they are. We hope you find a strategy that works in your context, so you, too, can enjoy watching children learn to love their perfect selves.



The Changing Shape of Childhood and the Family Network

Written by:
Emma Davis
Senior Lecturer of Education and Programme Lead for Early Childhood Studies, University College Birmingham

Many families now raise their children without the extended family and community ties that were once involved with parenting. Parents often live a considerable distance from their own parents after moving for work or housing. In some communities it has also become the norm not to know the people living next door. For a growing number of parents the support that previous generations relied on is simply absent, and early years settings are increasingly picking up much of what the wider family and community once provided.

In this article I consider the need for settings to recognise this shift and also the challenges experienced by families who are raising young children in relative isolation.



A loss of support

Extended family and neighbours have historically offered parents a great deal of practical help in a child's early years. A relative might care for a baby so that parents could catch up on sleep. Parents could also ask relatives about weaning or toilet training, knowing that they had been through the same stages with their own children. Nowadays, parents are more likely to look for this guidance online, where much of what they find is contradictory and takes little account of their own child or circumstances.

Relatives also offered emotional reassurance, and this carried more weight because they knew the family well. Being told by a grandparent that a difficult phase is a normal part of development can change how a parent copes with it, yet many parents now have nobody close enough to offer that reassurance.

Parenting under stress

It is during periods of stress that the absence of this support can be hardest to manage. A baby who cries for long stretches can leave parents exhausted and anxious. At those times a relative who can take over for an hour or two gives parents a chance to rest and recover before they carry on. Parents without family or friends close at hand may have no one to turn to, which can deepen feelings of isolation and inadequacy.

Gerhardt (2004) highlights the importance of responsive early relationships for the developing brain. Parents who are themselves under sustained stress can find that responsiveness harder to offer, however much they love their child. Because practitioners are often the adults that parents speak to most regularly outside the home, settings are well placed to notice when a parent is struggling and to offer support or signpost them to other services.



Relatives as attachment figures

Bowlby (1969) argued that a child's attachment to a primary caregiver provides the security from which they are able to explore the world. He also recognised that children form attachments to other familiar adults, among whom grandparents and other relatives have traditionally been some of the most significant.

Each relative brings their own characteristics to their relationship with a child. One may favour particular types of play while another uses different language, which in many Welsh families means a different language altogether. Through relationships of this kind children encounter a wider range of interactions and ways of relating to others than a single household can usually provide.

Reay (2017), drawing on the work of Bourdieu, shows how the cultural capital passed on through families shapes children's experience of education and their later opportunities. Relatives contribute to this through the knowledge and experiences they share with children. In Wales grandparents have long played an important part in passing on the Welsh language, so where families live at a distance from their relatives, children may have fewer opportunities to build this kind of capital in their early years.

What relatives bring from their own lives

Relatives also influence children through their own experiences and interests. A relative's education or working life can introduce children to ideas and activities that would otherwise sit outside their daily routine.

Children who grow up with limited contact with extended family may miss out on much of this, since the breadth of what a young child encounters depends a great deal on the number of adults around them.

Implications for settings



Settings already fulfil many of the roles that the extended family once played, and recognising this allows leaders to plan for it. Within the setting, the key person approach provides children with an additional attachment figure. Elfer, Goldschmied and Selleck (2012) emphasise the importance of close and consistent relationships between key persons and the children in their care, while Page (2011) argues that practitioners can offer professional love to the children they care for. For a child who sees little of their grandparents, ***the relationship with their key person may be one of the most important they have outside the home.***

Advice on sleep and weaning offered during everyday conversations with parents can go some way towards replacing the guidance that relatives would previously have shared. Intergenerational projects that bring older members of the community into the setting can also widen the range of adults that children spend time with.

Practitioners are taking on a significant amount of emotional support for families, which needs to be recognised by leaders and policymakers. Regular supervision ensures that staff are not left to manage families' difficulties alone. Strong relationships with health visitors and family support services also enable practitioners to refer families for further help when it is needed.

> ***Settings can also help families to build connections with one another through stay and play sessions or parent groups, so that parents develop networks of support beyond the setting itself.***

Conclusion

Many of the families in our settings are raising children with far less support than previous generations had available to them. When settings recognise how much of this has been lost, they can respond with greater understanding of the pressures these families face and begin to offer some of the support that extended family and community networks once provided.



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The Thinking Spot
Early Education Consultancy

Is inclusion *Just* an Illusion in your setting?

Written by:
Jacqui Lewis
The Thinking Spot, Early Education Consultancy

In early childhood education, frameworks, policies and guidance help define inclusion. In Wales, the Curriculum emphasises belonging, communication, participation and children seeing their identities and experiences reflected in the setting. The joint inspection framework also emphasises children feeling valued, included and respected (CIW and Estyn, 2026). But in demonstrating inclusive practice, we can easily become more focused on what we provide than on whether children and families experience inclusion.

Our understanding of inclusion is shaped by our experiences, relationships, values, professional learning and wider policy expectations (Osgood, 2010; Archer, 2024). These influences inform what we believe it means to be an inclusive practitioner. Attachment theory has highlighted how consistent, responsive care supports children's relationships and security (Bowlby, 1969; Ainsworth et al., 1978). Reggio Emilia philosophy positions children as competent communicators and active participants, suggesting that belonging is strengthened when their identities and diverse ways of communicating are recognised and valued (Malaguzzi, 1993).



Even our best intentions do not guarantee inclusive experiences, and believing ourselves to be inclusive can even make exclusion even harder to recognise. Rinaldi (2006) suggests that ***belonging is created through dialogue and shared meaning***, rather than being something adults can simply provide. We may articulate inclusive values and describe our adjustments, but how often do we ask whether children and families experience them as inclusive?

Belonging as a lived experience

Every early years setting has its own culture, shaped by relationships, routines, expectations and everyday interactions between children, families and practitioners. In some settings we are welcomed so warmly that we do not have time to throw off our coat before being immediately drawn in to play. We feel a shared openness, connection and belonging that goes beyond what people say or do. In others we may remain on the periphery of conversations, uncertain of our place, or feeling that we must earn the right to participate. The difference may not be intentional. A close community can create belonging for those already connected while making it harder for someone new to find their place.

I recall visiting a setting where families shared a rare sense of ownership and connection with staff and children. There was a real sense that this was their place, a community in which they felt connected and invested. Although welcomed, I felt aware of my position at the community's edge.



> ***"A strong sense of belonging may therefore reflect an inclusive culture while leaving newcomers less certain of their place.***

As practitioners, we are not external observers of our setting's culture. We are part of the relationships and everyday practices through which it is created and sustained. The routines we create, the conversations we have, the assumptions we make and the ways we respond to others all contribute to how inclusion is experienced. I am sure we can all recall a transition meeting where we have listened to compelling accounts of the new setting's inclusive ethos and practice, but we leave wondering what was truly heard and held about the individual child transitioning, e.g. what matters to them, what helps them feel safe, how they communicate, express their preferences and participate etc.

When inclusive intentions are not enough

A child may have a key person, an EDI or SENCO lead, carefully chosen resources and a place within the group, yet still be unsure whether their preferences will be respected, their communication understood or their participation welcomed.

These provisions cannot, by themselves, show that the child feels included or belongs.

In our commitment to inclusion, we may revise an anti-racism policy, communicate an inclusive ethos, appoint 1:1 support, use visual timetables and adapt sensory spaces, resources and movement opportunities. All may be valuable, but their presence alone cannot show whether inclusion is experienced.

> *"The same practice can affect children differently.*

A visual timetable may support one child but reassure another very little; a quiet space may comfort some but become somewhere others are routinely directed and 1:1 support may unintentionally separate a child from peers and wider staff. Inclusive intentions therefore require continued attention to each child's experience.

The same caution applies to apparent compliance. A child who follows routines, joins the group or shows no distress may still face unrecognised barriers. Rather than judging a practice as right or wrong, we should remain curious about its meaning and impact for that child.



From intention to impact: what can we do?

If inclusion is a felt, embodied experience, we need to do more than check whether guidance has been followed, or an approach implemented correctly.

> ***We must ask whose experiences are missing and move from 'have we done what we said we would do?', to 'what difference has this made to the child and how do we know?'***

The Index for Inclusion supports reflection on cultures, policies and practices (Booth and Ainscow, 2011), while the Lundy Model considers children's voice, audience and influence (Lundy, 2007).

ECERS-3 offers evidence about provision, interactions and diversity (Harms, Clifford and Cryer, 2014), but does not directly measure felt inclusion or belonging.

Reflection can also begin with a question, 'We believe our practice is inclusive, but what evidence might challenge that belief?' Alternatively, inquiry could also focus on one existing practice, and ask, 'who benefits? Who might not? Whose perspectives are missing? What needs to change?'

Inclusion becomes an illusion when commitment, policies and resources are treated as proof of lived experience, or when our professional identity makes conflicting experiences difficult to hear. hooks (2009) raised important questions about who is allowed to become part of a community and what it means to truly belong. Her work invites us to ask, who is permitted to belong and are we prepared to question the culture we have created rather than expecting others to find their place within it?

Are you?

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Jacqui Lewis is an advocate for children, early childhood educators and inclusive early education. Drawing on experience across practice, leadership, teaching, regulatory and research roles, she champions a respectful, rights-based pedagogical approach. She is a research associate, consultant for The Thinking Spot and the British Association for Early Education, a Makaton tutor, and a visiting fellow for the National Professional Qualification in Early Years Leadership.