

childcare & education EXPO

Nursery Leaders Network

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2026 Main Stage Insight Pack

Contents

This insight pack summarises **key takeaways from the Main Stage at for early years leaders.**

Bringing together talks from sector experts across **curriculum, inspection, behaviour, outdoor learning, technology and child development**, it highlights the key ideas shaping current early years practice.

Designed to support reflection and strengthen practice, **the pack provides concise, leadership-focused takeaways to help you quickly understand what was shared and what it means for your setting**, while highlighting the priorities for high-quality, inclusive early years provision.

Friday Speaker Sessions

1. The Wonder of Words: Lighting the Spark of Language and Literacy
2. Beyond Behaviour: The Power of Connection in Early Years
3. Mastering your Early Years Curriculum
4. Ofsted's Renewed Inspection Framework

Saturday Speaker Sessions

1. Breaking Into the Playground: Making aoaoutdoor Learning Work Anywhere
2. The Art of Being Brilliant: Your Wellbeing Launchpad
3. The Digital Playground: Integrating Technology & Play for Enhanced Learning
4. Fizzy to Calm - Supporting Behaviour and Regulation Through Movement
5. Early Years Inspections: What Are Ofsted Inspectors Seeing?

The Wonder of Words: Lighting the Spark of Language and Literacy

Michael Rosen

Michael Rosen led an interactive, performance-based session demonstrating how poetry supports oral language development, memory, creativity and emotional understanding in early childhood.

A key message was that poetry acts as a bridge between spoken language and written literacy, helping children internalise language naturally and joyfully.



Key Takeaways

1. Prioritise oral language before writing

Children need rich spoken language experiences before formal writing becomes meaningful.

2. Use poetry as daily practice, not a one-off activity

Regular repetition, chants and rhymes strengthen language patterns and confidence.

3. Make language physical and interactive

Gestures, movement and performance help children embed vocabulary and meaning.

4. Embrace playful, silly and rhythmic language

Tongue twisters and nonsense language build phonological awareness and enjoyment.

5. Focus on sound before full understanding

Children can engage deeply with rhythm and tone even before they fully understand meaning.

6. Encourage children to create their own lines

Poetry supports creativity and helps children develop ownership of language.

7. Build empathy through storytelling and role play

Poetry allows children to explore perspectives, emotions and narrative imagination.

Beyond Behaviour: The Power of Connection in Early Years

Marc James, Caroline Essame, Laura Smith, Mandy Cuttler, Prof Sam Wass

This panel brought together practitioners, researchers, clinicians and sector leaders to reframe early years behaviour as communication of unmet needs rather than something to manage or control.

A key message was that children's behaviour reflects their internal state, environment and relationships, and must be understood within context rather than corrected through compliance systems.



Key Takeaways

1. Reframe behaviour as unmet need

Move away from “managing behaviour” toward understanding what the child is communicating emotionally, sensory-wise, or relationally.

2. Prioritise relationships over systems

Secure attachment and trust are more effective than reward charts or compliance-based approaches.

3. Co-regulation is the foundation of self-regulation

Children learn to regulate through calm, attuned adults who support them through emotional states.

4. Adult regulation comes first

Staff must model emotional awareness, naming feelings and staying regulated under pressure.

5. Boundaries should be clear and kind

Respectful, explained limits support safety while maintaining connection and understanding.

6. Babies are active communicators

Even pre-verbal children express needs through behaviour and require attuned interpretation, not assumption.

7. Emotional variability supports learning

Children do not need to be “calm and still” to learn. Movement, emotion and fluctuation are part of development.

Mastering your Early Years Curriculum

Jamie Victoria Barnes

Jamie Victoria Barnes presented a practical framework for designing, delivering, and evaluating a high-quality early years curriculum. She reframed “curriculum” as a child’s learning adventure, emphasising clarity, sequencing and impact across all areas of development.

A central message was that strong curriculum leadership connects directly to environment, teaching practice, and child outcomes.



Key Takeaways

1. Define a clear and simple curriculum intent

Be explicit about what you want children to learn, grounded in EYFS areas, values, and your setting’s pedagogy.

2. Use the Three I’s consistently

- Intent: what children will learn
- Implementation: how it is delivered
- Impact: how you know it is working

3. Treat curriculum as a “learning adventure”

Make it meaningful, child-centred and connected to interests, not just a checklist of content.

4. Sequence learning across rooms and ages

Ensure continuity in skills and experiences so children build knowledge progressively over time.

5. Prioritise enabling environments and routines

Calm, structured and purposeful spaces support regulation, engagement and deeper learning.

6. Focus on communication, literacy and maths daily

Language-rich interactions and embedded maths experiences are key drivers of long-term outcomes.

7. Use impact to refine practice

Observe engagement, curiosity and behaviour to evaluate effectiveness and adapt the curriculum.

Ofsted's Renewed Inspection Framework

Blarina Miftari, Sam Sleeman-Boss

Sam Sleeman-Boss and Blarina Miftari introduced Ofsted's renewed early years inspection framework, highlighting a stronger focus on inclusion, transparency and contextualised evaluation.

The framework shifts inspection culture towards professional dialogue, shared observation and evidence drawn from everyday practice, rather than documentation-heavy scrutiny.



Key Takeaways

1. Inclusion is now the core lens of inspection

Inspectors will explicitly examine how well settings support children facing barriers to learning, including SEND and disadvantaged children.

2. Evidence comes from practice, not paperwork

Focus on the quality of day-to-day experiences, interactions and outcomes, not documentation for inspection purposes.

3. Expect more professional dialogue during visits

Inspections are structured around conversations, shared observations, and reflective discussion rather than formal “learning walks.”

4. Leadership clarity matters more than ever

Leaders should clearly articulate curriculum intent, priorities and how inclusion is embedded in practice.

5. Evaluation is more nuanced and transparent

Multiple graded areas provide a detailed picture, with emphasis on “secure fit” to standards rather than simple overall judgement.

6. Safeguarding remains non-negotiable

Safeguarding is the only pass/fail area and remains the highest priority across all inspections.

7. Context matters in every inspection

Inspectors use local data and setting-specific information to understand challenges, strengths, and priorities.

Breaking Into the Playground: Making Outdoor Learning Work Anywhere

Carol Murdoch

Carol, founder of Love Outdoor Learning, challenged the idea that outdoor learning is limited to forest schools or green spaces. She reframed it as a universal teaching approach that can take place in any outdoor environment - playgrounds, urban spaces, beaches or concrete areas.

Outdoor learning was positioned as a powerful way to make learning tangible, real-world and curriculum-rich across all areas of early years education.



Key Takeaways

1. Reframe what “outdoor learning” means

It is not forest-school dependent. Any outdoor space, even small or urban, can become a learning environment.

2. Build staff confidence first

Training, modelling and gradual exposure are key. Confidence is the main factor limiting uptake, not equipment or space.

3. Use what you already have

Playgrounds, pavements, local streets and community spaces can all be used intentionally for learning.

4. Link outdoor learning to the curriculum

Outdoor experiences should not be “extra”, they should directly support literacy, maths, science and communication.

5. Make learning concrete and visible

Outdoor contexts help expose misconceptions and deepen understanding through hands-on activity.

6. Improve inclusion and engagement

Outdoor learning particularly supports children who struggle indoors by improving behaviour, confidence and participation.

7. Teach risk positively

Use outdoor learning to build children’s awareness of risk and independence, rather than avoiding challenge.

The Art of Being Brilliant: Your Wellbeing Launchpad

Andy Cope

Dr. Andy Cope's session focused on how early years professionals can move from simply coping to flourishing. Drawing on Positive Psychology, he challenged the sector's focus on stress and instead highlighted the impact of mindset and behaviour on both staff and children.

A key message was that life is short and often spent waiting to feel happy. Instead, he argued that happiness should come first, as it improves performance, relationships and outcomes in settings.



Key Takeaways

1. Your mood sets the tone

Your energy and behaviour are quickly mirrored by staff and children, be intentional in how you show up.

2. Wellbeing drives performance

Positive, engaged teams are more effective. Happiness is not a reward - it's a starting point.

3. Challenge “countdown culture”

Avoid language and habits that focus on “getting through the week.” Help teams stay present and engaged.

4. Model what you want to see

Values like kindness, optimism and gratitude are learned through observation, not instruction.

5. Watch for “mood hoovers”

Negative language and attitudes spread quickly - address them early and lead by example.

6. Focus on who you are, not just what you do

Encourage reflection on “What kind of leader/practitioner do I want to be?”

7. Small changes matter

Simple daily habits (positive language, intentional starts to the day) can shift team culture over time.

The Digital Playground: Integrating Technology & Play for Enhanced Learning

Ben Case, Hayley Peacock, Rachna Joshi, Richard Waite

This panel explored how digital technology can be meaningfully integrated into early years play to enhance communication, creativity, curiosity and agency, without replacing hands-on learning.

A central message was that technology should extend, not replace, real-world exploration and relationships.



Key Takeaways

1. Reframe technology as a learning tool, not screen time

Use devices like cameras, microphones and microscopes to support inquiry, not passive consumption.

2. Combine digital and physical play

Technology should extend real-world experiences (e.g. filming role play, photographing discoveries, documenting outdoor learning).

3. Build staff confidence through simplicity

Start with basics (photos, video, audio recording) before introducing more complex tools.

4. Prioritise child agency and reflection

Allow children to revisit their own learning through images, voice recordings and digital storytelling.

5. Use tech to support inclusion

Translation tools and audio/visual supports can enhance communication for EAL and neurodiverse learners.

6. Embed ethics and safety early

Teach children about consent, respectful photography and safe technology use.

7. Focus on purpose, not devices

Technology should always answer: What is this helping children explore, express or understand?

Fizzy to Calm – Supporting Behaviour and Regulation Through Movement

Alexandra Chiorando

Alexandra Chiorando, founder of Marmalade, introduced the concept of children being “fizzy” to describe states of dysregulation and high alert, reframing behaviour as unmet sensory need rather than “naughty behaviour.”

The key message: regulation must come before learning and adults play the central role in co-regulating children through movement, rhythm and connection.



Key Takeaways

1. Reframe behaviour as regulation, not defiance

Children are not “bad” - they are often dysregulated and needing sensory support.

2. Prioritise regulation before learning

Children must be calm and regulated before expecting focus, listening or participation.

3. Build movement into the daily routine

Short, frequent bursts of movement improve readiness to learn (e.g. traffic light games, rhythm clapping, ball work).

4. Counteract reduced natural movement

Modern routines limit physical development -motor play is essential for school readiness.

5. Use “heavy work” to calm the nervous system

Pushing, pulling, lifting, climbing, carrying and resistance activities support regulation.

6. Integrate rhythm and breath for calm

Simple breathing, chanting and patterned movement help reset overstimulated systems.

7. Adults regulate the room

Children mirror adult energy - calm, paced, connected adults create calmer environments.

Early Years Inspections: What Are Ofsted Inspectors Seeing?

Sam Sleeman-Boss, Wendy Ratcliff

Wendy Ratcliffe and Sam Sleeman-Boss shared early insights from the renewed Ofsted early years inspection framework, focusing on how inspections are being experienced in practice following rollout.

Inspectors highlighted that the framework is designed to improve outcomes for all children - particularly the most vulnerable, while reducing unnecessary workload and aligning closely with the EYFS.



Key Takeaways

1. Inclusion is the inspection lens across everything

Children facing disadvantage, SEND or social care involvement are central to case sampling and evaluation.

2. Evidence is drawn from practice, not paperwork

Inspectors prioritise observation, interaction and professional dialogue over documentation.

3. The planning call is key

Early conversations shape inspection focus, context understanding and reduce on-site disruption.

4. Key person practice is critical

Secure attachment and consistent relationships are consistently linked to strong outcomes.

5. Explicit teaching matters alongside play

Some learning, particularly mathematics and communication, requires direct, intentional teaching.

6. Routines are a core part of curriculum delivery

Everyday moments (mealtimes, transitions, care routines) are key learning opportunities.

7. Strong provision = secure fit to EYFS standards

Inspection grading relies on whether standards are consistently met, not occasional examples.