

childcare & education EXPO

Nursery Leaders Network

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2026 Business Stage Insight Pack

Contents

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

Bringing together insights from sector experts on **leadership, workforce development, wellbeing, AI, SEND, neurodiversity, parent partnerships** and **baby room practice**, this pack highlights the key conversations and emerging priorities shaping early years leadership today.

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. More Than Inclusion: Creating Environments Where Difference Thrives
2. People First: Recruiting, Retaining, and Leading a Multi-Generational Workforce
3. More Play Please: Balancing Children's Needs with Inspection Demands
4. Scaling with Purpose: Smart Growth Strategies within Early Years
5. AI in Action: How can Leaders use AI Today?

Saturday Speaker Sessions

1. Early Childhood Leadership: Balancing Pedagogy, Policy, and Practice
2. Shaping Excellence in Baby Rooms: Getting It Right for Under 2s
3. Parent Partnerships & Difficult Conversations: Supporting All Families
4. Leading Through Change: Embracing a Shifting Sector
5. Brilliant Leadership: Cutting Through the Chaos

More Than Inclusion: Creating Environments Where Difference Thrives

Cheryl Warren

Cheryl Warren explored what it means to take a neurodiversity-affirming approach in early years practice, encouraging educators to move away from compliance-based expectations and towards understanding, connection and belonging. She highlighted the importance of adapting environments and approaches to meet children where they are.

A key message was that neurodivergent children do not need to be fixed or changed. Instead, practitioners should focus on creating safe, flexible and supportive environments that enable every child to thrive as their authentic self.



Key Takeaways

1. Respect individual developmental journeys

Children reach milestones at different times, and progress should not always be measured against neurotypical expectations.

2. View behaviour as communication

Behaviour is often a response to unmet needs, sensory experiences or environmental factors rather than something to be corrected.

3. Prioritise belonging over compliance

Focus on helping children feel safe, valued and connected rather than expecting them to conform to rigid expectations.

4. Review environments through a sensory lens

Regularly audit spaces for sensory triggers and make adjustments that support regulation and wellbeing.

5. Build flexibility into routines and practice

Predictable routines are important, but children should be offered choice, autonomy and adaptations where needed.

6. Work closely with families and celebrate strengths

Strong partnerships with families help practitioners better understand each child and maintain a strengths-based approach.

7. Create a neurodiversity-affirming culture

Ensure policies, environments and staff practice reflect the belief that every child belongs and deserves to be supported as they are.

People First: Recruiting, Retaining, and Leading a Multi-Generational Workforce

John Warren, Beverleigh Bossman, Claire Sephton, Natalie McGuinness, Stephanie Newman

This session explored how early years leaders can attract, recruit and retain a strong multi-generational workforce in an increasingly challenging recruitment landscape.

A key message was that successful recruitment is not about targeting generations differently, but about understanding individuals, creating a strong workplace culture and clearly communicating the purpose, value and progression opportunities within early years.



Key Takeaways

1. Start recruitment before vacancies arise

Build relationships with local schools, colleges and communities to raise awareness of careers in early years.

2. Sell purpose, not just the job

Many candidates, particularly younger generations, are motivated by meaningful work and social impact.

3. Avoid generational stereotypes

Treat every candidate as an individual and focus on their strengths, motivations and potential.

4. Create clear career pathways

Micro-progression opportunities and visible development routes help attract and retain staff.

5. Prioritise culture and belonging

A positive, supportive culture is often a stronger retention factor than salary alone.

6. Embrace workforce diversity

Recruiting people of different ages, backgrounds, genders and experiences strengthens teams and better reflects the communities they serve.

7. Focus on passion and cultural fit

Qualifications are important, but genuine commitment to children and alignment with your values are equally critical.

More Play Please: Balancing Children's Needs with Inspection Demands

Zoe Raven, Julia Warsop, Matt Bawler, Preeti Patel, Sue Robb

This panel explored the importance of play as the foundation of learning in the early years and how leaders can confidently communicate its value to parents, colleagues and inspectors.

A key message was that purposeful play is not separate from learning - it is how young children develop the language, thinking, social skills and resilience needed for lifelong success.



Key Takeaways

1. Be confident in advocating for play

Play is a powerful vehicle for learning and should remain at the heart of early years practice.

2. Link play to visible outcomes

When speaking with parents, connect play experiences to language development, problem-solving, confidence and social skills.

3. Prioritise life readiness over school readiness

Children need communication, independence, resilience and collaboration skills, not just early academic knowledge.

4. Use open-ended resources

Materials such as boxes, fabric and loose parts encourage creativity, exploration and critical thinking.

5. Balance observation and intervention

Effective practitioners know when to step in and when to allow children space to explore independently.

6. Create environments that invite exploration

Flexible spaces and child-led opportunities support deeper engagement than highly structured activities.

7. Recognise the learning happening in play

Careful observation helps practitioners identify and communicate the rich learning taking place during play experiences.

Scaling with Purpose: Smart Growth Strategies within Early Years

Sarah MacKenzie, Clare Roberts, Helena Deacon, Lydia Hopper, Sinead Johnson

This panel explored what purposeful growth looks like in the nursery sector, examining how organisations can expand while maintaining quality, culture and strong relationships with children, families and staff.

A key message was that successful growth is not simply about opening more settings or making acquisitions - it is about protecting what makes a nursery special while creating sustainable opportunities for children, families and teams.



Key Takeaways

1. Prioritise culture over rapid growth

Strong cultural alignment is essential when expanding, particularly through acquisitions.

2. Protect what makes settings unique

Growth should enhance quality while preserving the relationships and community identity families value.

3. Invest in staff from the start

Clear career pathways and development opportunities help retain talented practitioners during periods of growth.

4. Listen before making changes

Understanding the views of staff, parents and local communities leads to more successful integration and improvement.

5. Standardise what matters most

Key systems such as safeguarding and compliance should be consistent, while allowing flexibility for local needs.

6. Communicate openly during change

Transparent and ongoing communication helps build trust with both staff and families.

7. Plan workforce needs ahead of growth

Recruitment, training and succession planning should begin before expansion takes place.

AI in Action: How can Leaders use AI Today

**Ben Rolfe, Angelica De Assis, Caron Moseley-Helbert,
June O'Sullivan**

Sector leaders explored how artificial intelligence is beginning to transform early years leadership, administration and communication. The discussion focused on practical ways AI can reduce workload, improve efficiency and support decision-making, while protecting the relationships that sit at the heart of early years practice.

A key message was that AI should be viewed as a tool to enhance quality and free up time for meaningful human interactions, not as a replacement for the relationships, judgement and care that children, families and teams need.



Key Takeaways

1. Start with the problem, not the technology

Identify repetitive or time-consuming tasks first, then explore whether AI can help solve them.

2. Use AI to create more time for people

Automation should free leaders and practitioners to spend more time with children, families and staff.

3. Understand the difference between AI and digital tools

Digital technology often saves time, while AI can support thinking, planning, problem-solving and decision-making.

4. Protect the human touch

Relationships remain the foundation of early years practice and should never be replaced by technology.

5. Prioritise data security and safeguarding

Clear policies, staff training and secure systems are essential when using AI in any setting.

6. Keep your own voice and professional judgement

AI-generated content should always be reviewed, adapted and aligned with your values and context.

7. Build AI into leadership strategically

Successful adoption starts with clear goals, team involvement and a focus on improving quality rather than simply introducing new technology.

Early Childhood Leadership: Balancing Pedagogy, Policy, and Practice

Corinna Laing, Eleanor Richfield, Jamie Victoria Barnes, Lucy Lewin, Tom Richardson

This panel explored how curriculum and pedagogy can be designed, embedded and sustained in modern early years settings. Speakers discussed balancing educational values with business realities, building confident teams, and creating learning experiences that prepare children for life, not just school.

A key message was that effective curricula are rooted in strong values, meaningful relationships and everyday interactions.



Key Takeaways

1. Create a curriculum grounded in values

Strong curricula reflect a setting's vision, beliefs and what matters most for children's development and wellbeing.

2. Focus on life readiness, not just school readiness

Prioritise confidence, resilience, independence, emotional wellbeing and real-world skills alongside academic learning.

3. Recognise that care routines are learning opportunities

Moments such as mealtimes, nappy changes, dressing and transitions are rich opportunities for connection and learning.

4. Embed curriculum through culture, not compliance

Successful implementation relies on shared understanding, staff buy-in and leadership commitment rather than checklists and paperwork.

5. Build staff confidence through mentoring and modelling

Leaders should create psychologically safe environments where practitioners can learn, experiment and develop their skills.

6. Value presence and relationships

Meaningful interactions and responding to children's needs in the moment often have greater impact than overly complex planning.

7. Understand the business behind quality

Financial sustainability is essential for maintaining high-quality provision, investing in staff and securing positive outcomes for children.

Shaping Excellence in Baby Rooms: Getting It Right for Under 2s

Zoe Raven, Anisah Anaib, Mandy Richardson, Sara Bonetti

This panel explored what excellence looks like in baby room practice, focusing on the importance of relationships, responsive care and creating environments where babies feel safe, secure and understood.

A key message was that high-quality baby room provision is built on slow, attuned pedagogy. Babies learn best when practitioners are fully present, responsive to their needs and able to build strong, consistent relationships with both children and families.



Key Takeaways

1. Prioritise relationships above all else

Strong, secure attachments between babies and educators are the foundation of quality baby room practice.

2. Embrace slow pedagogy

Babies need time, presence and responsive interactions rather than busy schedules and excessive planning.

3. Recognise care routines as learning opportunities

Feeding, nappy changing, sleeping and comforting are central educational experiences that support development and wellbeing.

4. Invest in baby-specific training

Practitioners working with babies require specialist knowledge and professional development tailored to infant development and care.

5. Create consistency for babies

Stable staffing, meaningful key person relationships and predictable routines help babies feel secure and supported.

6. Build strong partnerships with families

Successful transitions depend on trust, communication and understanding each baby's unique needs, routines and experiences.

7. Allow time for thoughtful settling-in

Settling should be individualised, responsive and focused on building positive relationships rather than rushing separation.

Parent Partnerships & Difficult Conversations: Supporting All Families

Emma Kemp, Corinna Laing, Natalie Bishop, Neil Leitch

This panel explored how early years professionals can build strong parent partnerships and approach sensitive conversations with confidence, empathy and respect.

A key message was that effective communication starts with relationships. By using strength-based language, understanding family perspectives and treating parents as partners, practitioners can build trust even during the most challenging conversations.



Key Takeaways

1. Treat parents as partners, not problems

Strong relationships are built when families feel respected, listened to and valued as experts on their own children.

2. Lead with strengths first

Start conversations by celebrating what a child can do before discussing areas where additional support may be needed.

3. Use positive and inclusive language

Avoid jargon, labels and deficit-focused language. The words we choose can significantly influence how families feel and respond.

4. Create a culture of empathy and understanding

Recruit, train and support staff to approach conversations from the family's perspective and with genuine compassion.

5. Reframe difficult conversations as courageous conversations

Changing the language around these discussions can help practitioners feel more confident and prepared.

6. Support the whole family, not just the child

Effective SEND support often involves understanding wider family circumstances and using resources creatively to improve wellbeing.

7. Invest in staff training and coaching

Regular supervision, mentoring and opportunities to practise conversations help build confidence, consistency and communication skills.

Leading Through Change: Embracing a Shifting Sector

Sue Lee, Caroline Negre, Emma Kemp, Lewis Fogarty,
Tim McLachlan

This panel explored how early years leaders can successfully navigate change while maintaining strong teams, high-quality provision and positive outcomes for children.

A key message was that change is constant, but leaders who remain focused on their vision, communicate openly and put people at the centre of decision-making are best placed to lead their teams through uncertainty.



Key Takeaways

1. Keep your vision at the centre of change

A clear purpose helps leaders prioritise decisions and stay focused on what matters most for children, families and staff.

2. Communicate openly and often

Clear, honest and tailored communication builds trust, reduces uncertainty and helps teams feel involved in the change process.

3. Put people before processes

Successful change depends on supporting staff, children and families through transitions with empathy, understanding and consistency.

4. Invest in staff wellbeing and retention

Flexible working, meaningful recognition and opportunities for professional development help create loyal and motivated teams.

5. Strengthen SEND and inclusion support

Strategic investment in specialist expertise, family engagement and accessible training can improve outcomes for children with additional needs.

6. Be comfortable with uncertainty

Leaders do not need all the answers. Being honest, involving others and encouraging collaboration can create clarity and shared ownership.

7. Lead with confidence and courage

Whether managing change, challenging parental expectations or introducing new initiatives, confident leadership helps maintain standards and protect what is best for children.

Brilliant Leadership: Cutting Through the Chaos

Andy Cope

Dr. Andy Cope challenged leaders to rethink their role, arguing that effective leadership begins not with inspiring others, but with being inspired yourself. Drawing on positive psychology research, he explored how attitude, gratitude and everyday habits can influence both personal wellbeing and workplace culture.

A key message was that happiness is a leadership skill that can be developed. By consciously choosing positive mindsets and creating moments of connection, leaders can generate a powerful ripple effect that benefits their teams, children and wider communities.



Key Takeaways

1. Focus on your own inspiration first

Leaders who feel motivated, energised and positive naturally influence the people around them.

2. Stay 'above the line' whenever possible

Approach challenges with curiosity, openness and a willingness to learn rather than defensiveness or blame.

3. Practise gratitude regularly

Simple habits such as reflecting on what is going well can help counteract negativity and improve wellbeing.

4. Understand the ripple effect of your attitude

A leader's mood and behaviour can positively influence colleagues, families and children far beyond their immediate team.

5. Aim for more positive than negative interactions

Positive feedback, encouragement and recognition help build stronger relationships and higher-performing teams.

6. Use the Four-Minute Rule

Short moments of fully engaged, positive leadership can have a significant impact on others.

7. Create a culture of flourishing

Wellbeing is not just about individual happiness; it is about creating environments where everyone can thrive and support one another.