

[Amanda Spielman at the National Day Nurseries Association](#)

It's a pleasure to be here today. Looking at the agenda, you certainly know how to cram in the big issues. Perhaps unusually, inspection is one of the most straightforward items on the agenda today.

No doubt you're aware that we're making some changes to how we inspect. But before I talk more about what this means for early years, I want to thank the NDNA for its collective response to [our consultation](#), and to any of you who responded individually. We had over 15,000 responses in total. That's quite something and the biggest response to any consultation in Ofsted's history.

And our early years supremo, Gill Jones, and her team, have been travelling up and down the country speaking to many of you at our consultation events. As ever, we thank you for engaging so fully and frankly. I was very pleased to see so much support for our plans.

As part of developing the framework, we've also been carrying out pilot inspections, the biggest pilot programme we've ever done. By September, we'll have done more than 250 pilots in all kinds of education providers.

So far, feedback from our early years pilots shows that the new approach is working well. Practitioners and inspectors too are saying that they welcome our emphasis on the curriculum, and what you're teaching children.

I hope that some of you will have had chance to look at [the final framework and handbooks](#) by now, which we published recently. They set out what we'll be looking at on inspections from September onwards.

Today I want to explain some of our changes in more detail, offer some clarity and also allay any fears you may have.

Evolution, not revolution

The experiences children have, and the knowledge they gain for their lives ahead, are central to our changes. This couldn't be more relevant to your work in the early years.

It's natural to feel a degree of unease with the introduction of any new framework. But let me reassure you, this isn't seismic change. As I've said before, we're talking about evolution, not revolution. A rebalancing, if you like, of how we inspect.

The most significant shift is our focus on the 'substance' of education, with the introduction of a 'quality of education' judgement.

This is a move away from the current 'outcomes' and 'teaching learning and assessment' judgements. Instead, we want to know about the quality of

education children receive as a whole. What it's like for children in your setting, whether they are a baby, a toddler, or a child nearly ready to go to school.

We'll be looking at what children are learning, appropriate to their age, and why you've chosen to teach them that. This could be encouraging babies to move, making sure they have enough 'tummy time', through to teaching older children how to take turns by playing games together, or teaching manipulative skills through cooking, painting, or playing with clay.

Put simply, it's the what, the why, and the difference these choices make to children learning, remembering and doing more.

We're also going to be focusing less on data, something I know many of you supported when you responded to our consultation.

Instead, we'll look more closely at how well you know and respond to your children. The cultural capital they bring (more on that later), the knowledge they already have, and what they need to know to prepare them for the next step.

We want to get beyond the numbers to what individual children are learning. Names, not numbers. We'll do this through our conversations with you and from seeing you in action.

So please, don't fill in a form or spreadsheet because you think we want to see it. We want you to have more time to focus on what you do best, giving children the best start in life, rather than on paperwork.

Alongside 'quality of education', we've also introduced new key judgements on 'personal development' and 'behaviour and attitudes'. This separates out what used to be just one judgement on 'personal behaviour and welfare'. Again, I'm glad that so many of you welcomed this move.

It means that we will be looking at what you do to care and educate children in the broadest sense. That includes, among other things, the knowledge and skills you equip children with to improve their life chances. It's also that important work you do to build their physical and emotional health.

I should say, with personal development, that we're not attempting to judge the outcome. We're looking at what you're putting in, and how you're approaching it.

I'll talk in more detail about behaviour and attitudes later. But as you might expect, this is about setting high expectations for children, giving them a positive environment where they can learn and thrive. And it's about how you're responding to poor behaviour, not an expectation that all children must behave well all the time.

The final judgement, for leadership and management, is essentially the same as it is now. We want to know how managers are supporting and helping their staff to do the best possible work with children. And it's about integrity: recognising settings who do the right thing for children, and who resist the

temptation to take short cuts. It's about doing the right thing.

Cultural capital and curriculum

Some of you raised concerns about the language we've used in the new framework, particularly around what we mean by 'curriculum' and 'cultural capital'. So let me unpack some of this now.

You don't need me to tell you that the years between birth and starting school are incredible for lots of reasons. Children's brains develop more quickly, they learn more rapidly between the ages of 0 and 7 than at any other stage. So the experiences children have at this time really count. What you do makes all the difference.

When they start life, most children are given the support and direction they need to do well. But of course, that isn't so for every child. When children arrive in your settings, they will all have had widely different experiences before they get there. I've talked before about lucky and unlucky children, but it's particularly apt here.

Lucky children will already have had lots of positive experiences. Love, affection, strong relationships built with those who care for them. The things they see, words they hear, toys they play with and places they've been. Even in the very young, all these things help to set children on the right path.

We can't expect children to put one foot after the other and get to their destination without someone to show them the way. They need guidance. Each and every contact, choice and intervention matters, especially for the unlucky children. That's where you come in.

Good early years education helps all children make that journey. It levels the way for those children whose journey is a bit steeper, a bit more difficult. Those whose experiences at home are a bit more limited.

And here's where cultural capital is so important. By this, we simply mean the essential knowledge, those standard reference points, that we want all children to have.

All children are at different points on the same path to building that knowledge. You need to recognise where they are, and what they need next. And this pathway needs to be coherent, building on their cumulative experience.

So for example, it's about being able to learn about and name things that are, for many, outside their daily experience.

As adults, all of us know about things we haven't experienced. Few of us will ever visit the Antarctic, a south-sea atoll, or the moon for that matter. And children's enthusiasm for dinosaurs, for example, shows that they can be utterly fascinated with things they will never see and never touch. A child is absolutely capable of learning about things without experiencing them directly.

So it's vital that we don't limit children only to what we're able to put directly in front of them. It's those wonderful activities and resources you choose that give children the words to bring these experiences to life.

And cultural capital isn't a separate 'thing' that inspectors will look at during inspection. It's more a golden thread, woven through everything you do to teach children well. Will we be judging you on it separately? No. Will you need to do a cultural capital course? Of course not.

Cultural capital should be a central part of your curriculum. Again, this is another word that sets hares running needlessly.

Regardless of its connotations, curriculum isn't just something that happens in schools. It's not about learning a series of facts to pass exams. It's much more than that.

The curriculum really is the most important thing to think about as educators. As I said earlier, it's the 'what'. The very essence of what we want children to learn. It's how we prepare them, as best we can, for what they might face next. And to leave children unprepared is, frankly, a dereliction of duty, I'm sure you'd agree.

Of course, this isn't about excessive formality, and treating toddlers like children two or three times their age. We don't expect you to drill them in phonics and times tables.

But the EYFS is 'the skeleton'. It gives a basic outline of what children should know. You put the flesh on its bones. Or to put it another way, if the EYFS is the outline, you decide how to colour it in.

As experts in your field, you must think about and decide what children learn, and how they learn it. You choose all the resources, activities and experiences. Here's where our focus lies.

So yes, we want to see those [basic requirements of the EYFS](#) being met. But how are you going further to make sure all children get the knowledge and skills they need for their next stage?

Sequencing

Going back to our journey analogy. Sequencing does have a part to play here. Most nurseries expose children to an array of wonderful activities and tools that they may not have at home. So a degree of signposting, of showing children the way, is needed. It's not enough to simply put everything out there and hope that something sticks.

This isn't about having some beautiful tick list of what a child should do, and when. If a child is having difficulty with something, it's about stepping in to try a different way. These are the decisions that any good childcare professional makes instinctively.

Practical teachers of most kinds wouldn't give a student a tool without

showing them how to use it. That's how bad habits start, and they're hard to unpick. A child learning the violin must be taught how to hold a bow properly, right from the start. And you don't get a hole-in-one without first perfecting your grip on a golf club.

If we put things in children's hands where there's the potential for them to pick up bad habits, isn't there a responsibility to show them, to teach them, the right way from the very beginning?

Holding a pencil, cutting with scissors, using a knife and fork, doing up the buttons or zip on their coat, and tying shoe laces. These are all really important skills that need to be taught properly, and early on, or else children without them are left at a disadvantage when they get to school.

But to stress again, there's no need for endless photographing and formal recording of this. Any good early years professional, when they see a child struggling with activity Y, will have that lightbulb moment to say 'let's try activity X'.

The importance of vocabulary

And at Ofsted we've spoken a lot about the importance of early language, the vital work you do with children to build and develop their vocabularies. So it won't come as a surprise that this is a continuing theme in our new inspections. Our inspectors will be talking to you about what you're doing to make sure that children learn, remember and use more words.

The reason for this is simple: a good vocabulary sets a child up for life.

A child with plenty of words has agency. Knowing and using more words brings confidence and assuredness. They can communicate well, articulate what they're thinking, get what they want. At the simplest level, it helps them to make friends and fit in socially. It's good for their self-esteem and mental health.

And it's now well accepted that the number of words young children have has a bearing on how well they go on to do at school, as well as their success in adulthood for that matter. Children with poor language and communication skills when they get to school are less likely to do well in tests when they're 11, and twice as likely to be unemployed in their thirties. Those are pretty stark statistics.

So the more words a child has heard and knows by the time they start school, the better.

What will this mean for you? Well we aren't asking you do anything radically different. We're quite clear that it's not your job to teach children to read. But you do have an amazing opportunity to develop children's spoken language, the words they understand and use. It's about getting the path to reading right.

You can make sure that children have lots of lovely activities that build and

develop their vocabularies. And that all children benefit, not just the ones who put themselves forward.

These are all the things you and your staff do so well, day in, day out. Listening and talking to children, introducing new words all the time and encouraging them to use them. Rewarding curiosity about language. Reading then comes more easily when children do start school.

But while vocabulary can be picked up through activities and in every day conversation, there will always be some words that need to be taught quite explicitly.

So please, don't be afraid to teach where you think that a child needs to be taught. This is especially relevant for those children who come in with fewer words. What do they need if you are to send them out fully prepared for their next stage?

The power of reading

I often mention reading aloud when speaking to an early years audience, today is no exception. So forgive me for banging the drum once again. But reading really is one of the best things you can do to help children increase their vocabulary. Stories, rhymes and songs all help children to learn new words that aren't always going to come through everyday conversations.

Take two past favourites in our house. Maurice Sendak's Wild Things 'roared their terrible roars and gnashed their terrible teeth'. And the words of Beatrix Potter in the Tale of the Flopsy Bunnies 'It is said that the effect of eating too much lettuce is "soporific"'.

So there are a whole host of words in those simple lines that children will rarely hear through day to day chatter, however articulate the adult.

Listening to a well-read story is a joy most of us will remember from childhood. It's sensory, exciting. It helps to give children a love of reading and books, as well as some much-wanted attention. What toddler doesn't love cuddling up with a book?

And it may be a dying art in some homes. According to a recent (and fairly depressing) report, some parents are delegating the task of bedtime story to digital assistants, like Alexa.

Of course, I'm not criticising time-pressed families, who are under many pressures. But a child is going to get so much more benefit from the interaction with mum, dad, or someone else reading aloud than they would do from hearing words through a screen or device.

The Literacy Trust reported that last year around 1 in 4 five-year-olds started primary school without the language and communication skills expected for their age. So nurseries like yours really can even the playing field. Especially for children who aren't lucky enough to get that exposure to words at home.

It's too simplistic to say that reading alone is suddenly going to make all children's lives better. There are many socio-economic factors at play here. But it's an area that can certainly make a difference.

Again, that's where you come in. Giving all children the words they need to get on in life, from babyhood onwards, really is one of the most important things that the early years can do. Especially for those children who arrive with less.

Behaviour and attitudes

I also want to talk briefly about our new judgement on 'behaviour and attitudes'. I know some of you were concerned about what this means in practice.

Let's be clear. You aren't going to get a lower inspection judgement if a usually angelic little Dylan hits Simone because he wants her toy. Unwanted behaviour is going to happen, and all children behave unpredictably from time to time.

But helping children learn how to regulate their own behaviour is a fundamental job of the early years. You sit in that in-between period of a child's life, after they have been entirely at home with family and before school, where they have to be part of a much larger social group.

Really good nurseries teach children, gently, how to deal with group dynamics. In fact, recent studies show that socialisation is one of the biggest advantages of nurseries. Then when they do get to school the challenges of a much bigger, more formal learning environment don't come as such a shock to the system. But more than that, you're preparing children for life in the adult world.

It's so important that children learn how to behave with others. What is acceptable behaviour, how to make friends, how to be kind. Children who learn how to regulate their own behaviour from a young age have an advantage for life.

So our inspectors aren't going to penalise you for unwanted behaviour. Not every child has to be 'good', in inverted commas. What we want to see is how you deal with this behaviour when it happens, and model better behaviour in future. How are you helping children manage their feelings? Do you make sure they recognise the impact of what they do on others?

Today I've spoken a lot about our new inspections and of what's to come in September. This really is an opportunity for you to simplify what you do. We're not looking for whizzy, convoluted ways of doing things.

As ever, with something new comes the inevitable industry in learning events, courses and consultants. Each one offering advice about what Ofsted is looking for, how to ace your new style inspection. But you can rest assured that these really aren't necessary.

If you're doing something because you think we want to see it and it doesn't benefit your children, then please, don't do it.

Do what you do best. Open up windows for your children, into all the exciting worlds that exist beyond the home. Give them the skills to do well at school and in life beyond. Focus on this, and not on what Ofsted wants. If you do that, then inspection will take care of itself.