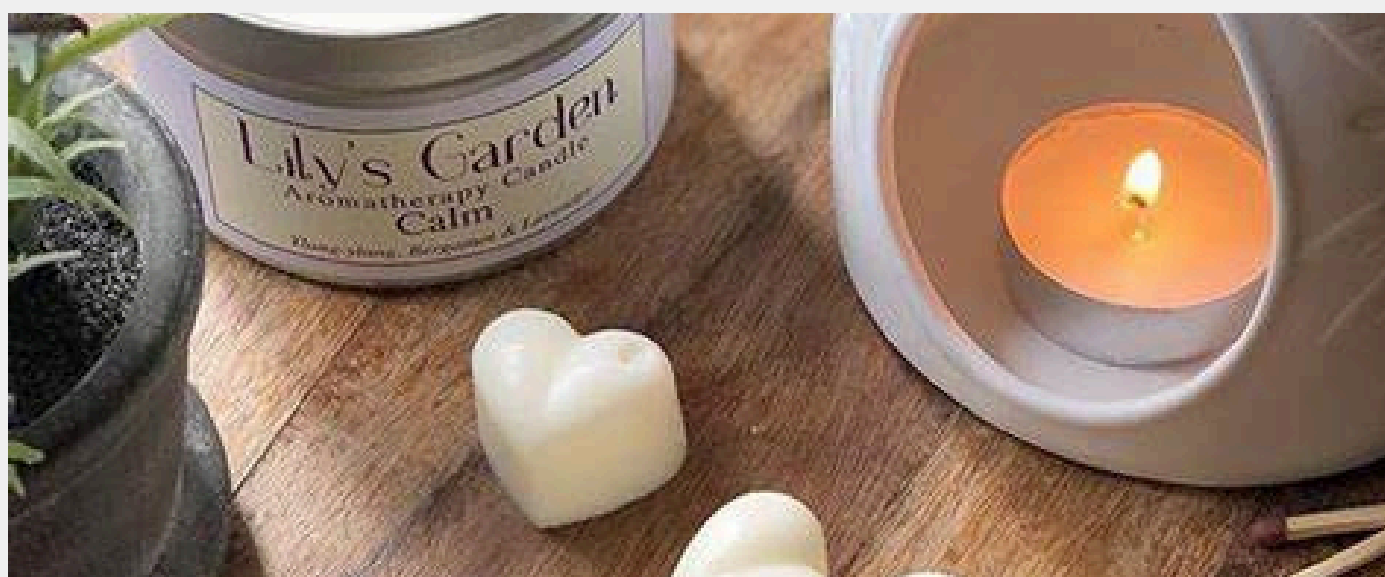




Kathryn is a Maintained Nursery School Headteacher at Childhaven Nursery School in Scarborough. The four times rated outstanding nursery school is the lead setting of the Yorkshire and Humber Together Early Years Stronger Practice Hub and holds several awards. In June 2025 the school became a Nurture School and has been developing its nurturing practices. In this four-part series, Kathryn considers the impact of nurturing practices, which focuses on adult to adult, and adult to child relationships. She will also explore the impact of using a nurture-based scale to monitor practice with our youngest children who might have SEND.

# NURTURING MINDS



## PART 2: How can leaders monitor nurture?

Following on from part 1 when we looked at the value of nurturing the workforce, in this blog Kathryn considers the value and benefits of monitoring nurturing practices and putting these at the centre of whole setting improvement.

As the headteacher of a maintained nursery school, monitoring quality has to be at the heart of driving forwards school improvement. All too often however, the expectation can become on sharing 'data'. Numbers, figures, improvements that are mathematical. These things are easy to interpret externally. I see their place. However, knowing what I do about how progress in our youngest children demonstrates itself, I know that numbers will never tell the story. I often find myself pondering about how to demonstrate progress. How do you measure the strength of a relationship or show the progress made in a young baby settling in to nursery and the potential that that will bring?

In part 1 you will have read that at my school we have embarked on a journey to define and develop nurturing practices as a powerful tool in supporting young children's learning. Part 1 talked about how important it is to ensure our adults are ready and that we are considering nurturing them so that they can in turn nurture children. In part 2 I explore how we as leaders can monitor nurture and make key improvements that support all-round development.

We know and understand the importance of children being ready and willing to access opportunities to extend their learning and development, but all too often, the 'measures' that leaders take are around outcomes. If we want to make a real difference to young children, we can unpick the conditions in which they learn and the nurturing practices that support these.

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Key sources of evidence have been important in shaping my thoughts in relation to recognising the value of using nurturing practices as a monitoring tool. In particular the Early Years Evidence Store

*“Evidence consistently shows that educators can implement approaches that benefit young children’s personal, social and emotional development (PSED)”*

If we look at the approaches that have been identified to support PSED, they almost all have roots in nurturing practices;

1. **Teaching Awareness of Emotions and Feelings.** Helping children to notice the connection between their physical reactions, feelings, and core emotions, and to express their emotions and feelings.
2. **Teaching and Modelling Managing Emotions and Feelings.** Working with children to teach and model different ways of managing strong emotions, considering impact on others and the environments children are in.
3. **Teaching and Modelling Social Communication.** Teaching children to notice body language, spoken words, and how to listen and respond in appropriate ways, including being a helper and help seeker.
4. **Teaching Relationship Skills.** Teaching children the value of connecting with others and the skills needed to build relationships over time.
5. **Teaching How to Sustain Positive Relationships.** Teaching appropriate behaviours and strategies for effective collaboration with others.
6. **Promoting Self-care.** Supporting children’s motivation to care for themselves. Children are taught to express their needs in relation to health and hygiene. They learn to risk assess and stay safe.
7. **Developing Self-Regulation and Executive Function.** Self-regulation involves a complex range of skills and abilities that enable children to monitor their emotions and thoughts and choose how to adapt their behaviour in different circumstances. Self-regulation supports children’s executive function and the two are closely interrelated.

Such is the impact of **self regulation and executive function**, a whole separate theme in the early years evidence store has emerged. All elements are strongly linked to nurturing practices.

*“A child’s ability to regulate their own thoughts, feelings, and behaviours and their executive function is supported by responsive interactions with others. Caregivers, such as parents and educators, play a large role in providing these crucial, regulation-supporting interactions, but siblings and peers can provide them too. When adults create consistent, predictable routines, they develop an emotionally safe environment. This helps children feel secure, know what to expect, and makes the development of regulation skills more manageable.”*

*“Co-regulation occurs when a child receives warm, responsive support from an adult to bridge the gap between the child’s current and their potential capacity to regulate in a particular task or situation. Soothing, calming, and supportive interactions with trusted adults play a crucial role in enabling children to regulate and develop their self-regulation skills. Adults help to develop children’s awareness and understanding of their thoughts, emotions, and actions to underpin their ability to regulate them. An adult’s own level of self-regulation, emotional availability, and capacity for regulation in the moment can play a part in the success of co-regulation and coaching self-regulation.”*

Approaches that have been identified to support self regulation and executive function;

1. **Creating and navigating challenge:** Creating developmentally appropriate challenges for children to develop and practise their skills in different contexts.
2. **Teaching self-monitoring and self-awareness:** Helping children to develop an awareness of their own thoughts and emotions, including how their feelings can influence their actions and vice versa.
3. **Creating a community of collaborative learners:** Facilitating collaborative groups of learners where adults and children cooperate and work towards shared goals.
4. **Promoting physical activity:** educators proactively and regularly organise opportunities for children to engage in physical activity.
5. **Promoting talk about learning:** Encouraging talk that enables children to plan, monitor, and reflect on their thinking and learning, including how they plan to approach or adapt an activity and evaluating this afterwards.

It is clear that the base from which a child can learn is critical and therefore should be measured and we should challenge practice here long before we look at numerical outcomes for children. Here is our power to have the most impact. Again I consulted the Love and Nurture Rating Scales (Bradbury & Grimmer 2024) as I considered a whole school approach to nurture and I looked at all aspects of the day from early morning to late finish times.

*Happy and confident children who are able to access learning opportunities and challenge themselves*

NEED

*Happy, confident and secure staff who are fully available to give themselves to these children*

## WHAT CAN LEADERS LOOK FOR?



*Look for.....relaxed drop off times with parents taking time and talking to staff.....access to outdoors as children arrive....individual greetings.....interesting open ended opportunities*

Can parents come into your setting?  
Is there a relaxed start that is child led, and able to flex with their emotions on the day?

Can children go with their parent to wherever they choose to play?

Is your outdoor area open and ready to offer a calm start?

Is there a level of continuity for children so that they can plan what they are going to do?

Do adults greet each child by name?  
Do adults look ready and available for children they arrive?

Do adults remind children of what they did yesterday and can the child carry on with their plans?



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## WHAT CAN LEADERS LOOK FOR?

*Look for.....staff talking about what children have done....staff talking about family members as children play....visual representation of families in the setting... opportunities for siblings to be together*



Do staff know children and families well?  
(including for example the names of siblings)

Can the child see familiarity – e.g. family photographs when they come into the setting?

Is there a reflection of the different cultures represented in the setting community?  
Do staff share things that children have done well with families, the children, and each other?



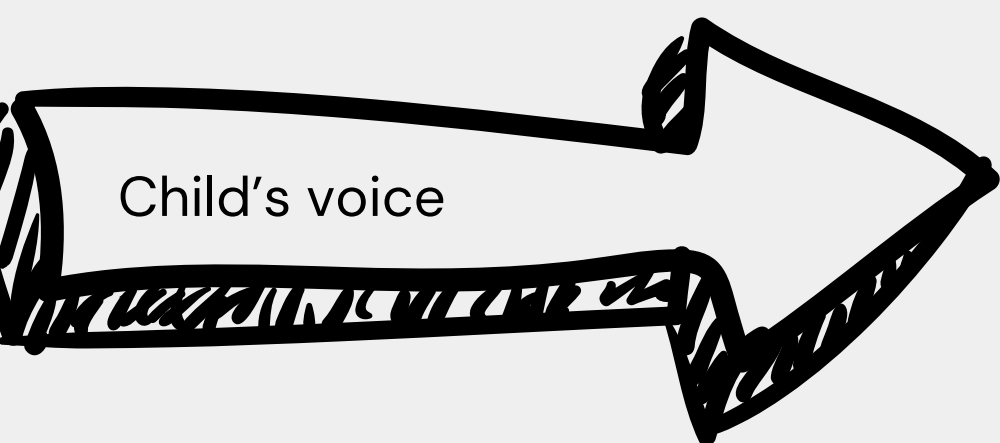
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## WHAT CAN LEADERS LOOK FOR?



*Look for.....open ended materials being used uniquely...adults asking children what they need.. children planning out loud...adults joining in with children's play...look for pure JOY!*

- Can you hear staff sharing things that children have said and done?
- Is provision ready for these children today (and not some children some day)?
- Is there evidence of small adjustments with particular children in mind?
- Do children naturally carry on their interests and pick up where they left off?
- Can you hear planning between adults and children (and adults and adults adjusting their plans)?
- Are adults playing with children in their games rather than observing them from the outside? Do children assign them roles?
- Do adults paint when children paint?
- Do adults help children gather what they need?



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NEED

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## WHAT CAN LEADERS LOOK FOR?



*Look for....adults and children having fun together....close connections....adults at child level....the pace being dictated by children....children seeking out adults*

Do children seek out the staff for help?  
Can clear key person relationships be seen?

When children are dysregulated, are the adults calm and do they get alongside them at their level?

Do adults validate children's feelings and display empathy?

Is there a climate of resilience being modelled by adults – do they talk about their own challenges and say things like "This is hard for me, let me try again"



Emotional support

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