



## Deep dive into British values in the early years

In early childhood education, values such as kindness and compassion are not taught like the alphabet or numbers. They are lived, experienced, and embodied through daily routines, relationships, and the culture of the setting. Since 2014, early years practitioners have had a statutory duty to promote the Fundamental British Values (FBVs), but this is not just about policy compliance. These values are about nurturing fairness, respect, confidence, and community awareness in the youngest members of British society.

This in-depth guide explores what British values mean in the early years context, how to embed them meaningfully across your practice, and how to work in partnership with families and carers to reinforce these values at home. As practitioners who are already under pressure to deliver a wide and varied curriculum, British values should not be seen as an added burden, but as an integral part of our everyday work to help children grow into kind, thoughtful, and resilient human beings.

## What are the Fundamental British Values (FBV)?

Outlined by the Department for Education in 2015, the four British values are:

-  **Democracy**
-  **The rule of law**
-  **Individual liberty**
-  **Mutual respect and tolerance of those with different faiths and beliefs**

Although termed “British,” these are values shared by many democratic societies, and they are not a statement of nationalism or superiority. Their purpose is to support social cohesion, inclusion, and to help education institutions, including early years settings, prepare their children for life in modern Britain. This means being able to understand and participate knowledgeably in some of our systems, such as the:

-  Legal system
-  Education system
-  Political system
-  Healthcare system
-  Judicial, as part of the legal system



In the early years, these values should be experienced through play, interaction, and environment – not taught as abstract concepts or standalone lessons.

## Why are these values important in early years?

The early years are a critical time for emotional, moral, and social development. Whilst the British values may seem impersonal when read on paper, in practice, they are deeply embedded in the EYFS principles, especially those that promote personal, social and emotional development (PSED). Practitioners who model fairness, respect and inclusion help shape children's sense of right and wrong, identity, and how to relate to others.

By weaving these values into the day-to-day life of your setting, you are:

- 🇬🇧 Supporting emotional regulation and conflict resolution
- 🇬🇧 Encouraging independence and personal responsibility
- 🇬🇧 Building empathy, cultural awareness, and appreciation for difference
- 🇬🇧 Creating a consistent and safe learning environment

## Exploring each value in practice

### 1. Democracy: Everyone has a voice

At the heart of democracy is the belief that everyone's voice matters – and that includes the voices of our youngest citizens, so they grow up with this core value. In the early years, promoting democracy doesn't mean holding elections or parliamentary debates, but rather creating an environment where children are encouraged to make choices, express opinions and contribute to decisions that affect them. It's about listening, valuing individual perspectives, and encouraging a sense of fairness and mutual respect. By modelling democratic practices in your setting, you help children learn to share, take turns, and understand that their thoughts and feelings are important – vital lessons for both now and the future.

Young children can begin to understand democratic principles through:

- 🇬🇧 Choosing between stories or snacks
- 🇬🇧 Taking part in votes to decide group activities
- 🇬🇧 Planning parts of their day with adult support
- 🇬🇧 Taking turns and listening during circle time



**Examples:** In a pre-school room and with adult support, children could vote on whether to play “pirates” or “space explorers” in the role-play area. Staff can create tally charts and celebrate every vote as part of respecting everyone’s opinion.

## 2. The rule of law: Understanding rules and boundaries

The rule of law is about understanding the importance of rules in keeping us safe, fair and respectful towards one another. In early years settings, this means helping children learn what is expected of them and why. Clear boundaries, consistent routines and age-appropriate explanations all support children in developing a sense of right and wrong. When we also help children understand the reasons behind rules – rather than simply enforcing them – we nurture responsibility, cooperation and self-regulation. It’s about creating a calm, respectful environment where children know the rules are there to help everyone feel secure and included. You will probably find that they come up with their own ideas too.

Children learn the importance of rules by experiencing them fairly and consistently.

- 🇬🇧 Use simple, visual “golden rules” posters
- 🇬🇧 Discuss why rules exist (“We walk inside to stay safe”)
- 🇬🇧 Involve children in creating group rules
- 🇬🇧 Use predictable consequences for actions

**Examples:** Think about working with children to co-create a “Kindness Code” with images drawn by the children themselves. Display these at the children’s eye level in key areas like the home corner and reading tent. Talk to children about any rules they may want to come up with during any inventive play time, and make sure they understand why they want to include them.



## 3. Individual liberty: Freedom within safe boundaries

Individual liberty is all about empowering children to make their own choices and express themselves in a safe and supportive environment. In early years settings, this means giving children the freedom to explore, take appropriate risks, and follow their own interests. Whether they are choosing an activity, expressing their feelings, or sharing their ideas, you can help children develop confidence and independence by promoting these actions. When children feel valued and listened to, they learn that their voice matters and this will serve them well later when participating in wider society.

Children should feel confident to make choices, explore their identity, and express themselves safely. You can encourage this by:



- 🇬🇧 Offering open-ended activities and child-led play
- 🇬🇧 Celebrating differences and unique preferences
- 🇬🇧 Respecting children's "no" when appropriate
- 🇬🇧 Supporting problem-solving and independent thinking

**Examples:** Where possible, allow children to fully explore an activity they're drawn to. For example, if a two-year-old repeatedly returns to a water tray while others move to a group craft, allow them the space to continue investigating the water (with adequate supervision). Even better if your staff can then extend this child's preference by playing pouring and floating games, supporting freedom of choice while gently encouraging group involvement later.

#### 4. Mutual respect and tolerance: Living with difference

Mutual respect and tolerance involve recognising and celebrating the differences between people as a normal part of everyday life, whether that's their beliefs, cultures, abilities or opinions. In early years, this means helping children understand that everyone is unique and worthy of respect and kindness. Through stories, play and positive role-modelling, you can introduce the idea that it's okay for others to think, look or live differently from us. These early lessons in empathy and acceptance shape the way children treat others as they grow up and lay the groundwork for a more inclusive society going forward.

This means helping children see difference as normal, valued and interesting. For example:

- 🇬🇧 Use diverse books and resources reflecting various cultures, families and abilities
- 🇬🇧 Celebrate festivals with real meaning and context
- 🇬🇧 Challenge stereotypes gently (e.g. "Girls can be firefighters too")
- 🇬🇧 Encourage empathy through stories and role play

**Examples:** Embrace children's cultural heritage. For example, during Lunar New Year, encourage a child with Chinese heritage to share photos or stories about how their family celebrates it. Empower staff to encourage meaningful questions and perhaps undertake an art activity based on traditional decorations.



## Making British values part of everyday life

British values should not be a wall display pulled out before Ofsted arrives. They must be embedded in the very fabric and ethos of your setting. Think about:

### Staff culture and ethos

- 🇬🇧 Model respect, fairness and inclusion
- 🇬🇧 Use kind language and resolve conflicts in a calm and professional manner
- 🇬🇧 Create a reflective culture where the voices of all team members matter

### Daily routines

- 🇬🇧 Use group decisions in transitions or tidy-up games
- 🇬🇧 Encourage respect if disagreements occur during play
- 🇬🇧 Show how rules apply to adults and children alike

### Planning and provision

- 🇬🇧 Include different values in your medium-term planning
- 🇬🇧 Choose topics that explore fairness, feelings and community
- 🇬🇧 Use stories to prompt conversation about choice, difference or kindness



## Linking British values to EYFS Learning Goals

British values are not separate from the EYFS; they are deeply interconnected, especially in areas such as:

- 🇬🇧 **Personal, Social and Emotional Development (PSED)** – including forming relationships, managing feelings and behaviour, and developing self-confidence
- 🇬🇧 **Understanding the World** – helping children explore cultures, communities and ways of life
- 🇬🇧 **Communication and Language** – encouraging children to express preferences, ask questions, and listen to others

If, during free play, you observe a child saying, “No, it’s my turn now,” and another responds, “OK, you go first.” This simple exchange reflects the values of both individual liberty and mutual respect, which can be linked directly to PSED goals.

By embedding the principles of the British values into your observation notes, planning and assessments, you can create a setting where these principles naturally form part of the children's development and progress observations.

## Working with parents to support shared values

We’ve talked about how the British values are not exclusively British. Many other countries and individuals also embody these values, and there are many families which have these, and other values as part of their family ideals. Children thrive when they receive consistent messages from home and their early years setting, so shared values – even if expressed differently – can help children feel secure, understand expectations, and develop an internal moral compass.

Aligning values between yourself as a practitioner and the families and carers you support can help children’s:

- 🇬🇧 Emotional regulation and attachment
- 🇬🇧 Clarity about behaviour expectations
- 🇬🇧 Sense of identity and belonging

Here are some ways you can do this as a setting:







### Communicate your values clearly

When communicating British values to parents, avoid jargon and explain what the values mean in everyday language. For example:

- 🇬🇧 “We support independence by letting children make choices.”
- 🇬🇧 “We help children understand fairness through turn-taking games.”

Display your setting’s values in child-friendly ways on the walls, in handbooks, and on your website.

### Engage families in values conversations and practical activities

- 🇬🇧 Ask about cultural or religious values during settling-in sessions
- 🇬🇧 Include value-themed questions in feedback forms
- 🇬🇧 Co-create a “values tree” or shared display including quotes from parents and carers
- 🇬🇧 Create kindness jars or values cards to take home
- 🇬🇧 Set up a story book lending library with themes of empathy or fairness
- 🇬🇧 Run workshops or coffee mornings to explore child development and behaviour related to values
- 🇬🇧 Organise cultural celebration weeks with family input on food, stories or music






## How to embed British values in everyday practice

Embedding British values in early years settings doesn't have to be complicated or very formal. In fact, the most meaningful learning often happens through everyday routines, interactions, and play. By weaving these values into your setting's ethos, environment, and experiences, children will naturally begin to develop an early understanding of respect, fairness, and community. The key is to be intentional and model the values yourself, as well as providing opportunities for children to explore them in ways that are natural, age-appropriate, and rooted in real life. Here are some things you can do:

### Audit your environment and practice





Use reflective tools or questions, such as:

-  Are values visible in your planning and practice?
-  Do staff understand how to explain values clearly in child-friendly language?
-  Is your environment inclusive and diverse in its resources and marketing?

Consider creating a simple internal audit sheet for termly review.

### Staff training and CPD

Use staff meetings or insets to explore:

-  How to role-model the values you are focusing on
-  Using inclusive language in daily interactions
-  Dealing with unconscious bias
-  Reviewing situations where values have not been appropriately upheld

### "Value of the Month/Week" strategy

Choose one value to highlight each month/week and involve families and children in activities around it. For example, "Kindness" could involve a kindness tree, stories about helpfulness, and kindness/thank you notes for peers.

## Induction and policy integration

Ensure British values are included in your:

- 🇬🇧 Staff inductions
- 🇬🇧 Parent welcome packs
- 🇬🇧 Safeguarding and behaviour policies
- 🇬🇧 Planning templates and reflection tools



## What to do if values appear to clash

At times, families may hold beliefs that feel at odds with aspects of your curriculum and British values. This can be areas such as expected gender roles, festival celebrations or the use of inclusive language. These situations can be challenging but they also offer a vital opportunity for relationship-building. In situations where there may be a potential conflict between the setting and the parents/carers, always approach with respect and professionalism.

- 🇬🇧 Remain open, calm and non-judgemental
- 🇬🇧 Emphasise the intent behind your work – fairness, inclusion and preparation for life in a diverse, modern British society which operates on the basis of these values
- 🇬🇧 Refer to your setting's Equality and Diversity Policy and the mandatory safeguarding Prevent Duty if needed
- 🇬🇧 Involve your local authority or safeguarding team if you feel that there is a safeguarding issue

Respectful, ongoing dialogue can turn potential tension into shared understanding.



## British values and safeguarding

Promoting British values is closely linked to safeguarding and the Prevent Duty, which focuses on protecting children from radicalisation and extremist views. Embedding British values into your safeguarding and everyday culture ensures children feel emotionally and physically safe to grow and express themselves.

Practitioners should:

- 🇬🇧 Be alert to discriminatory language or behaviour
- 🇬🇧 Challenge misaligned behaviour or comments kindly but clearly
- 🇬🇧 Create an environment where children can ask questions without shame
- 🇬🇧 Use books, stories and discussions to build empathy and resilience
- 🇬🇧 Understand their duty to report safeguarding concerns that relate to extremism or prejudice

**Examples:** If a child says, "He can't play because he looks different," a practitioner might respond, "We're all different, and that's something we celebrate here. Everyone is welcome in our setting and our games." Another example might be when a child continuously breaks a rule. Explain to them why there are rules in place (to keep everyone safe) but don't allow them to continue breaking the rule without being challenged.

## Conclusion: Create a culture not a checklist

Promoting British values is not about politics or patriotism – it's about nurturing empathy, fairness, respect and belonging, which are universal human values. These values help children understand themselves and others, manage relationships, and grow into socially responsible citizens.

When these values are embedded authentically through inclusive planning, thoughtful modelling and strong family partnerships, they become part of "how we do things here."

Let's not teach values by name alone. Let's show children what they feel like, look like, and sound like every day.



## References and further reading

- 🇬🇧 Department for Education (2015). [Promoting fundamental British values as part of SMSC in schools](#)
- 🇬🇧 Ofsted (2023). [Education inspection framework – Early Years guidance](#)
- 🇬🇧 [Parents and partners – Birth to Five Matters](#)
- 🇬🇧 Julian Grenier (2021). [Working with the Revised EYFS: Principles into Practice](#)
- 🇬🇧 [Prevent Duty Guidance \(2023 Update\): gov.uk](#)
- 🇬🇧 [How Can Early Years Settings Promote British Values? - Early Years Careers](#)
- 🇬🇧 [Inclusive practice and equalities – Birth To 5 Matters](#)
- 🇬🇧 [Working in partnership with parents and carers – gov.uk](#)
- 🇬🇧 [6 Top Strategies for Effective Parent Partnerships in Early Years](#)



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