



# How to Overcome Setbacks in the Workplace

The early years sector is incredibly rewarding - watching children learn, grow, and thrive is why most of us chose this path. However, we know it can also be equally demanding. From dealing with challenging behaviour to unexpected Ofsted inspections, funding pressures, or even team conflicts, setbacks are inevitable. Whether you're an apprentice, a room leader, or a manager, learning how to bounce back when things go wrong is essential for both personal well-being and professional success.

This guide explores why setbacks happen, how they can affect us, and - most importantly - practical strategies to help you recover, learn, and grow stronger.

Let's dive in!



## Understanding what a setback really is

First things first: a setback is not the end of the road. It's a temporary hurdle, not a permanent barrier. In early years settings, setbacks come in many forms:

- ▶ A lesson plan that doesn't work out
- ▶ A failed observation or negative feedback
- ▶ Staff shortages or sickness, creating stress
- ▶ Struggling to meet deadlines for paperwork or assessments
- ▶ A challenging conversation with parents

It's natural to feel frustrated, disappointed, or even defeated when these things happen.

However, it's important to remember that these setbacks also present opportunities to build resilience and enhance practice.



## Recognise your emotional response

When something goes wrong, your first reaction might be emotional: upset, worry, anger, or even embarrassment. This is completely normal. However, acknowledging your emotions instead of suppressing them is key to responding effectively. Try these strategies:

- ▶ **Pause before reacting.** Even a few minutes of calm breathing or a quick walk can help you think clearly
- ▶ **Label what you're feeling.** Saying to yourself, "I feel anxious because I'm worried I let my team down", helps you separate the emotion from the event
- ▶ **Avoid blame (self or others).** Instead of thinking, "I'm terrible at this," reframe it as "This is a problem to solve - what can I learn from it?"

### Top tips

**For apprentices and junior team members:** Don't panic if you make mistakes while learning. Everyone starts somewhere, and your willingness to learn is more important than perfection.

**For leaders and managers:** Show your team that it's okay to admit mistakes. When leaders model calm and constructive responses, the team feel supported and safe to do the same.

## Recognise your emotional response

Dwelling on the problem keeps you stuck. Asking the right questions will help to move you forward:

- ▶ What exactly happened?
- ▶ Why did it happen – was it something within my control?
- ▶ What can I do differently next time?
- ▶ Who can help me resolve this?



### Example:

- ▶ **Problem-focused mindset:** "The activity failed. I'm terrible at planning."
- ▶ **Solution-focused mindset:** "On this occasion, the activity didn't engage the children. Next time, I'll ask colleagues for ideas and adapt them to their interests."

This approach stops setbacks from becoming personal failures and frames them as learning opportunities.

## Build a personal action plan for recovery

Once you've analysed the situation, you can start putting things right. Remember, a structured approach prevents you from feeling overwhelmed. Let's take this step-by-step:

### Step 1: Break it down

Identify the single most urgent thing you need to do first. Then tackle the rest in order.

### Step 2: Ask for support

- ▶ Apprentices can speak to a mentor or their tutor
- ▶ Team members can ask room leaders for guidance
- ▶ Managers can consult trusted advisors or peers in other settings

### Step 3: Take small, consistent steps

Even a little progress each day builds momentum and confidence.

### Step 4: Review and adjust

Check if your actions are working - and if not, tweak them without self-criticism.





## Strengthen your resilience every day

Resilience is the ability to bounce back when things go wrong. Think of it like a muscle; it grows the more you use it.

### Practical ways to build resilience in your early years role:

- ▶ **Stay connected.** Build positive relationships with colleagues - a supportive team can lift you up after tough days
- ▶ **Look after your well-being.** Sleep, healthy food, and breaks are not luxuries; they're essentials to stay balanced
- ▶ **Keep learning.** Whether through formal courses or informal discussions, new knowledge boosts confidence.
- ▶ **Celebrate small wins.** Don't wait for big milestones - notice and appreciate progress along the way

#### Tip for Managers

Encourage reflective practice sessions where staff can share experiences openly. When everyone sees setbacks as a normal part of growth, morale improves.



## Strategies for common setbacks

When an observation or inspection goes badly:

- ▶ **Review feedback calmly** - look for specific points, not just overall impressions
- ▶ **Take immediate corrective action** on anything urgent (e.g., health and safety, safeguarding)
- ▶ **Create an improvement plan** - even small changes show commitment and professionalism
- ▶ **Ask for another colleague's perspective** - they may see strengths you've missed

When you make a mistake with paperwork or admin:

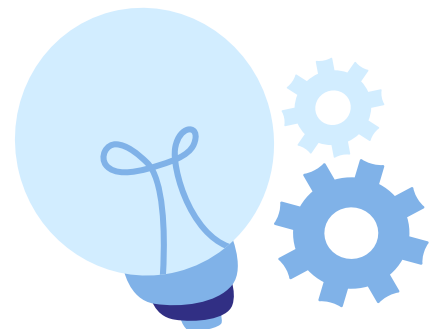
- ▶ **Admit it quickly** - this prevents problems from snowballing
- ▶ **Find out exactly what needs fixing** - is it a form, a calculation, or a deadline?
- ▶ **Create a system** - digital tools or checklists can prevent repeat errors

When there's conflict in the team:

- ▶ **Address issues early** - don't let resentment grow
- ▶ **Focus on behaviour, not personalities** - "We need to improve communication" rather than "You're always rude."
- ▶ **Seek mediation if needed** - managers can step in or involve external HR support if the issue is serious

When parents complain or raise concerns:

- ▶ **Listen fully before responding**
- ▶ **Acknowledge their feelings** - even if you disagree!
- ▶ **Offer clear solutions or actions** to show you take it seriously
- ▶ **Follow up** so they know it hasn't been forgotten



## Use reflection as a 'Growth Tool'

Reflection isn't just for when you're doing a course or apprenticeship - it's a lifelong skill for everyone in early years and is essential for personal and professional growth. After a setback:

- 1 **Describe the situation clearly.**
- 2 **Analyse what went well** - there's always something positive, even if small.
- 3 **Identify what could improve.**
- 4 **Write down lessons learned** - and share with your team (if appropriate).

Managers can integrate reflection into staff meetings or supervisions. Apprentices can use it to develop coursework evidence of professional development.

## Know when to seek help

Sometimes setbacks feel overwhelming - and that's when reaching out is crucial.

- ▶ **For apprentices:** Speak to your tutor or setting manager. They expect you to have questions and need guidance
- ▶ **For staff members:** Approach your room leader or a trusted colleague - sharing reduces stress
- ▶ **For managers:** Networks such as local authority forums, nursery owner groups, or professional associations offer peer advice and moral support

If stress starts affecting your health - lack of sleep, frequent headaches, or feeling constantly anxious - consider professional help, such as your GP or an employee well-being service if your setting has one.



## Create a positive culture around setbacks

The best settings treat mistakes as learning opportunities rather than reasons for punishment. This requires everyone - from junior members of staff to managers - to agree on some ground rules:

- ▶ **Open communication:** Encourage honesty (without fear)
- ▶ **Constructive feedback:** Focus on solutions, not blame
- ▶ **Shared learning:** When one person overcomes a challenge, let the whole team benefit from the insight
- ▶ **Celebrating resilience:** Acknowledge effort as much as achievement

When staff see that setbacks won't harm their reputation if handled well, they're far more likely to act quickly and effectively.

## Turning setbacks into strengths

The most successful early years professionals aren't the ones who never face difficulties - they're the ones who use challenges to grow. Each time you:

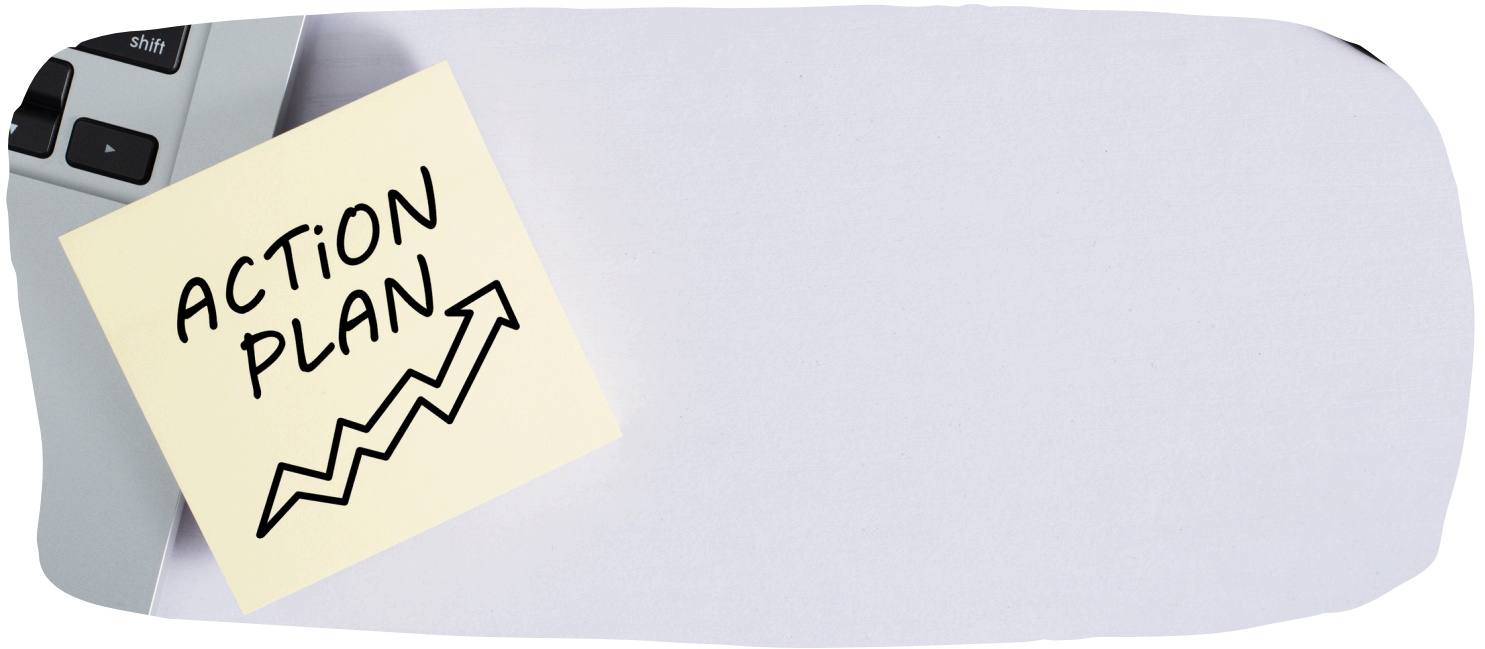
- ▶ Stay calm under pressure,
- ▶ Ask for help without shame,
- ▶ Learn from feedback, and
- ▶ Keep going even when things feel tough...

...you're building skills that make you stronger, more capable, and more valuable in your role.

KEEP GOING.  
KEEP GROWING.







## Key takeaways and action steps

- 1 Acknowledge your emotions** - it's normal to feel upset or frustrated.
- 2 Shift to solution-focused thinking** - ask "what can I learn?" rather than "why me?"
- 3 Make a recovery plan** - small steps are better than no action.
- 4 Build resilience daily** - good habits, reflection, and teamwork make setbacks easier to handle.
- 5 Use setbacks as growth opportunities** - every challenge makes you better at your job.
- 6 Seek support when needed** - you're never alone in this sector.
- 7 Foster a positive workplace culture** - one where mistakes are part of the learning journey.

## Final thought

Working in early years and becoming the best practitioner you can is far from just about helping children build resilience - it's about building it in ourselves, too. Whether you're in your first role, running a busy room or managing an entire setting, setbacks will, and do, happen. But with the right mindset and strategies, you can face them with confidence, recover quickly, and keep doing what you do best - giving children the very best start in life.

# Parenta Solutions



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### EYFS LEARNING JOURNEY TRACKER - FOOTSTEPS 2

- Record meaningful and detailed EYFS observations
- Improve essential safeguarding and save hours of time
- Reduce your workload and spend more time with the children
- Identify at a glance each child's development pathway

### ONLINE DAILY DIARY - DAYSHARE

- Share every magical moment of each child's day with their parents and carers with our online diary software

### PARENT PORTAL APP

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## ONLINE CPD COURSES

No deadlines, no time restrictions, no classroom! Support your staff or further your professional development with our online CPD accredited courses



## TRAINING

Increase employee motivation and keep staff for longer within your setting by offering training - the ideal tool for you to develop your team.

Parenta courses include:

- Level 2 Early Years Practitioner
- Level 3 Early Years Educator
- Level 5 Early Years Lead Practitioner

PLUS ... Parenta offers a free recruitment service - no fees!



## MARKETING SOLUTIONS

### WEBSITE DESIGN

- Our childcare websites generate genuine interest and leads from parents and carers
- We specialise in designing and building childcare websites so you can rest assured that our team know what Ofsted and parents/carers are looking for

### BRANDING & DESIGN

- Showcase your setting with branded products. From newsletters to logos and prospectuses to business cards, we take care of all your branding needs

### SOCIAL MEDIA

- We assist you with setting up and using your social media accounts in no time to help you increase your setting's visibility

## Working together for our children



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