



Values ♥ Culture ♥ Ethos

We care,
we learn,
we grow,
together

- Kindness
- Respect
- Inclusion
- Integrity
- Excellence

Values, culture
and ethos in early
years settings

In early years education, we often focus on what we do, meaning the activities we plan, the environments we create, and the outcomes we hope children will achieve. However, what sits beneath all of this, quietly shaping everything, is the culture of the setting itself.

Values, ethos and culture are not just words used in policies or prospectuses. They're lived daily experiences and are reflected in how staff speak to one another, how children are welcomed, how decisions are made, and how challenges are handled.

A strong and intentional culture does so much more than create a pleasant working environment. It empowers staff, supports effective leadership, strengthens relationships with families, and ultimately shapes the quality of care and education that young children receive.

At a time when the early years sector continues to face challenges around recruitment, retention and workload, creating a positive and empowering culture is no longer optional – it's essential.

What do we mean by values, ethos and culture?

Before we can create an empowering culture, we need a clear understanding of what we mean by the terms 'values', 'ethos' and 'culture'.

Values are the principles that guide what we believe is important. These might include respect, inclusion, kindness or curiosity. They could equally be academic excellence, independence and community involvement.

Ethos is the expression of those values in action – the 'feel' of a setting. It's seen in everyday interactions, expectations and attitudes. As one definition puts it, "ethos is the shared spirit that shapes how a setting operates and how people treat one another".

Culture is the wider picture. It develops over time and includes leadership style, relationships, communication patterns, routines and attitudes towards learning.

In simple terms:

- Values = what we believe
- Ethos = how it feels
- Culture = how everything works together in practice



Different settings, different cultures

Early years settings don't operate in isolation. They're part of a wider social and cultural landscape, and their identity is often shaped by the communities they serve. One of the strengths of the early years sector is its diversity. No two settings are the same, and nor should they be. A rural preschool, a large urban nursery, and a childminder working from home will all have very different cultures. These differences may reflect:

- The vision of the leadership team
- The local community
- The needs of the families they serve
- The local physical environment and area of the country they're located in

Importantly, variation in culture should not mean variation in quality.

The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) sets out the standards that all providers must meet to ensure children learn, develop and are kept safe. Within that framework, however, there are degrees of flexibility. Settings can interpret and deliver high-quality provision in ways that align with their own values and ethos, which might align more along religious, ethnic or pedagogical lines.

The families who attend a setting bring with them their own values, experiences and expectations. These influences are seen in everyday practice – in communication styles, routines, celebrations and approaches to learning. Rather than something to be managed generically, this can be one of a setting's greatest strengths. For example, a setting in a busy urban area may reflect a rich diversity of languages and cultures, developing an inclusive and adaptable approach to learning. A rural setting might draw more heavily on outdoor experiences and connections with nature, while coastal or countryside settings may embed their environment into daily practice, using local surroundings as a natural extension of the classroom. There's no 'right or wrong' here; only things that resonate with the leadership team and the local community, while operating within the EYFS statutory guidance. When settings embrace their context in this way, culture becomes authentic and responsive. It reflects the real lives of the children and families who are part of it.

This connection to the community also creates valuable opportunities for lasting partnerships beyond the children’s families. Links with local businesses, community groups and cultural or historical attractions can enrich children’s experiences and help them develop a sense of belonging. Strong relationships with families are also more easily built when there’s a shared understanding of values and when families can see their own experiences reflected in the life of the setting.

In this sense, culture isn’t something imposed from the top down. It’s co-created through ongoing relationships between leaders, staff, children, families and the wider community.

This is reflected in the principle of the “Unique Child”, which recognises that children develop in different ways and require personalised approaches. In the same way, settings themselves can be unique while still meeting statutory requirements.

Leadership and management – setting the tone

Culture doesn’t happen by accident. It’s shaped – consciously or unconsciously – by effective leadership.

Leaders play a crucial role in:

- Setting expectations for staff interactions
- Creating a sense of shared purpose
- Ensuring consistency across the setting
- Modelling values in everyday behaviour

Research and guidance consistently show that culture is strongly influenced by leadership actions and behaviours. This means ‘walking the talk’. You cannot create an authentic culture by having policies that say one thing and staff who operate differently.



A clearly defined ethos can unite a team, but it must be lived, not just written down. When leaders demonstrate the values they promote, staff are far more likely to adopt and sustain them.

Effective leadership in early years settings also includes:

- Supporting staff well-being
- Fostering open and honest communication
- Providing meaningful and effective supervision
- Encouraging professional development

These elements are particularly important in the current climate. Recent research continues to highlight the challenges facing the early years workforce, including recruitment and retention difficulties, low pay and increasing workload pressures.

These challenges have a direct impact on the culture of a setting. Where staff feel undervalued or unsupported, this can quickly affect morale, relationships and the overall atmosphere.

At the same time, there's a growing recognition across the sector that staff well-being, strong leadership and positive workplace culture are central to improving quality. Culture is increasingly being seen not as an added extra, but as a key driver of outcomes for both children and staff.

Creating this kind of environment often involves small but meaningful actions. Providing opportunities for staff to contribute to decision-making helps to build a sense of ownership. Supervision becomes more effective when it allows space for genuine reflection rather than focusing solely on administrative or routine tasks.

Recognition of staff efforts, even in simple forms, can have a powerful impact on morale.

Professional development, when prioritised, supports both individual growth and the overall quality of provision.

Ultimately, when staff feel that they're part of something purposeful, they're more likely to remain committed and engaged.



Creating the best experience for children

Ultimately, culture is experienced most powerfully by the children within the setting; young children are highly sensitive to the emotional climate around them. They respond to the tone of interactions, the consistency of expectations and the sense of security within their environment. A positive culture supports not only their learning, but also their well-being and sense of belonging. A setting with a strong and positive ethos will feel calm, welcoming and safe, where relationships are warm and respectful, routines are consistent, and children are supported to explore, learn and develop with confidence. A relational, inclusive culture has been shown to positively impact children's behaviour, well-being and sense of belonging.

Developing a culture for sustainability and succession

For leaders and owners, culture also has an important role to play in the long-term sustainability of the setting. A clearly defined and well-embedded ethos provides continuity for everyone, even if there are staff changes or the leadership evolves. A culture and ethos that supports the development of future leaders within the team can help ensure that the setting can continue to thrive over time and provide security and continuity for the children and families using the setting.

A strong culture provides continuity. It allows a setting to:

- Adapt to change
- Maintain quality over time
- Remain resilient in challenging circumstances

Planning for the future may include thinking about growth, transition or eventual exit strategies. In all of these situations, a strong culture provides a stable basis for changes to happen. It allows settings to adapt while maintaining their core identity and values.

As an owner or leader, it's important to consider:

- Planning for growth or transition
- Developing future leaders within the team
- Ensuring the ethos continues beyond one individual

Practical strategies for settings

Sometimes, ethos and culture can feel like abstract concepts, but they're shaped by very practical and everyday actions. Many settings begin by revisiting their core values, involving staff in discussions about what these values look like in everyday practice - this helps to ensure that they're meaningful and consistently applied. Below are some examples of things you can do to strengthen your setting's values, culture and ethos.

1. Define your values clearly – and involve staff in shaping them

Values are far more powerful when they're co-created rather than imposed. Taking time to explore what matters most as a team helps to build a shared sense of purpose and ownership. This might involve staff discussions, reflective activities or revisiting existing statements together as a team. When practitioners can see their own beliefs reflected in the setting's values, they're more likely to live them out consistently in their day-to-day practice.

2. Review your ethos regularly – does it match daily practice?

It's easy for ethos statements to become static over time, particularly when they're written for policies or inspections. Regular reflection allows settings to ask honest questions about whether their stated ethos truly reflects what happens in practice. This might include observing interactions, gathering staff and parental feedback or considering the experiences of children and families. Where there's a gap, small, intentional changes can help bring practice back into alignment.

3. Model behaviour at leadership level – consistency is key

Culture is shaped most strongly by what leaders do, not just what they say. When leaders consistently model respect, openness and professionalism, this sets clear expectations for the whole team. Staff are far more likely to adopt positive behaviours when they see them demonstrated in everyday interactions. Consistency builds trust, and over time this becomes embedded as part of the setting's culture.



4. Prioritise staff well-being – through supervision, support and recognition

In a demanding sector, staff well-being cannot be an afterthought - it needs to be part of your staff offer. Meaningful supervision provides an opportunity not only to review practice, but also to check in on how staff are feeling and coping. Support may take many forms, from flexible approaches to workload, to simply creating a culture where people feel listened to. Recognition, even in small ways, helps staff feel valued and appreciated, which in turn has a positive impact on morale and retention.

5. Encourage open communication – create a safe space for feedback

An empowering culture is one where staff feel able to speak honestly without fear of judgement, even if they're querying or challenging management decisions - creating this environment requires time and consistency. Regular team meetings, informal check-ins and opportunities for reflection can all support open dialogue. When feedback is welcomed and acted upon, not from a defensive place, but from one that welcomes constructive feedback, it reinforces the message that every voice matters and contributes to the development of the setting.

6. Invest in professional development – build confidence and skills

Ongoing professional development is essential for maintaining high-quality provision, but it also plays a key role in shaping culture. When staff are supported to learn and grow, they're more confident, more motivated and more engaged in their work. This might include formal training, peer support, mentoring or opportunities to take on new responsibilities. Investing in people sends a clear message that they're valued and trusted.

7. Celebrate successes – both big and small

In busy settings, it's easy to move quickly from one task to the next without acknowledging what has gone well. Taking time to celebrate successes helps to build a positive atmosphere and reinforces good practice. This doesn't need to be overtly formal – a simple acknowledgement in a team meeting, a thank you, or sharing a positive moment from the day can make a real difference to how staff feel about their work.



8. Engage with families – ensure values are shared and understood

Strong partnerships with families are central to early years practice, and culture plays a key role in this. When settings communicate their values clearly and involve families in the life of the setting, this helps to build trust and mutual understanding. Listening to families' perspectives and recognising the diversity of their experiences also enriches the culture of the setting, making it more inclusive and responsive.

9. Plan for the future – develop leadership within your team

A sustainable culture doesn't rely on one individual. Developing leadership across the team helps to ensure continuity and resilience over time. This might involve identifying potential leaders, offering mentoring or creating opportunities for staff to take on additional responsibilities, which could benefit their careers and the sustainability of the setting.

Forward planning, including thinking about succession and long-term goals, helps to protect and strengthen the ethos of the setting as it evolves.

Final takeaways

Values, ethos and culture are not separate from the work of early years settings – they're the foundation upon which everything else is built. While each setting will develop its own unique identity, all share a common goal: to provide the best possible start for children.

By creating a culture that empowers staff, supports leadership, and nurtures positive relationships, settings can meet this goal in a way that's both meaningful and sustainable.

In a sector facing ongoing challenges, culture may well be one of the most powerful tools we have, not only to improve outcomes, but to create environments where both children and adults can truly thrive and leave a legacy that can be felt by many generations to come.

Final takeaways

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