Me, my family and my childcare setting:

A practice note for building stronger connections and meaningful relationships

Keeping The Promise at the heart of what we do

Our thanks

We would like to extend our heartfelt thanks to the families, childminders, and staff in early learning childcare and school age childcare settings who generously contributed their time and professional knowledge during the development of this practice note.

The terms we use

In this practice note, we use the term 'family' to encompass the child's primary caregiver and crucial figures in a child's life.

We also talk about the 'relationship' between the child, family and the childcare setting. We believe that building meaningful relationships and strong connections is the foundation for positive and active family engagement and involvement.

The terms 'family engagement' and 'family involvement' are often used interchangeably. 'Engagement' generally implies collaborative, ongoing partnership, while 'involvement' might suggest specific active participation.

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Introduction

High-quality childcare plays a vital role in making Scotland the best place to grow up.

This practice note aims to focuses on the relationships between the child, family and their childcare setting.

Children flourish when they experience a profound sense of belonging, acceptance and trust from the people who care for them. When we prioritise the significance of nurturing relationships between children and their families, we support the development of genuine connections with both the child, their family and their childcare setting.

Meaningful relationships and strong connections begin with families accessing their childcare setting. During the pandemic, restrictions disrupted family access to childcare settings and the usual practices designed to support children and families to transition into their settings. Since the end of covid restrictions, we have found from our inspection activity that restrictions previously in place during the pandemic have not been fully reviewed by some settings to enable unrestricted access to families. We have also found that the disruption to these critical transitions for children and families links to a number of cases of children leaving settings unaccompanied or being unaccounted for while in their childcare setting.

Arrangements vary across the childcare sector in relation to how families connect with and access their child's childcare setting. Many families have highlighted the welcoming, inclusive experience they have received. However, we have found that some settings would benefit from strengthening relationships with families. These relationships are instrumental in fostering trust and cooperation between families and the childcare setting, creating a true sense of belonging for the child and their family.

We recognise the dedication of childcare sector staff who balanced both personal and professional demands at a time of great uncertainty during the pandemic and recovery. In this practice note, we hear from a range of services about how they successfully navigated the journey from pandemic restrictions to welcoming families back into their setting.
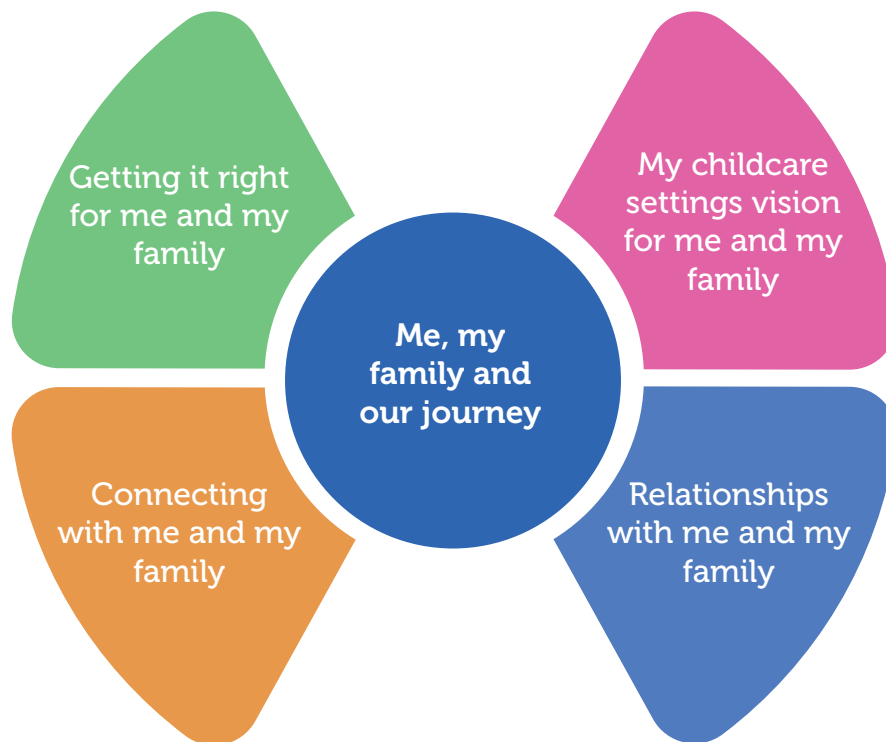
We consider the benefits of families accessing their child's setting free of limitation and explore the impact of families not feeling connected to their child while attending their childcare setting.

We highlight the critical importance of families being physically present in their child's setting as part of their daily experiences. We promote relevant childcare research and policy as a powerful tool for fostering a positive, family-centred culture.

This practice note complements the suite of Care Inspectorate **practice notes** that already support improved outcomes for children and families across the childcare sector, including our **SIMOA** campaign, which raises awareness of how and why children could leave a childcare setting or be unaccounted for while in its care.

Our additional fact sheet at the end of this practice note is for families. It highlights the importance of constructive conversations with settings when exploring why there are limitations on them accessing their child's childcare setting together with their child.

The diagram below highlights the importance of the relationship between the family the setting and the child. When we talk about a child's sense of belonging between their family and the person who is caring for them, we mean the child's emotional attachment and connection to the relationship between both. It provides a foundation of trust and security, and it reassures families that their children are in capable, caring and nurturing hands.

Getting it right for me and my family

My childcare settings vision for me and my family

Me, my family and our journey

Connecting with me and my family

Relationships with me and my family

It is important to foster a family-centred culture, which invites the opportunity to build strong relationships with the child and their family.

1. Responding to the needs of children and families

All childcare settings should create a welcoming environment to ensure smooth and positive transitions for both the child and their family. How the care, play and learning environment is used to support strong family connections, can have a significant impact on a child's experiences. Even the language you use with children and families can influence your approach. For example, the term 'welcoming' can convey hospitality and partnership, while the term 'handover' may feel more transactional.

When reviewing your current access arrangements for families, consider the approaches below. Do your access arrangements get in the way of building meaningful relationships and strong connections with children and families to improve their wellbeing?

Are you taking account of how GIRFEC seeks to realise children's rights on a day-to-day basis when placing limits on how they and their families access your childcare setting?

Emotional attachment - When a child, their family and the person who is caring for them are all together, the child feels emotionally connected.

Comfort and security - When a child, their family and the person who is caring for them are all together, the child experiences a sense of comfort and security. This security comes from knowing that both adults are there to meet their needs and protect them.

Familiarity - The child recognises both their family and the person who is caring for them as familiar and important figures in their life. They have a strong bond with each other, and this bond contributes to their sense of belonging.

Consistency - Both the family and the person who is caring for them maintain consistent routines and interactions. Consistency helps the child feel a sense of predictability and stability.

Trust - The family and the person who is caring for them have the child's best interests at heart and will provide love, guidance, and protection.

Positive interactions - The child experiences positive interactions and emotional connections between their family and the person who is caring for them. These interactions reinforce their sense of belonging.

Responsive care - Both the family and the person who is caring for them are responsive to the child's physical and emotional needs. They offer comfort, nurture and support as required.

Communication - Open and effective communication between the family and the person who is caring for their child is essential. They coordinate and collaborate to ensure the child's wellbeing and development thrive.

Cooperation - The family and the person who is caring for their child mutually co-operate to reinforce the child's sense of belonging within a supportive and nurturing network.

Respect - The child observes that their family and the person who is caring for them respect and value each other's roles in their life.

In the next three sections we share practice examples and insights from childminders, early learning and school age childcare staff that outline their own experience of supporting a family-centred culture within their childcare settings.

We would like to thank the following settings for sharing their practice examples and insights with us.
Lisa Sneddon childminding
The Family Tree childminding
Arnhall nursery
Overlee family centre
Hugh Smiley early learning and childcare centre
Raploch nursery
KLAS Care

2. My childminding setting: meaningful relationships and strong connections

We explored with childminders how their childcare practice fostered strong relationships with both children and families. Discussions highlighted the strategies they use to create an environment of nurture, care and support.

My childcare setting's vision for me and my family

My setting's vision is to provide a home from home, relaxed environment for children to feel content, happy and secure. An example of working with parents was when I was planning a trip and all the parents asked if they could come along on this trip. It was a celebration for a child who was going into full-time nursery care and would no longer be coming to my setting. We had a wonderful day and the children and their families made memories together."

Relationships with me and my family

We are part of the local gardening club and we have pick-up and drop-off outdoors in the park forest and orchard. This allows the parents to see their children engaged and enjoying the activity. It also means the children don't get disturbed in their play and learning until they're ready to go home."

Getting it right for me and my family

"I had a new start family and mum was breastfeeding. Mum would come and stay and feed at her own pace. We slowly built up the time mum was away. The child has settled well and is staying full days. This process helps the child feel safe and secure and we are getting it right for the whole family. Mum felt happy in the knowledge that we were meeting her needs and the needs of her child."

Me, my family and our journey

"The parents using my service are new and they have always been allowed in. This has been very beneficial. We are building a better relationship and stronger bonds between the parents, myself and the child."

"I had a family before who started in covid, but after the restrictions were lifted, they still did not come in. It did become the routine that Mum stayed in the car while the children ran into my house, and then Mum drove off to work. Sometimes, this routine impacted on how I communicated with Mum. I would now explain to families why it is important for them to have time within the setting, for the children to share with them what they have been doing."
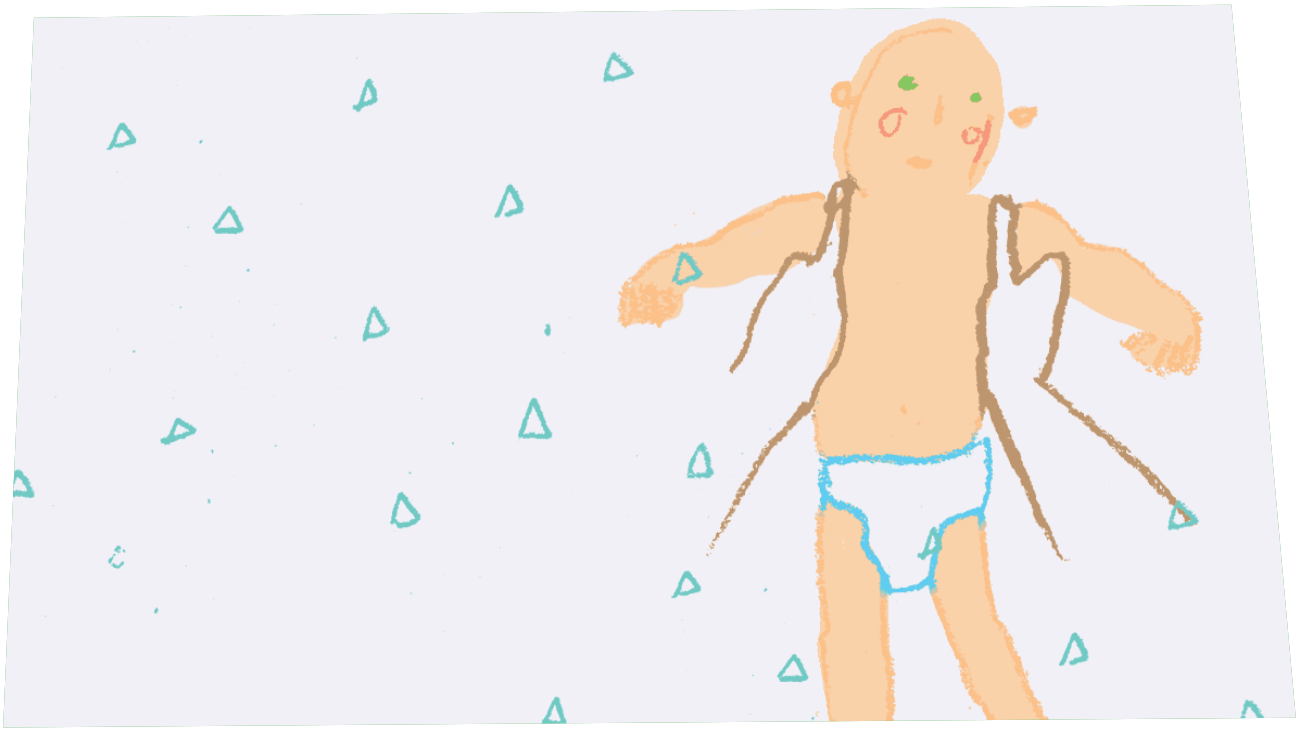
3. My early learning and childcare setting: meaningful relationships and strong connections

We explored with early learning and childcare staff how they re-engaged with families following the lifting of covid restrictions.

My childcare setting's vision for me and my family

As a staff team, we revisit our vision, values and aims every year. We promote them in everything we do. We talk about parents being involved at the very beginning of their journey with us and we have a strong support network of parents. Our vision is not a bit of paper; it's what we do. We live our values by being available for families, welcoming the new parents in and catching up with old parents; they know we take the time to listen."

"We want to remove any barriers so that children and families feel valued, building trusting relationships that enable an open culture. We want everyone to feel our ethos and culture."

Relationships with me and my family

Having received the comments made by families through the Microsoft Forms survey as part of the inspection, we recognised that we needed to revisit our decision making regarding family engagement. We recognise the importance of family engagement and the positive impact that this has on outcomes for children, but realised families were not satisfied with our proposals. We realise that connection with families is vital, so have proposed that families will be welcomed back into the playrooms each day, and various meetings will be organised to enable families to feel included in the service."

"Practitioners recognise that the family knows the child best. They take the lead from the family as they use an individualised, flexible approach to supporting children as they settle into the service. The personal plan for each child includes the voice of the child and family. Practitioners listen to what families have to say and foster genuine partnerships as they support children's progress and learning."

Getting it right for me and my family

We will continue to develop family engagement to ensure we continue to build trusting relationships with children and families. We will reflect on and develop personal plans and other records to ensure the child and their family's voice is present. We want to get it right so that we ensure positive outcomes for children."

"We continue to welcome parents into building even though some are keen to drop at the door. We regularly share the benefits of developing stronger children and family connections when coming into our setting."

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Me, my family and our journey

Covid-19 was significant in our journey as we reflected on and developed our work supporting children and their families. We followed national guidelines during the pandemic but at the same time, recognised the anxieties and the needs of families during this difficult time. The work of supporting and communicating with families on the doorstep during lockdown has since been evaluated and we have carried some of the positives forward during the covid recovery period. Having over 150 families means there needs to be a flexible approach. One-size-fits-all service delivery would not result in success for our children and families."

"Through our monitoring and evaluation processes, we found that our levels of family engagement had declined, partly due to Covid-19. Parents were welcomed back into the building as soon as restrictions were lifted, but we could see they were not engaging as before. We agreed we needed to make changes to re-engage parents. This included asking parents how they wanted to participate and engage with us. We had a lot of things post Covid-19 that were best practice that we had to restart."

4. My school age childcare setting – meaningful relationships and strong connections

We explored with school age childcare staff how their practice fostered strong relationships with children and families and what barriers there were to families reconnecting with the setting.

My childcare setting's vision for me and my family

When it was safe, we invited families in to have a play, to help the children feel safe. From there, we delivered a programme (the manager had been trained as a trainer) called Empowering Parents, Empowering Communities. We provided a crèche so that parents could attend. Two years on, the children who were in the crèche are attending our breakfast club and after school care. Now we have two parents trained in delivering the programme in the community."

Relationships with me and my family

There are still barriers to parents coming in. It takes a lot of continual work to keep encouraging families in. They were happy to send their children but parents tended to use the app, so we would say "Come in when you're ready". We would use observations of children in email correspondence with parents. For example, highlighting handwashing anxiety to a parent, or making suggestions by email and asking if they could reinforce this at home. Then we would encourage parents to come in for an appointment to discuss how their child was doing. While they were in the building, we'd say, "See what we've got" and show them the food pantry and "Come on in – here's where…" and "Come and see them play". This helped break barriers."

"We missed the opportunity of getting to know children through parents, which is a process that makes supporting children easier."

Getting it right for me and my family

Giving lots of feedback – that's key. We have a long way to go before we even reach 50% parental involvement."

"Things change so quickly for children, so it's important that All About Me information is reviewed regularly and kept up to date. By encouraging parents in to talk, we could ask them, "What can I do?" (As manager) and "What can we do together?" (How children/parents/families can be supported by service) "

"We now have parents who have approached us and asked if they can organise Halloween and Christmas parties, and fundraising."

"We've secured lottery funding to provide two nurture practitioners (existing colleagues who have had further training) who are working with schools too, to link more fully nurture approaches for children and families."

> **Me, my family and our journey**
>
> We didn't close all through the pandemic as we were emergency care hubs. We closed on the Friday at lockdown and opened again on the Monday. We made sure we followed all the guidelines. We kept procedures simple and in line with guidance: test; wear masks; keep two meters apart; frequent handwashing, etc.
>
> Our main aim was to ensure that children and families felt safe in the environment because that's when you get the best out of people – when they feel safe.
> There were a lot of interactions with staff and parents to share procedures. We accepted families in, one at a time initially, until we could allow more in. Then it grew and grew from there, all families now have full access."

5. Recognise, Relate, Reflect - creating a family-centred culture

Childminding, early learning and childcare, and school age childcare professionals shared insights with us on how they foster strong relationships with children and families. We found similar insights across all settings, including the use of responsive, meaningful interactions that are child and family-centred, which support feelings of nurture, care, acceptance and positive self-esteem.

When settings recognise, relate, and reflect on the importance of meaningful relationships and strong connections between children, families and their childcare setting, this supports the development of a family-centred culture interwoven with the setting's values, vision and practices.

Recognise and value the uniqueness of each child and family.

Relate to each child and family by building meaningful connections.

Reflect on how to create an inclusive and supportive environment for children, and families in your setting.

Childminder and childminding assistant views

> I understand and support children when they experience new or big emotions and situations. You do not need to manage it; you just need to be there to support them through with their families."
>
> "To offer a child responsive care, you need to adopt some of the home routines and customs that work well for a child. This will help children to settle, feel safe and to explore. It is important to talk to a child's family and to observe their interaction."
>
> "The childminder and the parents can work together to support children develop and gain new skills, and foster ideas about the world around them."
>
> "As a childminder, you can share with parents the child's achievements and challenges, be in the moment with the child and consider next steps and what they need from you, and their parents can continue at home working on the same goal."
>
> "Parents coming into the home helps the child feel secure in their transition. Transitioning objects from home to the childminding setting such as a teddy bear or a blanket create a home-from-home feeling for the child."
>
> "Children learn from everyone around them. This is why, as a childminder, I can include the whole family - parents and siblings - to get it right for every child."
>
> "Parents are the main educator of their child; it is important to build a good relationship between the childminder and the parents."

Early learning and childcare staff views

"High-quality admission systems and processes and an understanding of children's and family's individual needs will support the development of trusting respectful relationships."

"A welcoming, comfortable environment in a daycare setting will create a feeling of connection for children and families and give them a sense of belonging."

"Parents are the experts on their children; without the parent's input, a child will not achieve their potential in learning and development of skills. Together with families, we can help children reach their full potential. That's when the magic happens!"

"Building strong, trusting relationships with families supports planned early intervention. This helps children and families to build resilience and to feel loved, safe and respected so that children can realise their potential."

"It is important to facilitate a partnership approach to the child's care, play and learning. Supporting families to understand how to support learning at home will support positive outcomes for children."

"The vision, values and ethos of the service should be inclusive and representative of what children and families want from their setting."

School age childcare staff views

"We put children's care, play and learning at the centre when we welcome and involve their families too. What can we do for you? What can we do together?"

"Feedback to families shows how their involvement has shaped and improved children's experiences and outcomes."

"We plan for and promote parental involvement: to share a skill with children; help organise a fundraiser; become a parent representative on a committee; or give feedback to help the service evolve and improve to meet the needs of children and families."

"It's important every parent and family feels meaningfully involved, whether they just want to chat at drop-off/pick-up or seek involvement on a committee or group. Promote involvement with differing levels of time commitment so everyone can choose what suits them and meets their needs."

"We identify barriers to parental involvement and we collaborate with parents to minimise potential barriers such as time, communication, language, disability, accessibility and cost-of-living constraints."
"Think about family, social and economic situations as well as community diversity of ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds. Showing an interest and helping everyone to feel included fosters a welcoming ethos, which promotes parental involvement."

"We ask what children and families need from the service and consider how we are meeting the needs of the children and their families. We involve children and families in sharing their needs and hopes for their future."

6. Moving forward – Me, my family and my childcare setting

We recognise that the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic had an impact on children's care, play and learning experiences. Childcare settings should continue to build on the positive practice of reconnecting families, ensuring that children develop meaningful relationships and strong connections in ways that are suitable for them.

Children have the right to be supported by people who hold significance in their lives. This ensures that children can establish and sustain meaningful bonds with family members and the people who care for them. Such meaningful relationships and strong connections should be tailored to the individual needs of the child and family, and contribute significantly to their holistic development, emotional wellbeing and sense of belonging.

The insights of childcare professionals shared throughout this practice note demonstrate how attuned they are to the thoughts and feelings of the children and families attending their settings. They highlight the critical importance of how meaningful relationships and strong connections support a sense of belonging for a family when attending a childcare setting.

This practice note and our additional fact sheet for families support childcare settings to meaningfully explore how, when and where families connect with and access their child's setting. We have also included a range of research to support adjustment in practice to support family access to childcare settings without unnecessary restrictions.
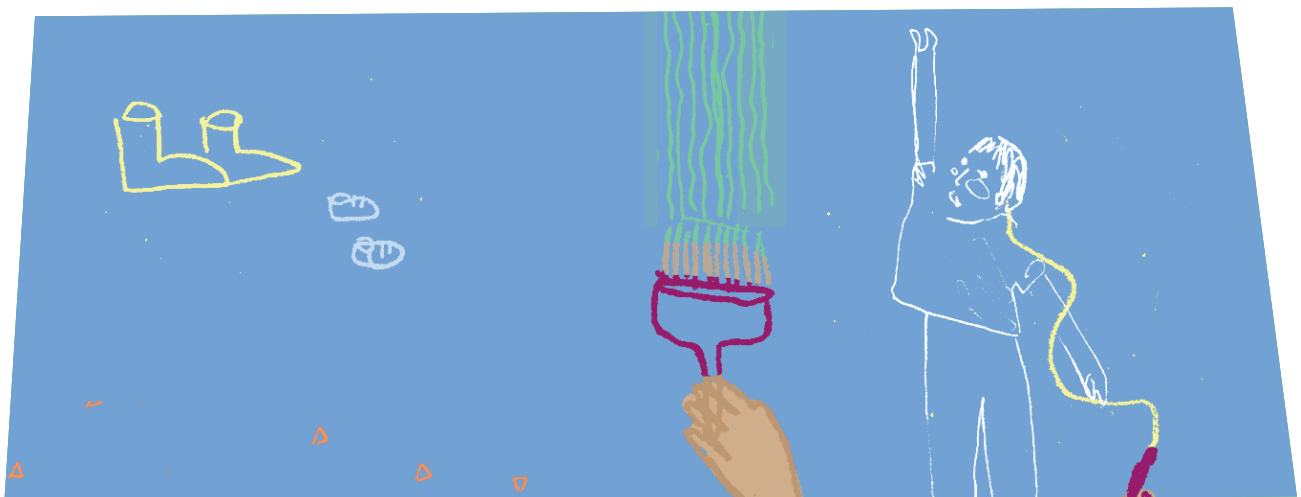
7. National policies and further reading

Policies

The most recent [Scottish Government guidance on COVID-19 for ELC services](#) was published in August 2022 and reaffirms that the focus should remain on "supporting children to form a secure and emotionally resilient attachment base which will stand them in good stead as they grow and develop". The guidance confirms there are no ongoing covid or other public health restrictions or recommendations on any movements in or out of childcare settings. This includes no requirement or recommendation for staggered pick-ups or drop-offs, break or lunch times, restricting visitors (including parents and carers) or restricting visits out of settings.

The Scottish Government document [Best Start, Bright Futures: tackling child poverty delivery plan 2022 to 2026](#) describes how every child has the right to grow up loved, safe and respected so they realise their full potential within an equal society that treats children and families with dignity and kindness. This creates the conditions in which wellbeing will flourish, with children's rights at the heart of everything we do.

Findings from the [OECD Early Learning and Child Wellbeing study (2020)](#) suggest the day-to-day activities that parents undertake are highly correlated with children's learning and development. The study found that regardless of socio-economic background, children did better when their parents were involved in the early childhood education and care centre or school they attend.

[The Quality Action Plan for the Blueprint for 2020](#) expands on the benefits of parental engagement and involvement for children and parents and carers. It notes that one of the earliest opportunities to strengthen parental engagement is to make them an active agent in the choice of early learning and childcare provision for their child. The plan also sees promoting parental engagement in children's learning as an important way of making parents feel valued, and demonstrates that educational institutions are accessible and approachable.

Further reading

The values and principles of **Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC)** support childcare settings to be rights-respecting, strengths-based and to place the child and family at the centre of decisions and care.

Attachment theory in practice defines attachment and the patterns of attachment behaviour and provides a lens for understanding and responding to the needs of children and the people who care for them in the context of their life and relationships.

Realising the Ambition: Being Me is the national practice guidance for early years in Scotland. It highlights that settings that are effective will have a clear, shared vision for what they would like their provision to be and what they want for the children in their care. The vision should be based on the unique needs of the children and families in their setting. Developing a vision that is co-created by settings, children and families means that everyone is working together for the best interests of the children.

My Childminding Experience highlights how childminders provide unique experiences and benefits for children that are different from group-based services. It is an improvement resource exploring and sharing good practice examples from across Scotland. It develops the Care Inspectorate's model for improvement resources by focusing more on individual children and involving them and their families directly in telling their experience.

A quality framework for daycare of children, childminding, and school-aged childcare recognises that prioritising the strength of family relationships within the childcare context honours children's rights and fosters an environment where children can flourish, grow and experience nurturing and supportive relationships.

The National Improvement Framework states that when high-quality, personalised communication between schools and early learning and childcare settings and families takes place, relationships are strengthened. Children are happier and more settled when all of the carers in their life can work together.

Connecting with your childcare setting –

a guide for families

Reconnecting with your childcare setting now Covid-19 restrictions have ended

For your child, a strong connection and positive relationship with their childcare setting begins with you being able to go into their setting without unnecessary restrictions.

This guide gives simple ways you can become more involved and work in partnership with your childcare setting. It talks about ways to build stronger connections between home and setting, so your child can feel secure and nurtured in the relationship between their family and the people who care for them.

We produced another guide for childcare providers, called Me, My Family and My Childcare Setting, to work in partnership with families to bring them back fully into settings, now that covid restrictions have ended.

Your childcare setting wants to hear your voice and views

Our discussions with childminders, early learning and childcare, and school age childcare settings highlighted their passion and commitment. They want to develop and sustain meaningful relationships and strong connections with the children and families in their settings.

What are your current access arrangements? Think about the questions below when you are exploring the barriers and benefits with your childcare setting.

- How is the setting involving you and your child when reviewing the barriers and benefits of accessing the setting, free of limitations?
- How is the setting creating time and space to nurture and support you and your child's wellbeing needs?
- How comfortable are you in the space used by your setting to communicate and consider the wellbeing needs of your child?
- Do your setting's communications foster strong connections between you, your child and the setting?
- How can you influence changes to the current access arrangements?

What families told us

When we spoke with families across Scotland, we found that expectations of the relationship between the family and their childcare setting differ from family to family. For childcare settings, understanding each family's expectations and views about their level of involvement in their child's setting is critical when developing meaningful relationships and strong connections.

Families told us about what works well and what could be better.

> My childminder knows my child so well, we have a lot of communication, I can speak to my child minder at any time, I feel it is important to see the environment that my child is cared for in"
>
> "They give us a good handover at the end of the day. They ask how he is in the morning and listen carefully if anything is different, like sleep or food related news, or if he has been interested in something at home, they will try to continue it at nursery, like shape or matching for example."
>
> "The staff are very helpful and have a good knowledge of my child's needs, discussions started before my child began out of school care."
>
> "Our nursery is quite accessible. This means we get to pop in and see the vibe of the place when we pick him up. We can observe him doing whatever he's doing until he notices us in the room. I love that about it."
>
> "I think drop-off and pick-up are the most important for establishing a good relationship with two-way information sharing."
>
> "He's always had key workers that he's bonded with, which helps a lot too."
>
> "Sometimes it feels there is a bit too much distance between staff and parents; better communication and closer relationships might help."
>
> "As we are seldom allowed in the room, I am not 100% acquainted with what my child plays with. I rely on the few photos that is uploaded on the app."
>
> "It would be nice to have parents allowed in to collect every day."
>
> "Left to stand outside and child sent out and no update as to how their day has been."

How do I know if my childcare is getting it right?

We, and childcare settings, use a range of standards, tools and guidance to assess and improve the quality of children's and families' experiences. We have listed some below, which you may find interesting and useful in understanding the quality of childcare practice your family should experience.

Scotland's **Health and Social Care Standards** are written for everyone. They describe what people should expect and experience when they use a care service.

[Our quality framework for daycare of children, childminding, and school-aged childcare](#) is the professional self-evaluation tool we use for assessing the quality of childcare settings are delivering. We also expect settings to use it when assessing how well they are doing.

Our professional improvement resource for childminders, [My Childminding Experience](#) shares examples of good practice from across Scotland.

The values and principles of [Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC)](#) support childcare settings in Scotland to be rights-respecting, strengths-based and to place the child and family at the centre of decisions and care.

[Realising the Ambition: Being Me](#) is the national practice guidance that focuses on the importance of ensuring that childcare settings know and understand the unique needs of the children and families attending their setting.
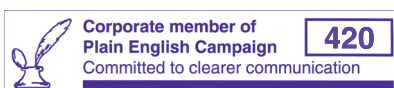
Website: www.careinspectorate.com

This publication is available in alternative formats on request.

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