



Rethinking Child Behaviour In The Early Years



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She has helped to run her local preschool for 10 years and has even been called up as an expert witness on behaviour in front of the Parliamentary Select Committee on Education. She has written more than 25 books for teachers and parents, and her latest book is [The Ultimate Guide to Differentiation published by Bloomsbury](#).



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She is the author of [Transitions in the Early Years](#) and writes regularly for Early Years Educator – EYE – magazine where she is Consultant Editor. Sue is also an independent consultant and trainer with her company [Early Years Out of the Box Consultancy](#).



Behaviour matters

One of our key roles as early years providers is to help our children learn to regulate their own behaviour.

Not only will this help with their personal, social and emotional development, but it also puts them in the best position to learn and to be successful when they move onto school.

The EYFS statutory framework asks that we support the 'learning, development and care' of our children. Helping them to learn how to share, stay calm and cope with frustration is all part and parcel of that. It's key to the development of the whole child.

But how exactly do we go about encouraging better behaviour in our setting? What role do your staff have to play? And what do we do when we have to deal with extreme behaviour? That's what this guide sets out to do.



Behaviour and self-regulation

by Sue Cowley

Self-regulation is a great place to start when it comes to behaviour. But what does it mean? And how do we encourage it? Let's find out...

What is 'self-regulation'?

Self-regulation is a complex concept but put simply, it refers to the ability to regulate our own behaviours. This might be about understanding what to do when we feel angry, how to cope with not getting our own way, and how to behave in a way that keeps us safe.

In fact, the pilot of the redrafted EYFS early learning goals includes some new goals around self-regulation that may impact on the work that settings need to do.

Self-regulation and behaviour systems

In order to build self-regulation, it is a good idea to encourage the children to manage their own behaviour in the early years, rather than for practitioners to try and control behaviour with systems of extrinsic rewards and consequences.

Help your children learn to do the right thing in order to learn and be kind, rather than to win a reward or avoid a sanction. This will help them make better choices around behaviour as they get older.

At our setting, we do not use any external consequences or rewards. We believe that they can interfere with the children's intrinsic motivation to learn. We think that it is better to talk about behaviour with the children to develop their understanding of it, and we maintain high staff-to-child ratios to make time for these conversations to happen.



Reflect on emotional responses

Encourage children to join in with discussions about behaviour in the early years, and to reflect on how their behaviour makes other people feel.

This helps to build their sense of empathy, which in turn supports them in developing self-regulation. You might ask questions like: “How do you think Sally felt when you took the toy from her?”.



Acknowledge the child's feelings

As well as talking about the impact of behaviour on others, it is also useful to examine what the child is feeling. Use phrases such as “I can see you are upset” or “I can tell that you are angry”.

By acknowledging the child's emotions, you help them understand that it is okay to feel this way and that it is possible to bring our emotional responses under control by regulating them ourselves.

Clarity of boundaries

If you are clear with the children where the ‘line’ on behaviour is, then they will be in a much better position to stick to it. Have a clear set of agreed boundaries in your setting, sharing these and talking about them with the children.

Keep your rules short and simple, and create a display so that you can refer to it regularly. In our setting, we focus on one rule a week, for instance using “kind hands” by never hitting, hurting or grabbing from others.

Staff talk about and demonstrate the rule, and they also model what it looks like when it is broken. They regularly refer back to the rule of the week by highlighting examples of good behaviour as well.



Focus on the positives

It is very easy to get sucked into focusing on negative behaviours, but it will have much more impact if you highlight what is going well.

Talk constantly about the good behaviours that you see, to demonstrate that behaving well is the best way to get your attention. Unless the situation is dangerous, take a moment to pause before you deal with a misbehaving child. Look at others close to the child and praise them or highlight what they are doing well before you intervene.

Talk about the 'why'

Building better behaviour in the early years is not just about having rules and getting children to stick to them, it is about understanding the 'why' behind the behaviours that you need.

Talk with your children about why they need to listen carefully during show-and-tell, and why it's important to use "kind hands". What impact does it have on others if they don't? What are the benefits for the group as a whole of following this rule?

Use non-verbal communication

The great thing about non-verbal signals is that they bypass the need for verbal understanding, and so they are especially useful with pre-verbal children or those who have English as an additional language.

A quick frown at a child who is about to do something they shouldn't may be more than enough to stop them. A smile at a child who is listening well can be sufficient to reinforce the fact that these are the behaviours you want to see.



How to self-reflect on behaviour

by Sue Cowley

When a child misbehaves, it is tempting to believe this has nothing to do with us, and everything to do with them. After all, the behaviour clearly 'belongs to' the child.

If there is any suggestion that the adult might have played a role in the situation arising, it can feel like an accusation. Is the implication that we are somehow to blame? Are we saying that, if the provision had been more effective, the child would not have misbehaved in the first place?

Clearly, to an extent this is nonsense. A small child's behaviour is impacted by many factors – things like tiredness and hunger can easily trigger problems.

However, if you think about your own behaviour – at a training session for instance – it is obvious that the more engaging the teaching, the easier it is to focus and learn. Even as adults we 'mess around' when faced with someone who is not an effective teacher. It's important to separate our feelings about critique from the idea that we are being blamed for what a child has done.

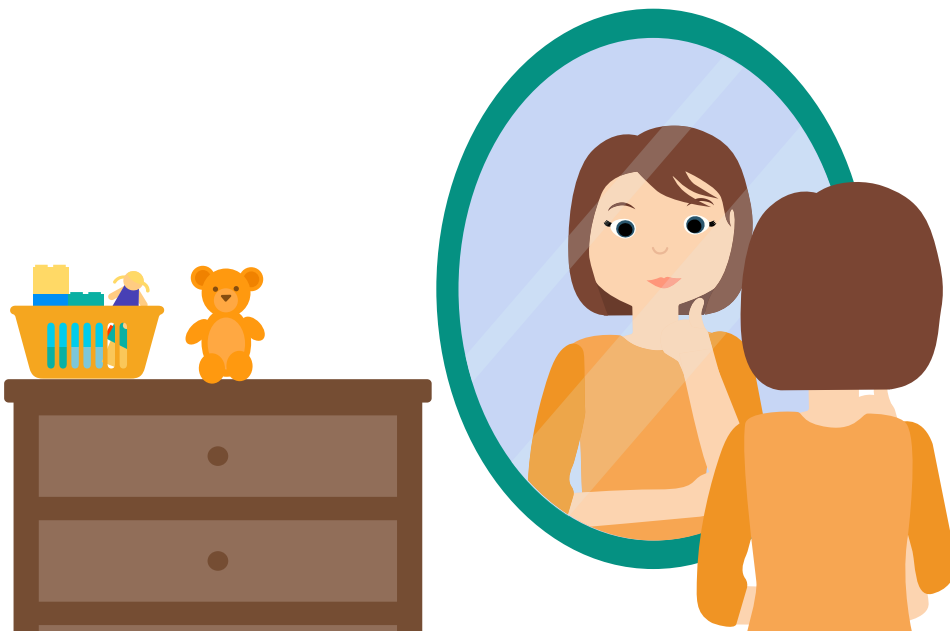
Focus on change

Just because poor behaviour is not directly our fault, it doesn't mean we shouldn't think about how we contribute to it. If we reflect honestly and openly, we give ourselves the power to change how we might react in the future.

If we are willing to think about our potential role in the problem, we can understand our potential role in the solution. Think about how you can make a difference to outcomes – put simply, focus on what you can change.

Role models

As practitioners, we know that adult behaviour does impact children's behaviour. A child from a supportive home background is normally better at regulating their behaviour than a child from a home where the adults are confrontational and inconsistent.



When children are young, they quickly pick up on what the adults around them model. If we are rude, they learn to be rude. If we are calm and well-mannered, they learn to act in the same way.

We model behaviour all the time in our settings, and not just in terms of how we treat others. We model behaviours around learning too. Do we come across as interested, curious, involved, aware, engaged? Model an interest in the world to your children, just as you model how to be kind.

Impulse control and behaviour

Young children's misbehaviour is often a result of poor impulse control. The child snatches a toy, hits a friend or throws a tantrum because they cannot yet regulate that impulse. Part of our role as practitioners is to help children develop the skill of self-regulation.

One way to do this is to use activities that require patience and turn-taking. Talk about emotional reactions to reassure your children that you understand how emotional impulses affect them – 'I can see that you are angry', 'I can tell that you are upset', and so on.

I'm so excited!

Poor behaviour in the early years is also often a result of overstimulation – an exciting game gets the children overwrought, and before you know it there are tears.

Children need to be exposed to situations where they learn to cope with challenges – but approach this carefully. When you set up continuous provision, consider the likely reaction of the children. Is there space for them to take time out, as well as to let off steam? Think about how the quiet children will feel, as well as the livelier ones.

Am I engaged?

When we are fully engaged in learning, we are less likely to misbehave. If we feel bored, or disaffected, we look for other ways to channel our attention.

Generally speaking, people find it easier to engage when they are hands-on with learning, when the learning links to something they already know about, and when there are multi-sensory elements to an activity.



Difficult questions

After poor behaviour has happened, ask yourself some tricky questions about how your practice might have impacted on the children:

- Were they bored or lacking focus?
- Were they over-stimulated or over-excited?
- Was the way the provision was set out partly to blame?
- Were they adequately supervised?
- Did you miss a chance to intervene earlier on?
- Did you miss any clues or cues when the child arrived?
- Did your own situation (tiredness, stress) impact on how you handled things?



Five ways to become a more self-reflective practitioner

1. When something goes wrong, don't be too quick to pass the buck. When the situation is over, and everyone is calm, think about what might have caused the incident and how you could prevent it from happening again.
2. Reflect on the layout of the space, as this is often the root cause of issues. Are there areas where poor behaviour often happens? Could you change the space around, or adapt the way you supervise the children?
3. Ask colleagues to observe you, and act on their feedback. Pick one area you would like to develop – for instance, tone of voice – and ask them to critique you on it.
4. When you plan an area of provision, think about how you would feel about it as a learner. Would it engage you? What would you learn from it? What might go wrong?
5. When faced with tricky behaviour, instinctively we tend to become defensive and overreact. Counteract your instinctive responses by taking a deep breath before you intervene. Take a moment to reflect on the best reaction, rather than letting your emotions take hold.



How to deal with extreme behaviour?

by Sue Cowley

It can feel shocking to be faced by a child who is physically aggressive, who has an extreme reaction in your setting, or who hurts staff or other children. We come into education to do our best for our children, and it is hard not to take it personally when you experience extreme behaviours from a child.

First and foremost, remember that the behaviour is not personal. It might be to do with the child's current home situation or adverse early childhood experiences. Maybe it is about a specific trigger that is setting off a reaction, perhaps linked to a special educational need.

It could also be a temporary situation, due to the child's development. For instance, a number of young children go through a period of biting, often connected to teething, which they usually grow out of quite rapidly.

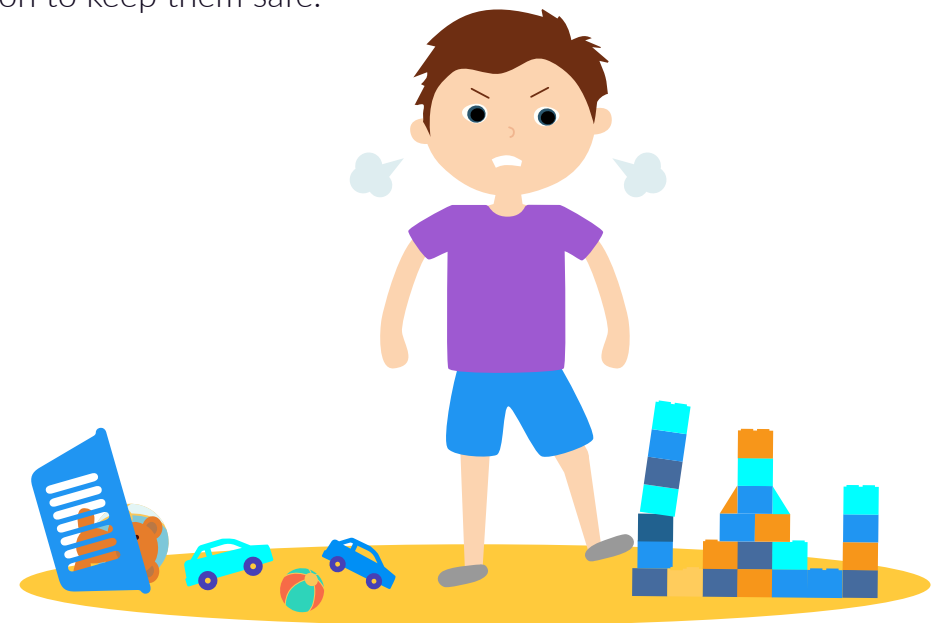
Identifying SEND

When you are faced with a pattern of extreme behaviours from a young child, this is often an indicator that the child has some form of SEND. Get your SENDCo to undertake some observations of the child and ask for support from your local authority SEND team.

Safety first

You should always keep the safety of both children and staff at the forefront of your mind.

If appropriate, put one-to-one adult supervision in place for the child for a period of time. Have a clear plan in place for your staff team about how to react if the child 'kicks off'. Work out who will do what, with the child's key person taking the lead role. If the child is likely to lash out physically, have a plan about how you will move other children away from the situation to keep them safe.



Using an ABC chart

With repeated examples of extreme behaviour, it is very helpful to use an 'ABC' Chart.

This is a chart on which you log details of the behaviour incidents, under the headings of **antecedent**, **behaviour** and **consequences**. The chart can help you look for patterns of behaviour over time, and to identify causes that you might be able to prevent. Noting down the specifics can help you get an overview of the situation.

Antecedent covers the things that happened before the situation arose – the aim is to identify any potential triggers for the behaviour, such as signs of distress from the child or negative environmental impacts.



Behaviour deals with the incident itself – aim to log specifics of the behaviour in a dispassionate way. What did the behaviour look like? What specifically happened? Who was involved?

Consequences is where you analyse the aftermath of the situation. This might include other people's responses to the situation, and what happened after the event, for instance how long it took the child to calm down or which adults discussed the situation with parents.

Identifying triggers

Try to spot a pattern using the ABC Chart, and identify the triggers for the extreme behaviour, so that you can try to stop it happening in the first place. For instance, if you notice that the behaviours occur on a day when the cleaners have been, or when a member of staff is present who wears a strong perfume, it might be that the child has sensory processing issues and is reacting to scents in your setting.

Another trigger might be to do with particular peer group relationships. Is the child playing with a specific child each time the behaviour occurs? It could be that the behaviour always happens on a Monday, and that the trigger is what has happened over the weekend. For instance, where a child whose parents are separated spends weekends in a different place.

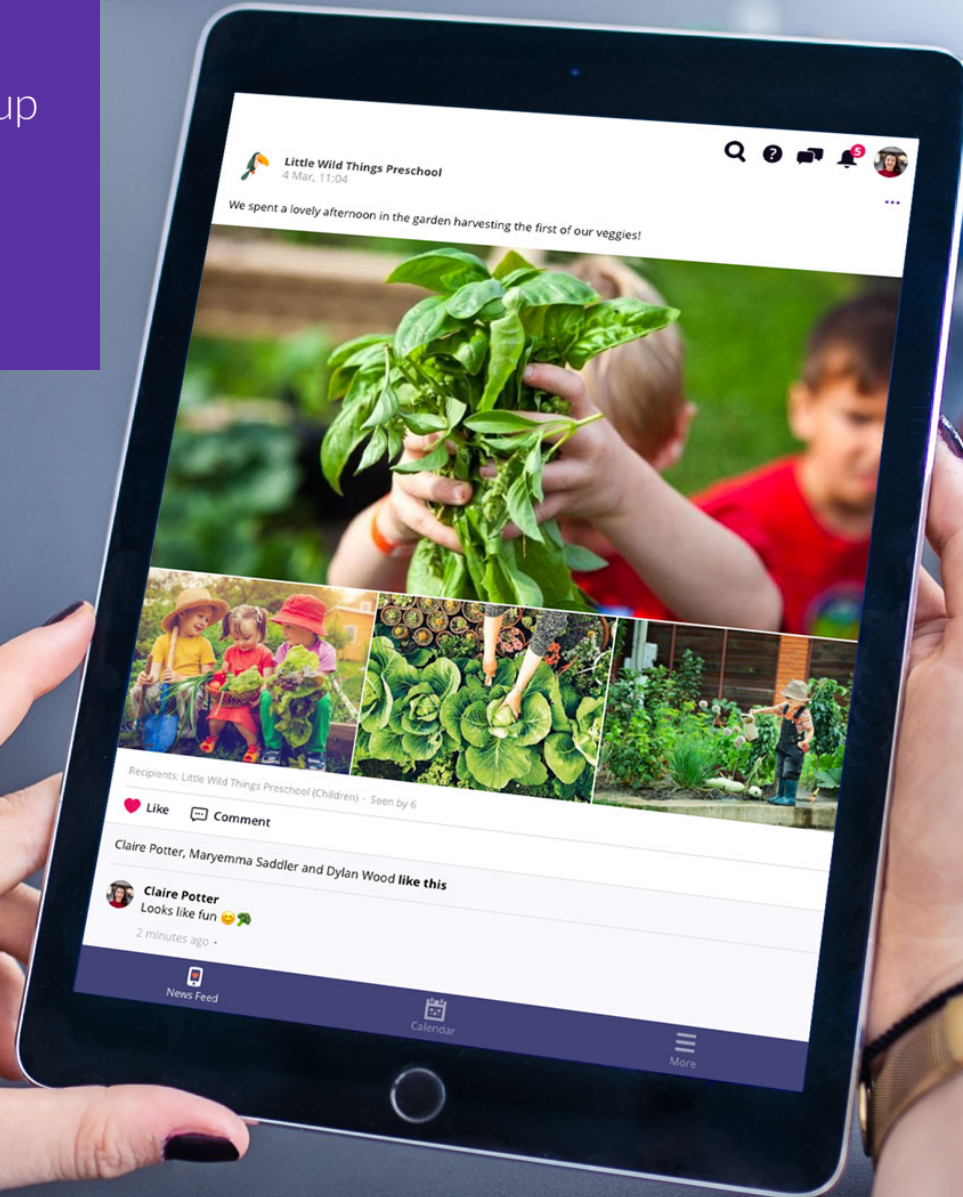
If you are able to identify a specific trigger, consider what steps you can take to stop this happening in the first place. For instance, for a child who is triggered by scent, ask staff not to wear perfume and change to hypoallergenic cleaning products.



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A needs-based analysis

A useful way to analyse extreme behaviour is to look at the issue from the point of view of what the child might need, and what you can do to meet those needs. Young children find it difficult to communicate or express their inner emotional state, and so we need to look at their behaviours and interpret these on their behalf.

Make a list of the behaviours you observe happening in the child. Now consider, what might the child be telling you that they need through these behaviours. For instance, a child who screams and has tantrums might be telling you that they don't understand how to calm themselves, or that they are finding their experience in the setting overwhelming. In response, you might adapt the way you organise your environment, to create opportunities for the child to have some calm and quiet time out.


Working with parents

Talk to the child's parents or carers about whether they experience this behaviour at home, and what might seem to be the cause. This can be a tricky conversation to have, because the parents might not want to admit to there being a problem.

To avoid this, be clear that you are not apportioning blame, but that you need to work together as a team to get the best outcomes for their child.



Leuven Scales

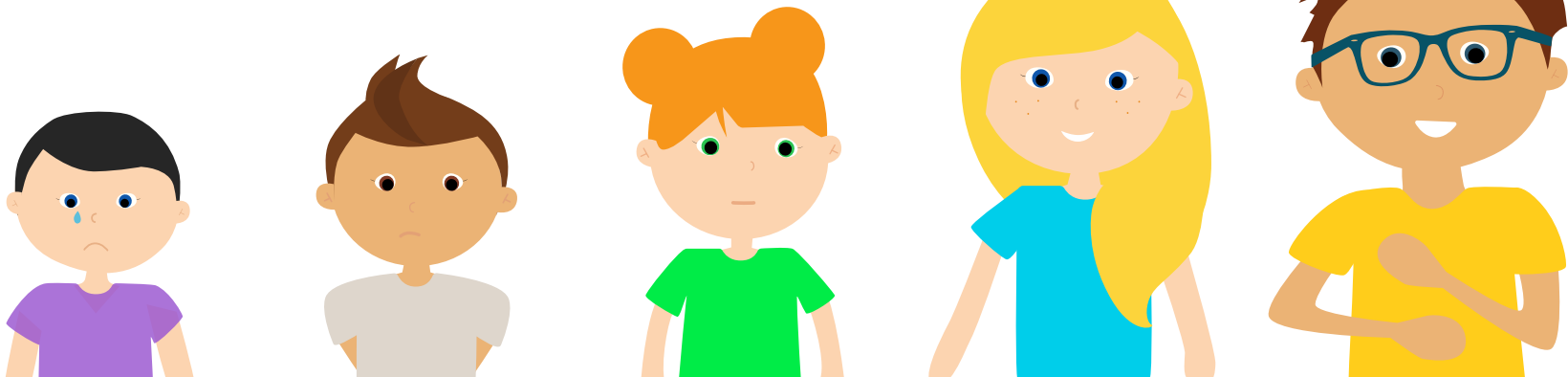
Make sure you consider proper training before using the Leuven Scales in your setting. Full understanding of the theory is important to stop them from becoming just another checklist. 

Is good behaviour enough? That's the question we ask in this final section, where we explore the benefit of using Leuven Scales to assess children, with a little helping hand from our second Sue of the guide, early years expert Dr Sue Allingham.


The Wellbeing and Involvement Sweetspot

The Leuven Scales of Wellbeing and Involvement are a fantastic assessment tool. First established by Ferre Laevers, they can help to ensure your children are involved in deep learning, experiencing the world at its fullest.

But that's not all they're useful for. Instead of understanding your children as simply exhibiting good or bad behaviour, a change of mindset amongst your practitioners to focus on wellbeing and involvement will help to give you calmer, happier, children.



A child with low wellbeing, for example, is far more likely to exhibit extreme behaviour. And yet, if you focus on wellbeing or behaviour alone, you're likely to miss a key component of a child's development.

A child can be happily getting on with tasks, and never cause any problems, but it's doesn't mean they're being challenged and finding opportunities for focused learning. 

That's where involvement comes in. And when you have high wellbeing and high involvement? That's when you've hit the developmental sweetspot.



The Leuven Scale of wellbeing

The child is clearly having a difficult time and doesn't feel happy in the setting. There are almost no instances of 'true' pleasure and they are primarily anxious or tense. Their contact with the environment is difficult and they might attack others. They are not at ease.

They show elements of level one, but these are less pronounced.

Here, they're neither happy nor unhappy. Moderate children are often indifferent and are rarely outspoken, positively or negatively. They're rarely enthusiastic, and contact with other children is pretty basic. There are not many moments of real satisfaction.

They show elements of level five, but these are less pronounced.

They feel like a 'fish in water'. They're clearly having fun, and laugh a lot. They enjoy both what the environment has to offer and the company of others, often positively affecting the group dynamic. Any anger, unhappiness, or fear quickly subsides, and mostly they're enjoying life to the full.

1. Extremely low

2. Low

3. Moderate

4. High

5. Extremely high

The Leuven Scale of involvement

They often don't engage in activities at all. They might wander about absent-mindedly and stare a lot. Activities that do occur are short-lived and purposeless. They're easily distracted and they don't seem to take anything in, often acting without any sort of dedication.

They show elements of level one, but these are less pronounced.

On first glance, the child can seem busy, but on closer inspection it's clear they're not really absorbed in what they're doing. While they may pay attention, they're rarely fully absorbed, concentrated or show intense mental activity. They often act routinely and their activities can be short-lived as they're easily distracted.

They show elements of level five, but these are less pronounced.

These children are regularly absorbed and intensely engaged in their activities. There are strong signs of concentration, persistence, and energy. Choices come easily, and they're absorbed straight away. Even very strong stimuli don't distract them from the task at hand and they love to explore and operate right at the limit of their abilities.



How to use the Leuven Scales

Now that you know what the scales are, it's time to think about how we implement them. Here's Sue with some ideas:

On realistic expectations

It is a time-consuming thing, but this isn't just another tick list or another thing to add to your to-do list. When used properly it can be a really powerful tool.

On using them for staff

Ferre would advocate that it's something you could do with the adults in your setting too. It's not just about the children. If your staff well-being and involvement is shot to pieces, then what hope do you have with the children?



On The Leuven Scales and observation

You might want to say in an observation that a child was particularly involved, but you shouldn't just tack a Leuven Scale assessment onto an observation. That's not what they're for.

On individual child Leuven Scale assessments

It's a useful tool if you've got a concern about anything or anyone or if there's a specific group of children that you're involved in. Things change. Just because a child's wellbeing or involvement is high one week, it doesn't mean it will be the next. You shouldn't be making a judgement until you've done a number of assessments.

On settling in assessments

They're always useful for children settling in - it's so easy to make so many sweeping judgements about new children without really seeing how they're settled.

For more on Leuven Scales, including how to spot high wellbeing and involvement, and how to use your Leuven Scale assessments to improve your provision, check out our full piece over [here](#).



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