

## Case Study: Working Together Hub Early Years Mentors

- Early Years Mentors have improved quality in the PVI sector.
- ITERS-3 has proved a useful tool through which this is achieved.
- Having mentors from nursery schools and PVI providers is beneficial.

### Introduction

Early Year Mentors (mentors) were developed by the Working Together Hub to work with Private Voluntary and Independent sector (PVI) providers to help improve quality. Using the Mayor's funding, the hub initially funded seven early years mentors. These were generally deputy head teachers of a maintained nursery school. Recognising the beneficial role that mentors played in improving quality, the local authority funded a further three additional mentors – two from outstanding PVIs and one from a school to join the team. Mentors are released from their usual duties for half a day a week.

Each mentor is responsible for six to eight good or outstanding PVI settings with whom they maintain regular contact. An important tool used by the mentors was Infant Toddler Environment Rating Scale (ITERS-3) - a system for assessing the quality of a learning environment based on 33 indicators grouped into six categories or subscales. Scores are given for each subscale and overall. An ITERS score of less than 4 usually means there is no positive impact on two-year-olds.

Mentors:

- visit settings termly
- undertake ITERS-3 audits
- run termly network meetings for all providers including childminders in the area
- deliver training and
- hold transition events for schools and PVIs

### Challenges

Initially, some providers were suspicious of the mentors, concerned that they might be out to take children away from PVIs and into schools to bolster school rolls. Some PVIs were unclear about the difference between mentors and Ofsted inspectors. Mentors present themselves as non-judgemental partners. They work hard to foster good relationships with and between PVIs, encouraging sharing of good practice.

“We start from the premise ‘I don’t know everything’ and we all learn from each other. We don’t present ourselves as judges and we don’t pass judgement.”

Early Years Mentor

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Getting the timing of network meetings right to maximise attendance has been a challenge. Use of on-line meetings, critical in maintaining contact during Covid-19 is proving popular.

## Benefits

The role of the mentor is very much that of a 'critical friend'. Network meetings facilitated by mentors help settings feel less isolated and more involved.

By far the greatest benefit has been increasing quality of provision. This is measured anecdotally and using ITERS-3 scores. Baseline ITERS-3 assessments in 2018 found that the 40 participating settings had an average score of 3.9. This is just below the level that the Effective Pre-School, Primary and Secondary (EPPSE<sup>1</sup>) found indicates that early education has a positive impact on children. Following a year of mentoring, action plans and peer support ITERS-3 scores had increased by 23% to an average of 4.8 in 2019. Mentors have been able to support settings to improve practice. Some examples include:

- Greater understanding of diversity, including a wider range of multi-cultural foods, toys and clothes
- Improved accessibility, with children better able to access resources themselves and more use of sensory toys and equipment
- Improved use of external environments and more science and nature-based activities and resources

Being a mentor also benefits the mentor and the mentor's setting. Mentors are better able to reflect on their own practice.

"Being a mentor has had an impact on my practice. Through self-reflection I have become a more effective observer. Using ITERS is more than applying a set of scores."

Early Years Mentor

The local authority highly values the mentor roles and in particular supports having mentors from different types of providers.

"Having PVI mentors has been really good and has given increased credibility to the sector at meetings. Working collaboratively has improved perceptions and professional respect across the sectors."

Local Authority Officer

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<sup>1</sup> EPPSE is a Government-funded, high profile, longitudinal study of the influence of early education on children's later development.

## Role descriptor

Early Years Mentors have a role descriptor which is reproduced below.

### **Working Together Lead Mentor Role Description**

Working Together lead mentors play a key role in developing self-improving systems in early years education settings in Newham. Mentors are teachers based in nursery schools, working collaboratively with local settings to improve quality.

As part of the Greater London Authority funded Working Together Early Years Hub, lead mentors aim to make a positive difference to children's life chances, and to ensure that the most disadvantaged children in Newham will not be left behind.

To that end, lead mentors:

- Organise evidence-based professional development opportunities for local settings
- Undertake annual collaborative audits with local settings using ITERS-3 as a tool, supporting settings to develop action plans so that they achieve a score of at least 4 in every area
- Attend professional development opportunities that enable them to support local settings
- Visit local settings once a term, and arrange visits between settings
- Arrange quadrant network/Forum meetings for settings every term
- Coordinate transition work with local schools
- Report on progress to the Working Together Steering Group and update information on the impact of their work for the Greater London Authority every term

The early years mentors and the local authority have recently introduced a new 'Keeping in Touch' Form. This is designed to help frame and keep track of conversations and issues. The current Keeping in Touch Form is re-produced below.



## **Keeping in Touch (KIT) record for Mentors & EYATs.**

Setting :

Date:

General open ended catch up...how are you?

Reminder to send weekly return re: numbers

### **Quality Questions:**

How are staff adapting to planning exciting activities whilst working in a different way

What are you doing in terms of assessments for the children?

Outdoor play- how are you planning for this?

Transitions- how is this going?

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Please note any sharing of practical ideas or advice given

Any other support needed?

**COVID -19 Specific**

How is the risk assessment working, have you made any adaptations?

How are your families/ children/ staff responding?

What are you doing to support your staff at this time?

Have you made any adaptations to policies, procedures, contracts following Covid 19?

Have you managed supervisions with staff?

Is there any support you need around any of the above?

Any safeguarding concerns? Yes/No, if yes please contact the EYAT for this neighbourhood.

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