

Inspiring leaders to
improve children's lives



National College
for School Leadership

Early Years

Leadership development resources for children's centre staff

Making this training pack work for you

Professional development

Contents

Introduction	1
Using your training pack for strengthening self-evaluation	2
How do these resources help improve your self-evaluation techniques?	2
Using the resources across children's centre clusters	3
Leaders' resource pack	3
Team resource pack	3
Other ways of sharing resources across clusters	3
Effective self-evaluation	5
Involving others	5
Long-term outcomes	6
Using data and collecting evidence	6
Obtaining the views of service users	7
Critical friends	8
How do I choose a critical friend for my centre?	8
How could the process work?	8
Leadership support networks	9
Children's Centre Leaders Network	9
References	10

Introduction

Self-evaluation has rapidly shifted to the fore in recent years. You will have noticed the increasing need to measure and provide evidence of impact in order to describe the progress of your centre in achieving its intended outcomes. Self-evaluation is one method that allows you to learn from experience by encouraging reflection on the success and impact of the services you currently offer. Through self-evaluation you can also consider the views of others, and act on this information in order to nurture a learning environment within your organisation. For many, self-evaluation is considered a key tool to discovering what will work best in the future.

This pack provides a set of resources that will encourage learning and development within your organisation through institutional self-evaluation. The resources aim to ease the difficult task of self-evaluation, which normally relies on a detailed understanding of the quality of provision, the centre leadership structure, changes in family outcomes, numbers and descriptions of families who attend and those targeted in the catchment area who do not currently attend, along with feedback from parents. In today's society, evaluating the current progress of even a single service can be just as complex due to changes in funding structure, staff turnover and the differing needs of those who attend, and yet the concept of evaluation is increasingly important.

It is likely that your responsibilities are widening in terms of the number of children's centres you manage or work closely with, posing the problem of finding out what works best in different centres, and how far good practice is transferable. More importantly, you will want to prevent what doesn't work from being duplicated. Self-evaluation of a single centre requires understanding of the management systems within that particular centre, its history, lead agency, respective target catchment areas and families, and the type of provision offered. Likewise, evaluation of a centre cluster requires the collection of staff views at each centre, and assessment of the factors contributing to the success of centres that have a shared leadership structure.

Using your training pack for strengthening self-evaluation

How do these resources help improve your self-evaluation techniques?

Within your training pack you will find two sets of resources: the leaders' resource pack, and the team resource pack. These have been designed with the complexities of children's centres in mind to stimulate discussion and enhance your leadership skills. The packs will help you to:

- study the quality of leadership practices throughout the centre cluster
- draw up development plans including input from all members of staff
- discover new ways of gathering information from the families who are best placed to feed back on the services you provide

The packs also aim to show you how to develop your own support networks with similar children's centres and individuals in order to facilitate the sharing of best practice and problem-solving, and to encourage staff and institutional learning.

These resources are designed to strengthen the way self-evaluation is carried out within your centre in order to improve your strength as a learning organisation. Resources can be used once or twice a year to measure and evaluate annual change, but you might equally dip into selected sections of the resources as you wish. The packs are designed to allow staff to complete different sections independently. Using these resources can promote regular reflective practice and tracking of progress, whilst encouraging a cycle of reflection and action.

The packs are designed so that all staff can contribute regardless of experience and level, allowing a comprehensive discussion of leadership and management by the whole team. The packs also touch on the management of the centre in terms of multi-agency services, governance and families which ensures that work with all partners is monitored. Use of the resource packs might also lead to an improvement in the way that data is used and evidence is documented within your centre.

In the leaders' resource pack, there is a rating scale for internal audit procedures which can be used to highlight potential improvement within leadership practices over time. There is also a questionnaire which can be used to stimulate discussion across the senior leadership team (SLT) and identify areas of strength and weakness. The team resource pack comprises a questionnaire to promote a team development discussion about leadership. The authors encourage the design of action plans on specific areas of challenge in the management of the centre, and recommend using both resource packs for a full reflective discussion of current practice.

This booklet aims to support you in getting the most out of the resources described above. Particular advice on how to use the resource packs across children's centre clusters can be found on page 3. A general guide to effective self-evaluation practices can be found on page 8, along with ideas for involving service users in your self-evaluation (page 7), and other sources of support (for example critical friends on page 8 and support networks on page 9).

Within this booklet you will also find additional resources to support your use of the resource packs. We suggest that you take a look at these supplementary tools as they reflect new ways of presenting your evaluation findings, detailed ways to plan future actions on the basis of what you have learnt, and further discussion points to raise with your centre teams.

Using the resources across children's centre clusters

The changing landscape of children's centres means that more leaders oversee clusters of children's centres across different locations. This can make self-evaluation challenging, but does mean that you can draw upon the wider expertise available from staff specialising in different services.

Each centre within the cluster should initially work individually on its resource packs to answer the questions in terms of the facilities, staff skills and leadership offered by the full cluster (i.e. taking into account services offered by cluster sites that may be used by the same families). The centre leader should rate leadership across the full cluster, even if based in only one location.

Leaders' resource pack

After the leaders from each part of the cluster have completed their leaders' resource pack, a discussion to compare scores and plans of action can be held across the centres with all of the individual teams involved. Such discussions can promote awareness of the different strengths of each cluster centre, and look at how the overall running of the cluster is working. Differences in ratings across the cluster might also highlight differences in staff contributions across the centres, over and above leadership by the centre leader. Discussions across centres can widen the centre leader's understanding of his or her overall leadership and what can be improved. Discussions will be useful to all staff as it informs them how an overall cluster is progressing, what common or different issues are being faced in cluster centres and encourages ideas for how good practice might be shared.

Team resource pack

The authors recommend that the team resource pack is completed across the cluster of centres. Ideally staff pair up with partners across cluster centres when working with the resources. This will allow easy, free-ranging discussion of any differences in how clusters centres are led as well as a comparison of views about common leadership practice. Joint action plans which will benefit the full cluster can be developed, as well as individual plans relating to each centre. If staff are unable to meet together, action plans can be shared across the cluster to foster further development, and brought to each separate leadership team for discussion in meetings.

Other ways of sharing resources across clusters

There are a number of other ways that network expertise can be shared across clusters. A critical friend can be chosen from the staff team at each centre to join in development sessions at other linked centres (page 10). Another way to get staff involved across the cluster is to invite staff from linked centres to carry out a parent focus group discussion (see example on p10). Parents might feel more open about discussing their feelings with someone they don't encounter frequently and therefore might be more truthful about more negative issues. This is a useful learning experience for staff as it will broaden their views on what parents are thinking within their own setting. It is also good practice to regularly invite staff from other linked centres to take part in staff meetings, and share any new challenges or successes. Regular cross-cluster meetings should also be held to discuss broader challenges around leadership at the top and in the middle tiers.

You may wish to raise the following questions for discussion across your cluster:

- What are the most effective ways to collect evidence of impact, particularly regarding improvements in family safety and health outcomes?
- How can the centre get early indications of long-term change?
- How aware are staff of key terminology (eg, national performance indicators, payment by results)?
- How might the centre tackle the issue of requiring identification for all visitors to the centre, even when visitors are expected or it might seem inappropriate?
- If your centre has limited knowledge of childcare (for example because childcare is outsourced), how do you go about improving your understanding of leadership and management in this area?
- How can you identify the neediest families within your local community?
- How can your centre identify those families it is not reaching? Are different types of centre reaching different excluded groups?
- How can staff become more engaged in their work with the centre?
- What other measures or tasks could be introduced to produce a better quality of service delivery?

Effective self-evaluation

Involving others

The Schools Network (formerly the Specialist Schools and Academies Trust or SSAT) noted in 2011 that there are four main principles in carrying out self-evaluation effectively:

1. Rigorous self-evaluation can aid improvement, and it should not be undertaken just for the purposes of inspection.
2. Self-evaluation should form part of routine management and become ongoing and responsive. It should not be considered a time-consuming task.
3. Self-evaluation should integrate and act upon views by other service providers and stakeholders.
4. Ideally self-evaluation should be carried out on an annual basis and should include information about impact on users.

Effective self-evaluation involves all staff, stakeholders and a selection of parents to capture current service provision. It is important to remember that different individuals experience children's centres from differing perspectives. More often than not, team members who work on the ground may be more aware of different challenges facing both the families and the centre. Likewise, volunteers, receptionists and other more casual staff should also be consulted.

Multi-agency partners are key to self-evaluation as they work closely with families and influence their experience of services. It is useful to involve partners from health, jobseeker services, social services, childcare, local primary schools and nurseries where possible to obtain a complete review of all areas of the centre's work. Such professionals might also be able to share the benefit of working with other children's centres, enabling them to offer guidance on good practice. Other important people to involve in your self-evaluation include stakeholders such as members of advisory board members and governing bodies, who by their nature should be overseeing the planning and evaluation of the centre and therefore may have a more detailed perspective on aims and targets.

One way to collect views on what is and isn't working well at the centre would be via a group discussion with all of the parties. However more practically it may be useful to complete session evaluation forms where staff can briefly note both what did and did not work in their sessions and conversations with families, along with possible reasons for why things didn't work and how they could be changed in the future.

Families should be consulted to provide feedback on your self-evaluation. Only with the views from users of your services can you find out exactly what is liked and disliked, what users believe they are getting out of the services, and what they wish could change. Whilst it is acknowledged that parent and child involvement in self-evaluation is not necessarily easy evidence to collect, individual informal discussions with families will work well. It is also useful to gather parent feedback at the time an activity happens, for example by informally asking families how they felt the session went and whether they would like to come again. Although data may be collected in a more ad-hoc manner within family discussions, the information might lead you to discover other areas of need and whether you are on target to improve family outcomes.

Long-term outcomes

A number of key outcomes may only be observable over long-term monitoring, and one challenge often faced by centres is the real need to evaluate progress of outcomes that gradually emerge. In such cases, it is extremely important to monitor any stages of change that might be expected as a precursor to the outcome. For example, if an outcome is to involve parents in the running of the centre, one potential precursor might be to measure parental attendance at consultation events to see whether there has been any increase over the year. Whilst this alone would not constitute a change in the outcome of parental involvement, when combined with a number of other precursors, it is evidence of improvement.

Using data and collecting evidence

Self-evaluation is reliant on the ability to measure current progress against available data. Children's centre staff should become familiar with ways to use and collect evidence for self-evaluation. Data can be collected in a number of ways including through local authority mail-outs, centre database information and statistics (such as E-Start), local area statistics, health visitor records, new birth records and centre-led research and surveys. Using data from other sources can allow centre staff to track the use of their own services against regional figures to ensure that they are reaching their targeted numbers of the neediest families, catering to all excluded groups and meeting local community outcomes. Likewise, data collected from within the centre in terms of types of family attending and their likes and dislikes can feed more centrally into self-evaluation, as these provide direct evidence of what is happening on the ground and details of needs that are not being met. It is important to remain aware of what data is available locally and what supplementary information can be collected daily within your centre. Encourage sharing of data across other children's centres in your area, both in terms of the locally available, large-scale datasets and lessons about success in service delivery and improvement of outcomes.

It is also now a growing requirement to document current protocols and policies in order to ascertain whether any impact has been made. It is therefore advisable to keep records from meeting agendas and minutes, changes to policies and evaluation sheets after sessions etc to allow others to follow documented changes.

Obtaining the views of service users

Whilst joint goal-setting and discussion promote intensive development and awareness of current practices from the level of staff working within the centre, to truly evaluate the current service provided and the current effect of centre management it is necessary to involve a range of users.

Involvement of families in your assessment of leadership allows you to gather an overall impression of how the management of services is working within your centre. Information might be collected informally to feed into your current quality ratings of the centre, such as through informal focus group sessions held with parents, either arranged at a convenient time for parents to attend during a drop-in session (perhaps providing incentives to get involved such as snacks etc) or obtained through meetings with the parent forum (if one is available). It is important to try and obtain views from all families using the centre.

Below are examples of some questions for parents which tap into areas covered in the development packs. Answers could be used to supplement current information provided by staff within the Packs:

- What is it that encourages you to come to the centre?
- What makes you feel comfortable/happy here?
- In what ways are you treated equally and fairly here?
- What do you believe the centre aims to do?
- What have you done to help plan the aims of this centre?
- Are you ever given any responsibility to be in charge of others in the centre?
- Are you ever involved in making decisions about the centre?
- Would you like to be involved in the running of the centre? How?
- What services would you like to be available at the centre?
- What new ideas for the centre have you shared?
- Do you have access to a parent group or forum that you can be involved in?
- When have you told staff your thoughts about services you have used?
- When have you let staff know your thoughts about the centre?
- What courses or sessions have you been to at the centre? How have they helped you to learn?
- How are you helped to support your child at home? What have you learnt?
- What opportunities are there for you to work at the centre? Have you ever done anything like this before?
- What opportunities are there to volunteer to help here? Have you done this?
- Have you had an induction to your participation in the centre?
- How do you normally find out about activities and opportunities at the centre?

Critical friends

Another way to improve your centre might be to find a critical friend to complete the resources with you, who could offer support whilst challenging your choices and boundaries. Such a person would ideally challenge the centre about whether it has achieved a particular level of quality (based on currently available evidence). This critical friend should be someone who is familiar with the area they are critiquing, and can be supportive in terms of improvement. A critical friend has been defined as:

a trusted person who asks provocative questions, provides data to be examined through another lens, and offers critiques of a person's work as a friend. A critical friend takes the time to fully understand the context of the work presented and the outcomes that the person or group is working toward.

Costa & Kallick, 1993:50

How do I choose a critical friend for my centre?

You can choose a critical friend from a variety of professional disciplines that may be in some way related to the work of your centre, or understands the background to early care and family support. Your critical friend might be a governor, or a member of your advisory board. Equally, you may choose one of your external partners to help you look critically at your work as they might have a more impartial view due to other, similar children's centres and early years settings that they are involved with: these could include school teachers, health visitors and Job Centre staff. Other staff you could also ask to help you might be other children's centre leaders, staff in clustered children's centres, staff involved in your children's centre network and university researchers working in the area.

How could the process work?

A critical friend would be particularly beneficial when helping you to complete the rating scale in part 1 of the leaders' resource pack. The critical friend would be able to provide an impartial view on whether or not the setting truly has achieved a level of quality. It would be good practice for the critical friend to work with the centre leader whilst he or she fills out the rating scale to ask them to justify or provide evidence for their assessments.

Leadership support networks

One way of ensuring that you are consistently moving forward in your leadership practice is to seek support from others in a similar setting who can share examples of good practice and lessons learnt. First, contact other children's centre leaders in your area to see if such a network already exists. If it doesn't, you could set up a support network with other centres within your local authority after you have completed these development resources. It would be useful to encourage all other centres to carry out the senior staff resource activities before you meet as a support network so that you can all share a common knowledge of strengths and areas of development within your centres.

A meeting could then be set up between senior staff of the children's centres where staff are given the opportunity to share their experiences of the resources. Discussion might spark sharing of good practice across other centres and future joint development activities. By meeting across the local authority, your senior leadership team might learn about further training opportunities and resources, and you would be encouraged to share any ways that you have dealt with difficult centre or staffing issues as a leader.

The list below describes a number of topics which could be used as a point of discussion within your support network:

- What common challenges are faced by children's centres within this local authority?
- What are the common areas of development relating to any of the other service divisions within centres (eg, health, jobseeking, schools, etc)?
- How might the centres work together to improve in these areas?
- What opportunities are there for staff from each centre to shadow staff from another centre?
- What policies or protocols could be shared across centres?
- What training opportunities are available within this local authority or this voluntary organisation?
- What research opportunities are available within this local authority or this voluntary organisation?
- How might children's centre leaders be able to work together to improve their ratings?

The centre can work through each challenge to see whether other centres have managed to overcome these, and discuss how.

Once the network is in place it would be good practice to share among any further opportunities that arise, and any queries that may develop. By raising queries with others you may find other centre leaders are facing similar issues in their own contexts and you may be able to work together to find a solution.

Children's Centre Leaders Network

If you find it difficult to begin your own support network within your local authority, another opportunity might be to join an established national leaders network such as the Children's Centre Leaders Network (CCLN). CCLN is led by the National College of School Leadership, and describes itself as a professional learning network for children's centre leaders. The network provides you with the opportunity to work with other children's centre leaders to improve practice, share experience and develop expertise. For more information on joining this network, please visit the website at: www.nationalcollege.org.uk/index/professional-development/ccln.

References

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The Schools Network, 2011, *Academy Resources* [online]. Available at www.ssatrust.org.uk/Pages/home.aspx

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