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## **The role of the early years professional and other leaders within the team**

The role of the early years professional (EYP) is as a team leader, who takes responsibility for the developing, leading and managing of care, play, learning and development. Their knowledge and understanding of early years practice should inspire others and support colleagues to develop their own practice. In this context the EYP takes on the role of mentor to the team, or as Callan and Copp (2006) describe the mentor role, “*a professional friend who can be a supporter, role model and giver of well informed feedback*”. The EYP is also vital in facilitating reflection which unites theory and practice, challenging others to consider what underpins and informs their work.

Others with the title of ‘leader’ within the team, for example ‘room leaders’, must also be willing to develop their roles as professional friends or mentors to their colleagues, taking the role far beyond that of a person with responsibility for a specific area of work, and helping to develop a sense of the team as a learning community, where individuals reflect upon their actions collectively. Team reflection informs observation, assessment and planning for individual children and for groups, but should also inform reflective activities that are often considered to be the responsibility of one person, for example, completion of the Ofsted self evaluation form (SEF) or accreditation schemes such as the Pre-school Learning Alliance’s Reflecting on

## *a reflective approach to the EYFS*

The EYFS encourages practitioners to think about how to sustain a successful care and learning environment; a process that must involve everyone in the team. It also highlights the need for all practitioners to “*consider how best to create, maintain and improve a setting so that it meets the highest standards and offers the best experience for young children*”, EYFS (2007), therefore putting a greater emphasis on ongoing ‘quality improvement’.

Reflective practice is the key to quality improvement as it enables individuals and the team as a whole to come together to discuss, plan and action change in settings, reviewing what is happening at every stage of the process. The team as a ‘learning community’ is able to sustain the idea of continuous quality improvement because they are committed to reflection and value it as a tool for developing shared knowledge.

The process of reflective practice within a setting will not just happen because someone suggests that it is a good idea. For reflection to be meaningful there must be a shared overall aim to achieve *effective* early learning and *positive* experiences for children, and for practitioners to be effective in nurturing them. The whole team must understand and value the need for reflection to take place so that they can improve both individually and collectively.

### **Case study: Unsafe emotional environment**

A nursery is short staffed, so they merge two baby rooms, taking them up to 15 children aged under two years old in the one room. They are within ratios and the room is registered for 15 children, but it is obvious that the babies are confused and distressed by the sudden change; staff are unsettled and find themselves trying to work round each other in a confined space; parents are not happy either but they are told that it is a short term measure and is within the terms of their registration.

The situation continues for several days and even though some parents voice their concerns to staff, they do not take it any further believing it to be a situation that is beyond the control of the nursery. Over a period of several weeks the same thing happens three times more. When concerns are again raised by staff and parents they are told by the manager that it is a temporary measure, no rules are being broken and unless anyone can make an alternative suggestion, it will continue to happen from time to time.

With no apparent solution available to them staff begin to accept the situation. The deputy who is acting up, whilst the manager is on annual leave, even organises the room merger for a period of two weeks so that she can be supernumerary, believing it to be normal practice.

This case study illustrates how something that is not good practice can easily become established practice if not challenged. The baby room merger meets the needs of the nursery for a short period of time, but the children and staff affected are now in an environment, that whilst it may meet EYFS welfare requirements for space and staffing, does not meet the emotional needs of the children. In fact it has become an emotionally unsafe environment for the staff and the children; some children who were previously settled revert to crying and clingy behaviour when dropped off by their parents on mornings when the rooms are merged.

Children no longer know what to expect from day-to-day which upsets their daily routine. The key person system is also likely to be affected, as staff cover for each other and informally take on other responsibilities; they then become frustrated when roles and responsibilities that were once clearly defined in their own rooms become 'blurred' in the merger. Roles are not renegotiated due to the temporary nature of the changes that have been made and staff clearly do not feel confident enough to challenge the decisions being made by the manager and deputy.