



CASE STUDY

STRENGTHENING PRACTICE THROUGH HIGH QUALITY INTERACTIONS TRAINING

Setting Context

This case study reflects the experience of an experienced Early Years practitioner and leader working within a primary school setting, where advocating for high-quality Early Years practice can at times feel isolating. With over 12 years of experience, the participant described a strong commitment to ongoing professional learning, often independently driven due to limited access to inspiring, theory-informed training.

She reflected that, at times, professional development opportunities had not always provided the depth of reflection or new perspectives she was seeking. As a result, she had often drawn on her own reading and research to continue developing her understanding. Within this context, the opportunity to engage in the High Quality Interactions Training came at a significant moment in her professional journey.

The Training



The High Quality Interactions Training, delivered by the East Midlands Early Years Stronger Practice Hub and developed by Pen Green, is grounded in over 40 years of research-informed practice. At its heart are the Pen Green Pedagogic Strategies — a well-established approach that has evolved through sustained work with babies, young children, families and practitioners, rooted in Pen Green's long-standing research and practice traditions (Whalley, 2007).

At a glance: How the programme works

A structured, reflective professional development journey focused on improving the quality of adult-child interactions

Day 1 – Building knowledge and understanding

Practitioners attend a full training day exploring relational pedagogy, including key theories such as attachment, attunement and intersubjectivity. The session introduces the Pen Green Pedagogic Strategies and supports practitioners to reflect on their own practice and consider the role of the adult in shaping children's experiences.

In-setting practice – capturing real interactions

Following Day 1, practitioners return to their settings and record short video clips of themselves (or colleagues) interacting with children. This brings the learning into real-life practice.

1:1 video reflection sessions – deepening practice

Over several weeks, practitioners take part in a series of individual online sessions with a facilitator. Using their video footage, they engage in supported, in-depth reflection to notice, analyse and refine their interactions, developing greater attunement and intentionality.

Day 2 – embedding and sustaining change

A second full training day focuses on embedding learning across the setting. Practitioners are introduced to peer observation approaches and consider how to build a reflective culture so high-quality interactions are sustained by the whole team.

Ongoing support – networks and continued reflection

Practitioners are invited to engage in ongoing networks and reflective opportunities, supporting continued development and shared learning across settings.



The Training

The training is carefully structured to move practitioners through a process of understanding, reflection and sustained change, rather than offering isolated strategies. It begins with a full training day that introduces the core principles of relational pedagogy. During this first session, practitioners explore the theoretical foundations that underpin high-quality interactions, including attachment, attunement, intersubjectivity, containment and the concept of holding. Alongside this, there is a strong focus on the role of the adult — considering ideas such as the Key Person approach and Professional Love — and how these translate into practice with babies and young children (Bowlby, 1969; Winnicott, 1960; Bion, 1962; Stern, 1985; Trevarthen, 1979). (Elfer, 2012; Page, 2018).

This first day is not simply about acquiring knowledge. Practitioners are supported to reflect on their own existing pedagogic approaches and begin to apply the Pen Green Pedagogic Strategies to real examples through video case studies. Ethical considerations are also explored, ensuring practitioners feel confident and safe in capturing practice within their own settings (Whalley, 2007; Lawrence and Gallagher, 2015).

Following this, the training moves into a crucial phase where practitioners take their learning back into their own environments. They are asked to record short video clips of themselves, or colleagues, interacting with children. This is a significant shift — moving from thinking about practice to seeing it.

Over the following weeks, practitioners engage in a series of one-to-one online sessions with a facilitator. These sessions provide a rare opportunity for deep, focused reflection, where video footage is revisited together and carefully analysed. Through this process, practitioners begin to notice the subtle details of their interactions — their timing, tone, body language, emotional availability and responsiveness.

It is within these sessions that the learning becomes most powerful. Practitioners are not told what to do; instead, they are supported to unpick their own practice, refine their understanding and begin to develop their own relational pedagogic strategies. This aligns with strong evidence that sustained, supported reflection — particularly through video — is one of the most effective ways to make interaction visible and open to analysis. (Jordan and Henderson, 1995; Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2019).

STRENGTHENING PRACTICE THROUGH HIGH QUALITY INTERACTIONS TRAINING

The programme then returns to a second full training day, where the focus shifts to sustainability. Practitioners are introduced to peer observation approaches, enabling them to continue this reflective process within their own settings. They are supported to consider how these strategies can be embedded across teams, ensuring that high-quality interactions are not dependent on individuals but become part of the culture of the setting.

Throughout the programme, there are also opportunities to connect with wider professional networks, reinforcing learning and creating a sense of shared practice across the sector.

Ultimately, the aim of the training is not simply to improve individual interactions in the moment, but to support a deeper shift in how practitioners understand their role. It seeks to develop adults who are more attuned, emotionally available and reflective — creating environments where babies and young children experience calm, consistent and secure relationships that underpin their development across all areas of learning.

Initial Experience and Immediate Impact

From the outset, the participant described the training as both professionally and personally transformative.

“I just wanted to take the time to say a huge thank-you again for the High Quality Interactions Training you both delivered, I felt lucky to have been a part of it.”

She spoke candidly about the challenges of working in a primary school context, where Early Years practice can sometimes feel undervalued:

“Sometimes it can feel a little lonely advocating EY in primary schools when you are not always deemed as a real teacher or leader.”

Against this backdrop, the training offered something distinctly different. It provided not only new knowledge, but a deeper connection to the values underpinning her work:

“The content delved into theory and practice, offering high quality professional development... it prompted me to think deeply about children, my own practice and staff.”

What stood out most was the way the training connected intellectual understanding with emotional engagement:

“Your expertise, passion and experience resulted in me feeling emotionally and intellectually connected to the vision and aspirations you have for our youngest children. This is something I share but could never articulate as well.”

STRENGTHENING PRACTICE THROUGH HIGH QUALITY INTERACTIONS TRAINING

The individual video reflection sessions were particularly powerful. Through careful, supportive analysis of her own practice, she experienced a level of insight that was both challenging and affirming:

“Your expertise at unpicking what was happening in the videos left me moved to tears... but it left me determined that this happens more and more for our children.”

This depth of reflection led to a renewed sense of professional curiosity and motivation:

“My professional curiosity to acquire new knowledge has certainly increased as a result.”

She also reflected on the wider impact of the training environment itself, recognising how it resonated across practitioners with different roles and levels of experience:

“Look at the impact you had on the room... I am positive that ultimately children will benefit.”

Embedding into Practice

Returning to her setting, the participant began to translate this learning into her day-to-day practice in thoughtful and intentional ways. One of the most significant shifts has been a conscious effort to slow down within the busyness of the environment reflecting principles of slow pedagogy (Clark, 2020).

“I am more mindful of my interactions. I am slowing down to allow for deeper, more meaningful connections, particularly with our more disadvantaged children.”

She described a growing awareness of the importance of every interaction, recognising that even the smallest moments — a glance, a smile, a shared pause — contribute to children’s development:

“Whether I am talking, playing, singing, or merely making eye contact, these interactions are helping our children.”

This has led to a change in how she responds to children’s cues. Rather than being pulled away by competing demands, she is now more attuned to noticing and sustaining interactions:

“Any cue given by a child is picked up on and time is given for that interaction to be nurtured and supported.”

Alongside this, there has been a shift in how she conceptualises learning within the setting. She described feeling less pressure to prioritise visible, task-based outcomes, and more confidence in valuing relational and emotional development:

“I feel less pressure to see every minute as curriculum learning time... I can justify emotional growth, language development and strong relationships, a sense of belonging and self-worth.”

Impact on Children

These changes in adult practice have led to noticeable differences in children's experiences. The participant described seeing more children who feel valued and confident within the setting.

“Children’s faces light up and they confidently share more... this is developing stronger trusting relationships with more adults.” (Bowlby, 1969; Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000).

She also observed increased levels of self-esteem and resilience, with children more willing to take risks in their learning:

“They are having a go and persisting with challenges.”

Children's interactions with peers have also developed, with more sustained and meaningful engagement:

“They contribute more and can be seen extending interactions more widely with different peers.”

Importantly, children who were previously finding aspects of social and emotional development more challenging are beginning to show greater capacity for self-regulation:

“Children at earlier stages of emotional development are showing increased abilities to regulate with less support.”

Impact on Team Practice

Recognising the importance of embedding this approach more widely, the participant began to share her learning with her team. During the training itself, she had already started to consider how this might be achieved, and was later given the opportunity to lead an INSET day.

She used this time to revisit the principles of high-quality interactions, explore the underpinning theory, and create space for reflection and discussion. This enabled the team to consider their shared practice and how they might develop greater consistency in their interactions with children.

“We explored how we can embed this in our environment so all children benefit from consistently responsive and enthusiastic adults who are genuinely interested in talking with them.”

STRENGTHENING PRACTICE THROUGH HIGH QUALITY INTERACTIONS TRAINING

The response from the team was overwhelmingly positive. Practitioners engaged thoughtfully with the content and reflected openly on their own practice, creating a strong foundation for ongoing development.

A key next step has been the introduction of video reflection as a team approach. Inspired by the impact it had on her own practice, the participant has begun to embed this as a shared reflective tool:

“All my team are extremely open to the video reflections... they could see the impact it had on me and were enthusiastic to take part.”

This marks an important shift towards a more reflective, research-informed culture within the setting.

Sustained Impact

Over time, the impact of the training has extended beyond individual changes in practice to influence the wider ethos of the setting. The participant described feeling more confident in her role as a leader and advocate for high-quality Early Years practice, with a clearer language to articulate its importance.

The training has supported the development of a shared understanding across the team, alongside a commitment to ongoing reflection and improvement. It has also reinforced the importance of relational pedagogy as the foundation for children’s learning and development.

Reflecting on the experience as a whole, the participant described a renewed sense of purpose:

“I felt empowered by the knowledge, vision and aspirations for our youngest children... it has instilled a real fire in me to be the best I and my team can be for the children we are privileged to teach and care for.”



Conclusion

This case study illustrates the powerful impact of professional development that is deeply rooted in both theory and practice. The High Quality Interactions Training, underpinned by the long-established Pen Green Pedagogic Strategies, demonstrates how sustained, reflective and relational approaches to learning can lead to meaningful and lasting change. (Education Endowment Foundation, 2021).

It highlights how investing in practitioners' understanding of interactions — not as incidental moments, but as central to children's development — can transform practice, strengthen teams and improve outcomes for children, particularly those who are most disadvantaged.

As the participant reflected:

“This kind of training needs to be shared more widely.”

References

- Bion, W.R. (1962) Learning from experience. London: Heinemann.
- Bowlby, J. (1969) Attachment and loss: Vol. 1. Attachment. London: Hogarth Press.
- Clark, A. (2020) Slow knowledge and the unhurried child. *Early Years*, 40(1).
- Education Endowment Foundation (2021) Effective professional development.
- Elfer, P. (2012) Emotion in nursery work. *Early Years*.
- Jordan, B. and Henderson, A. (1995) 'Interaction analysis: Foundations and practice', *The Journal of the Learning Sciences*, 4(1), pp. 39–103.
- Lawrence, P. and Gallagher, T. (2015) Pedagogic strategies. Pen Green.
- Page, J. (2018) Professional love. *International Journal of Early Years Education*.
- Shonkoff, J.P. and Phillips, D.A. (2000) From neurons to neighborhoods.
- Siraj-Blatchford, I. et al. (2019) SSTEW scale.
- Stern, D.N. (1985) The interpersonal world of the infant.
- Trevarthen, C. (1979) Communication and cooperation in early infancy.
- Whalley, M. (2007) Involving parents in their children's learning. London: Paul Chapman Publishing.
- Winnicott, D.W. (1960) The theory of the parent-infant relationship.

Contact us at

 sph@pengreen.org

 01536 443435

More information on our current offer and support services

 pengreen.org/stronger-practice-hub/