

Apprenticeships in early years settings offer tremendous opportunities for both learners and employers. When implemented effectively, they create a dynamic balance that supports the learner's development while enhancing the quality of care and education within the setting. However, achieving this **learner employer balance** requires thoughtful planning, robust support structures, and a shared commitment to professional growth and safeguarding.

As an early years workforce and training lead with over a decade of experience, I have seen the profound impact that a well-structured apprenticeship can have when aligned closely with workplace needs and the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) principles. This post explores key factors employers must consider to ensure apprenticeships deliver for everyone involved, highlighting practical tools like progress reviews and development coaching, and weaving in insights from industry leaders such as *Teach Early Years*, *Teachwire*, and *The Childcare Company*.

Understanding the Learner Employer Balance

The **learner employer balance** refers to the delicate equilibrium between providing apprentices with meaningful, structured learning while meeting the operational demands of the early years setting. Striking this balance ensures that apprentices can absorb essential knowledge and skills without feeling overwhelmed, while settings benefit from a motivated, well-supported workforce.



To achieve this, employers must integrate training into the learner's daily practice rather than treating it as an add-on. This integration fosters deeper learning, improves retention of knowledge, and aligns with the practical nature of early years work.

Workplace Support: The Backbone of Successful Apprenticeships

Dedicated workplace support is critical. Apprentices need clearly assigned mentors who understand both the occupational standards for Early Years Educators and the operational context of the setting. This relationship helps apprentices navigate teachearlyyears.com challenges and gain constructive feedback during their learning journey.

Regular **progress reviews** are a practical tool in this regard. They provide structured moments to evaluate the apprentice's achievements, identify areas for development, and address any challenges. They also facilitate open communication between the apprentice, their mentor, and external training providers.

Tying Workplace Learning to Daily Practice

One of the most effective ways to embed apprenticeship learning is to align it closely with everyday activities in the nursery or preschool. This approach ensures that theoretical knowledge is immediately tested and reinforced through practical application.

- **Child Development Knowledge Applied in Rooms:** Apprentices should regularly engage with observing and documenting child development milestones, linking these to EYFS expectations. For example, noticing when a child masters a new physical skill or demonstrates emerging communication abilities.
- **EYFS Principles in Action:** Employers need to encourage apprentices to reflect on how EYFS promotes holistic development, well-being, and effective safeguarding. This can be done through daily discussions and reflective journals.
- **Professional Practice:** Apprentices benefit from participating in team meetings, planning sessions, and parent communication, helping them understand the broader scope of early years work beyond direct childcare.

Providing apprentices with meaningful responsibilities, combined with ongoing support, helps cement their learning and builds confidence.

Safeguarding: The Non-negotiable Foundation

Safeguarding remains paramount in early years settings. Apprentices must be deeply familiar with safeguarding policies and practices from day one. Employers are responsible for ensuring the learner understands their duty of care and the procedures for reporting concerns.

- Induction training should cover all safeguarding topics, including recognising signs of abuse and neglect.
- Regular updates and scenario-based discussions help apprentices stay alert and responsive.
- Development coaching sessions are perfect opportunities to revisit safeguarding in a reflective, supportive environment.

Involving apprentices in risk assessments and health and safety checks further grounds their learning in real-world practice and reinforces a culture of safety within the setting.

Health and Safety & Risk Management

The importance of health and safety cannot be understated. Apprentices should be trained in site-specific procedures, emergency protocols, cleanliness standards, and safe use of equipment.

Employers benefit from utilising coaching techniques to help apprentices internalise risk assessment principles. Encouraging apprentices to voice safety concerns actively also builds their professional confidence and promotes a safer environment for children and staff alike.

Tools to Maximise the Impact: Progress Reviews and Development Coaching

Tool Description Benefits for Learner Benefits for Employer Progress Reviews Regular, structured meetings to assess progress against apprenticeship standards and set achievable goals. Provides clarity on learning objectives, builds confidence, and identifies areas for additional support. Ensures progress is aligned with setting needs, helps retain talent, and supports quality assurance. Development Coaching One-to-one sessions focusing on reflective practice, problem-solving, and professional growth. Encourages self-awareness, enhances skills application, and fosters resilience. Builds a capable, reflective workforce, improving overall setting performance.

Learning from the Best: Industry Insights

Several organisations provide valuable resources and support to help settings maximise the success of apprenticeship programmes:

- **Teach Early Years** offers practical strategies to embed apprenticeship learning within daily routines, highlighting the importance of the learner employer balance.
- **Teachwire** shares up-to-date research and digital tools that assist training fit and workplace support, helping settings stay compliant and innovative.
- **The Childcare Company** specialises in supporting providers with onboarding and managing off-the-job training plans, ensuring that apprenticeships are tailored to individual learners and operational demands.

Engaging with these organisations not only provides evidence-based approaches but also connects employers with a wider community of practice dedicated to early years workforce development.

Practical Checklist for Employers to Ensure Training Fit

1. **Assess Needs:** Understand the skill gaps and learning needs of your apprentice in relation to your setting's goals.
2. **Onboard Thoroughly:** Provide comprehensive induction covering safeguarding, health and safety, and EYFS foundations.
3. **Assign Mentors:** Designate experienced staff to support the apprentice daily.
4. **Integrate Learning:** Embed apprenticeship activities into daily practice—observations, planning, parent interactions.
5. **Schedule Progress Reviews:** Hold regular reviews to track progress and adjust plans.
6. **Implement Development Coaching:** Use coaching sessions for reflective practice and professional growth.
7. **Monitor Safeguarding & Safety:** Continually reinforce safeguarding and risk management policies.
8. **Utilise External Resources:** Leverage support and guidance from organisations like *Teach Early Years*, *Teachwire*, and *The Childcare Company*.
9. **Gather Feedback:** Encourage open communication with apprentices to identify what's working and what could improve.
10. **Celebrate Successes:** Acknowledge milestones to motivate and retain learners.

Conclusion: Building a Thriving Apprenticeship Environment

To ensure that apprenticeships truly work for both learner and setting, employers must thoughtfully blend training with day-to-day practice. Prioritising safeguarding, wellbeing, and health and safety alongside child development knowledge and EYFS adherence creates a strong foundation.



Workplace support through tailored mentoring, progress reviews, and development coaching promotes continuous growth and confidence in apprentices, while practical tools and community resources help employers maintain a training fit that meets evolving demands.

By fostering an environment where learning and professional practice coexist seamlessly, employers not only nurture the next generation of Early Years Educators but also create sustainable, high-quality early years settings that benefit children, families, and the workforce alike.