

See for yourself

Reflective practice is embedded in early years provision, but is not always easy to achieve. Educational psychologist **Anita Soni** describes a project in Birmingham that uses video to help practitioners find and reinforce the positives in their everyday work



Reflective practice – the process of analysing your work with children in order to improve it – is a key aspect of early years pedagogy. It aims to have a positive impact on children, by ensuring their individual needs are met, as well as on parents, who are reassured that the quality of the provision is high. Staff also benefit by becoming more confident in their abilities, which in turn boosts motivation and job satisfaction.

One of the downsides of reflective practice is the tendency to focus on what hasn't gone well. While it is clearly important to work on areas that need developing, it is equally

valuable to consider an individual's or setting's strengths. This is where video can be incredibly helpful, and in particular video enhanced reflective practice (VERP).

A model that has been around for more than 20 years (Kennedy *et al* 2015), VERP involves a practitioner reviewing very short video clips of him or her interacting with a child, group of children or another adult. This helps both individuals and groups to develop their skills using the principles of video interactive guidance (VIG), an approach used to foster communication that is sensitive, responsive and mutually receptive. This is also known as attuned interaction, and is most commonly employed in video

Key person Ashwaq and her child share an attuned interaction about ladybirds

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enhanced therapy to help parents communicate better with children.

A video project run at George Perkins Nursery in Birmingham stemmed from the desire to understand why the quiet, hard-to-engage children attending didn't seem to have a voice. Manager Sarah Presswood says, 'We have five Early Years Pupil Premium children, who were on the periphery of activities. We wanted not just to be supporting these children but upskilling staff as well.'

In one extreme case, says Ms Presswood, 'A girl had come in desperate for breakfast, but was selectively mute and wouldn't even gesture to establish whether she wanted toast or cornflakes.'

reflective practice



Practitioner Zoe is balancing the needs of three children as they talk and play outside

This now happens every six weeks; for the first few sessions, a VERP guider facilitated, but it didn't take long for the group to feel able to continue unaided. The session runs for about an hour, usually at the end of the day, with around six people involved each time.

Each practitioner sets their own goal – for example, supporting a certain child to join in, or, in the case of managers and room leaders, something that will develop discussions with apprentices – and chooses video clips linked to this. Because VERP is a strengths-based approach, the practitioner chooses better-than-usual clips. While this can feel a little unusual, or boastful even, identifying what has been done well means practitioners can then strive to do more of it.

It is a very positive thing to do: practitioners share moments they are proud of, colleagues give positive feedback, and everyone reflects on why they think the interaction went better than usual, including how both the child and practitioner thought and felt at the time and longer term. It can fuel discussions about focused aspects of practice, such as the detail of how a particular child responds or is helped to be calm or engaged. It also leads to valuable discussions about knowing when to wait for the child, when to talk, and the subtleties of non-verbal communication such as eye gaze, posture and facial expression.

→ FURTHER INFORMATION

- Kennedy H, Landor M and Todd L (2015) **Video Enhanced Reflective Practice.** Jessica Kingsley Publishers
- Ofsted (2018) **Early years inspections: myths**, available at <https://bit.ly/2xkPgX4>
- PACEY (2016) **Developing Self Reflective Practice**, available at <https://bit.ly/2tHqXGU>

'After the project she will show off her clothes and tell you about her auntie. Her language skills are great. But she needed to feel someone was attuned to her.

'We also had a little boy who had quite a high level of play, but in groups he didn't really want to put any of his ideas forward, and he wasn't able to tolerate other children coming into his space.

'Since the project he is much more spontaneous in group conversations. He will invite people into his play.'

How was this achieved?

During the first training session, staff were videoed positively interacting with the children, and

then the clips watched by the whole team with the following questions in mind:

- When are my attachments secure?
- What does good attunement look and feel like, for both child and me as practitioner?

Staff were encouraged to reflect on what they had seen. Because the interactions with the children were positive, many strengths were identified, and a team of six practitioners, including managers, volunteered to be videoed, analyse the footage themselves, and then edit it down to a few moments in order to share specific positive interactions with the group.

Viewpoint: George Perkins Nursery, Birmingham

'George Perkins has always adopted a reflective practice approach, but after the first VERP session, I understood that reflection must be intrinsic to everyone's daily practice,' says manager Sarah Presswood.

'However, I realised that it has to go hand-in-hand with being confident and responsive – for children and management as well as staff – so my assistant manager and I ran a training day for the staff to come up with our own agreed principles of what reflective confident staff and children look like.

- The first involved defining the three qualities that

identify reflective, confident and responsive staff or children. This was done in groups in order to facilitate debate and negotiation.

- The second exercise required individuals to reflect on their own practice and rate themselves on their reflectiveness, confidence and responsiveness, with consideration of the evidence they had to support their self-assessment and next steps to try to improve their score.
- The final activity was the same as above but related to children, with senior and junior members of staff paired up and asked to

consider the three defining qualities of each key child. Again, there was an expectation for reasons to be given for the ratings, and rough action plans to boost scores as needed.

'The key learning point is we need to give children space and time to communicate – creating a safe space for children to proffer something they want to say. The language that has followed from the project has been much richer. It wasn't hard for staff to see it – but without seeing it in practice from both theirs and the child's point of view, they wouldn't have. That is the power of video.'

'The key principle of VERP is identifying what is good and striving to do more of it in order to move practice forward. I've now taken this into supervisions and said to staff "is this something you can try?" rather than saying "that isn't something you do so you can try it". Because it is presented in a positive way, people feel very empowered.'

'The best outcome of all is witnessing this in practice – in daily interactions, in clips that have been brought to VERP sessions, and when a staff member says, "I have been thinking about how I can support my less confident key children and give them a voice."