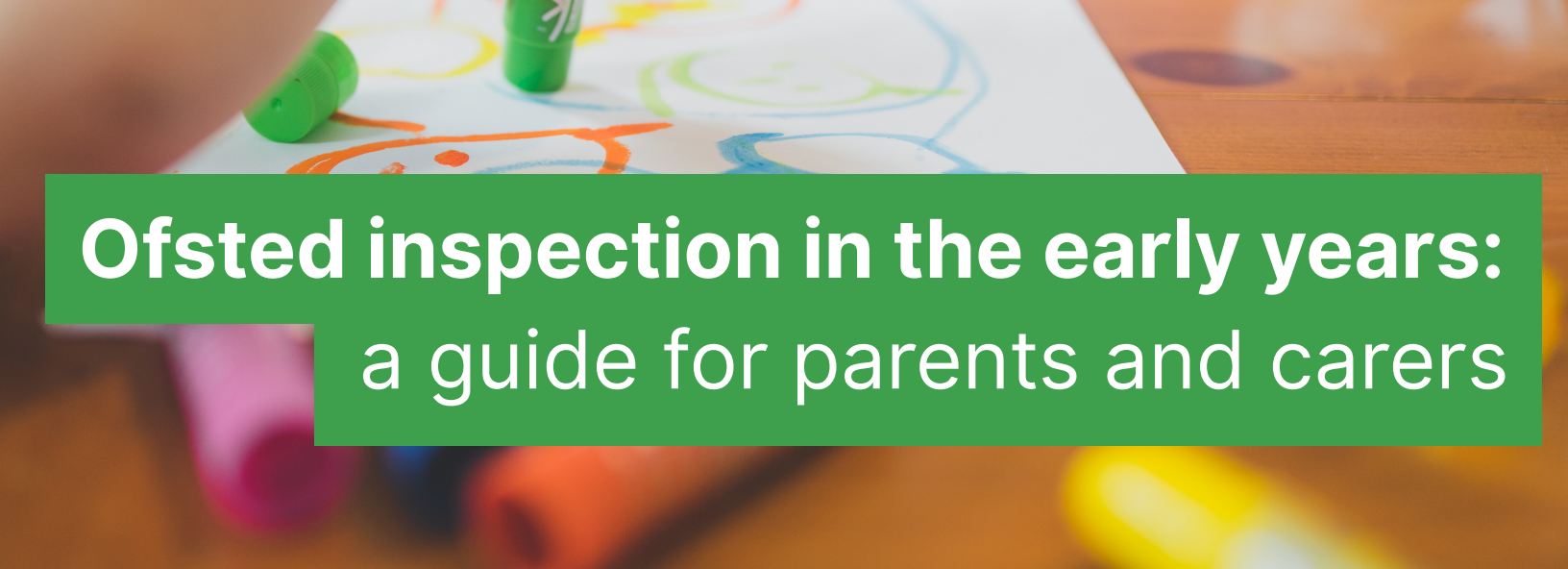




Ofsted inspection in the early years: a guide for parents and carers

Early years inspections play an important role in making sure that the care and education that nurseries, pre-schools and childminders provide meets legal requirements, and that all children are kept safe.

How often does Ofsted inspect early years settings?

Early years settings receive routine inspections every four years. These are one-day inspections that check that the provider is following the principles and requirements of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) statutory framework (which sets the standards for the learning, development, and care of children from birth to the age of five).

Newly-registered settings also normally receive an inspection within 18 months of registering with Ofsted.

Settings may also be inspected if someone reports concerns about the care and education they are providing.

What do Ofsted inspectors look at during inspections?

During an inspection, the inspector will:

- observe the children at play
- talk to both setting staff and children
- observe how the staff and children interact
- check the children's levels of understanding and if they take part in learning

- talk to staff about the children's knowledge, skills and abilities
 - evaluate staff's knowledge of the EYFS
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How do Ofsted inspectors make sure that children are being kept safe?

Ofsted inspectors inspect against the EYFS Framework, which includes checking that providers are meeting the safeguarding and welfare requirements within the EYFS.

This includes looking at:

- how the setting makes sure that all staff are suitable
- the setting's whistleblowing policies
- what steps the setting takes if they are concerned about a child's safety and welfare
- what training and qualifications staff have completed, including safeguarding training
- what staff:child ratios the setting operates to

As of September 2026, early years inspectors will also specifically gather evidence on:

- safe sleep practices, especially for babies
 - safe weaning and eating
 - how care arrangements and practices impact on a setting's ability to safeguard children
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How are settings graded?

Providers are graded across seven 'evaluation areas':

- inclusion
- curriculum and teaching
- achievement
- behaviour, attitudes and establishing routines
- children's welfare and wellbeing
- leadership and governance
- safeguarding

For safeguarding, providers are given a grade of either 'met' or 'not met'. All other evaluation areas are graded on a five-point scale: 'exceptional', 'strong standard', 'expected standard', 'needs attention' or 'urgent improvement'.

If Ofsted grades safeguarding as 'not met' and/or grades any evaluation area as 'needs attention' or 'urgent improvement', they will say in the inspection report card what the provider needs to do to improve.

How much notice do early years settings get before an Ofsted inspection?

For routine early years inspections, nurseries and pre-schools are normally told that they will be inspected by 10am the working day before the inspection is due to take place. Childminders or providers that do not operate regularly will get a call up to five days before an inspection to check what days they work.

However, Ofsted can decide to inspect a setting without notice if they feel it is the best thing to do to keep children safe. In June 2026, the government confirmed that it would provide additional funding to allow Ofsted to carry out up to 3,000 more unannounced inspections a year.

What happens if Ofsted has concerns about a provider?

In some cases when a provider has an evaluation area graded as 'urgent improvement', or where safeguarding is 'not met', Ofsted will take formal enforcement action against it.

Ofsted may also receive concerns about a provider from parents, members of the public, the local authority, other agencies and regulators, or the provider themselves. If this is the case, they will risk assess this information and log it on their record. They may then:

- note low-level concerns to consider at the next visit or inspection
- carry out an inspection with notice
- carry out an inspection without notice
- carry out regulatory activity by telephone or video call
- carry out a regulatory visit, with or without notice

If inspectors find that an early years provider is not meeting the requirements of their registration and/or the EYFS, they may do any of the following:

- write to the provider telling it what it must do to meet the requirements, either in a letter or in its inspection report card
- send them a legal notice, called a 'welfare requirements notice', which sets out what the provider must do (and by when) to meet the welfare requirements – if the provider does not comply with this notice, it commits an offence
- change or add new conditions to a provider's registration
- prosecute a provider if it has committed an offence
- cancel a provider's registration, in exceptional cases, if they believe nothing else will protect children or to make sure the provider keeps to the law

Ofsted may also suspend a provider's registration if they believe that children are at risk of harm, so that they can investigate or take steps to reduce or remove the risk of harm.

To complain about an early years provider or childminder agency, parents and carers can email enquiries@ofsted.gov.uk or call 0300 123 4666.