

# Open Kindergarten

## Implementation Framework for setting up an Open Kindergarten



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## Purpose of the Framework

Welcome to the Open Kindergarten in Scotland. This framework is a guide to support practitioners set up and run an Open Kindergarten in your community. The framework will address the core values and give insight into what parents and carers felt were the key elements of creating a safe space that they valued.

The framework will cover the key question of what is and what isn't an Open Kindergarten. It will introduce you to the development of Open Kindergarten's in Scotland and will address areas including theoretical underpinnings and the practical elements to consider in setting up your Open Kindergarten. We hope that this guide will help to ensure consistency in values, safety, and high-quality engagement with families of children aged 0-5.

This framework should be read together with the [Engaging Families with Open Kindergarten e-module](#). The e-module outlines the key learning requirements for staff to help them understand how to set up and run an Open Kindergarten effectively. This e-module will assist you to:

- Learn about what Open Kindergartens are and understand the fundamental principles of the Open Kindergarten approach
- Understand the importance of building strong relationships with parents and carers of children aged 0-5 years and the role this plays in improving outcomes for children and families.
- Understand how Open Kindergartens support current policies and best practice when working with children and families (including UN Convention on Rights of a Child (UNCRC), Getting it right for every child (GIRFEC) and whole family support).
- Increase your confidence and learn practical tips to help support your work with parents and carers.

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## What is an Open Kindergarten?

The Open Kindergarten model is an approach to early years family support originating in Sweden and it has been widely adopted across Nordic countries. Open Kindergartens are a welcoming space open to parents, carers, babies and young children, which often take place in a family centre.

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## Three key attributes of an Open Kindergarten:

- **Facilitated opportunities**

Sessions are facilitated by an early years practitioner or a teacher, providing opportunities for children to socialise and learn through play with their peers, while parents and carers build the connections necessary for peer support.

- **Open- door policy**

The open-door policy means parents and carers can access it without other professional involvement, and without stigma.

- **Free to access**

Families are not required to book in advance and are welcome to drop in at any time during sessions, which are free to attend.

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## What makes Open Kindergartens unique?

Whilst Open Kindergartens share some features with other groups such as parent and toddler groups, Stay and Play, or Bookbug session, the following features help to make Open Kindergartens unique:

- A strong focus on the needs of both parent and child.
- Being facilitated by skilled and well-trained practitioners who have a background in understanding attachment theory and parent-infant relationships. They are able to observe and support the development of attuned relationships.
- Facilitating access to key professionals (as identified by parents) in an informal setting
- Ensuring that support is available pre and post group to meet the identified needs of parents and carers
- Open Kindergarten Practitioners make onward referrals and connections where appropriate
- Addressing the range of hierarchy of needs of families e.g. housing, poverty/ financial, parenting, early years issues, relationships, isolation, mental health concerns, domestic abuse, etc.
- Providing the opportunity to address issues relating to communities of interest e.g. young parents, grandparents, male carers, ethnographic groups etc.
- Having a rights based approach. They ensure that they are up to date with policy and GIRFEC practice.
- Being free and open access – non stigmatising and removes barriers to participation.

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## The Open Kindergarten in Scandinavia

The Open Kindergarten model stems from Nordic practices, with the main components of the Swedish and Norwegian models detailed below.

### Open Kindergarten in Sweden

In Sweden, Open Kindergartens – also known as open pre-schools – are welcoming community spaces where parents and carers, babies, and young children can come together to play, learn, and receive support. These centres have grown alongside Family Centres and are now a central part of their services. They were created in response to concerns about the negative effects of social isolation on families and children's wellbeing.

Open Kindergartens are designed to empower parents, strengthen their social networks, and increase their knowledge about child development. They are open to all families with young children and are usually free of charge. Unlike traditional childcare, children do not need to be enrolled, and families can attend whenever it suits them. Parents stay with their children during the sessions, which are guided by principles from attachment theory and an ecological view of family life.

The activities are child-led and grounded in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), emphasising the importance of supporting parents as key figures in upholding children's rights. The Swedish model sees the state's role as helping parents fulfil this responsibility, making Open Kindergartens a supportive and inclusive environment for the whole family.

## Open Kindergarten in Norway

In Norway, Open Kindertartens (Åpen barnehage) are inclusive, low-threshold spaces where parents and carers and young children can meet, play, and access support – without needing referrals or appointments. These services are open to all families and are typically located within Family Houses (Familiens hus), alongside health and social services, making it easier for families to access multiple forms of support in one place.

Parents can attend simply to spend time with others or to seek advice, while children benefit from a safe, stimulating environment where they can socialise and develop new skills. Activities are designed to promote health and development, and may include group meals, sing-alongs, walks, themed courses, and drop-in sessions like “baby cafés” or “coffee with the midwife.” Third-sector organisations may also offer services on-site.

A key goal is to strengthen parenting capacity and reduce social isolation by helping parents build networks and engage with professionals. Staff – typically preschool teachers – play a vital role in creating a welcoming atmosphere, encouraging participation, and responding sensitively to families’ needs. They must balance pedagogical expertise with strong social skills and a deep understanding of child development and family dynamics.

Open Kindertartens also serve a preventive function, identifying families who may need additional support early on. Health professionals often collaborate closely with kindergarten staff, sharing insights (while respecting confidentiality) to ensure families receive timely help.

Unlike traditional kindertartens, Open Kindertartens focus on working *with* parents rather than providing care for children. Parents are expected to actively contribute to the environment, helping to make it a safe, inclusive space for all.

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## History of the Open Kindergarten in Scotland

Scotland’s journey with Open Kindertartens began in 2015 when Clare Simpson, then Manager of Parenting Across Scotland, visited Sweden, Norway and Denmark to explore those countries approaches to supporting families in the early years.

A key feature of the study visit was understanding how they used the Open Kindergarten approach. Clare visited early years settings and was interested to discover the open kindertartens – also called open pre-schools – of Sweden and Norway. Clare notes:

*“These cater for children aged from nought to seven, but in practice they tend to focus on the nought to twos, as after that age many go into an early years setting. Everybody working in the open kindertartens had a professional qualification and they offered far more parental support, with a whole family approach.”*

*“I feel like when I come here, I can just feel relaxed and be normal and she can just play away and I can talk to other mums about how I feel, what’s went on, and it’s like we share different things, different techniques, and it’s like okay, I’ll give that a try. Yes, and it’s good to have other support than my partner which is nice.”*

Parent



Clare also observed that: *“Some of the open kindergartens were standalone, but a number were part of a hub to link antenatal care, health nurses (we would call them health visitors), and early years provision.”*

Read Clare Simpson’s report [Supporting families in the early years in Scandinavia](#). On her return to Scotland Clare worked with Children in Scotland and the University of Stirling to undertake a feasibility study to explore whether the Open Kindergarten model could be adapted to Scotland to improve outcomes for children in the early years.

The report from the feasibility study, [Open Kindergartens: Improving Family Support Provision in Scotland](#), written by Andress Gadda, Marion Macleod and Clare Simpson concluded that Open Kindergartens could:

- Meet parents’ support and learning needs more effectively
- Provide parents with critical peer support
- Upskill the early years workforce, particularly on parental engagement
- Represent a sustainable and financially viable model, readily capable of being upscaled and, most importantly, contribute to achieving better and more equitable outcomes for children.

Following the publication of the feasibility study, Clare, in her role as Manager at Parenting Across Scotland succeeded getting funding to pilot the project at two contrasting early years settings based in Edinburgh and Midlothian.

Between April 2019 and April 2020, the three initial partners worked with Midlothian Sure Start and the City of Edinburgh Council to test the delivery of free, twice-weekly drop-in sessions in Edinburgh at Granton Early Years Centre and Mayfield Family Learning Centre (Midlothian Sure Start).

A total of 51 families participated in these groups. The key objectives were to reduce social isolation among parents of very young children (0-3 years), support effective parenting, and contribute to optimising child wellbeing in health, learning and development.

An evaluation of this pilot was undertaken by Dr Jane Callahan, Dr Hannah Hale, Dr Andressa Gada and Laura Bellussi through the Centre for Child Wellbeing and Protection at the University of Stirling. Their research report, [Open Kindergarten: Improving family support provision in Scotland](#), identified the key components that defined the Open Kindergarten approach in Scotland:

- It is person-centred, relaxed and informal.
- It is parent-led.
- The open-door policy means that you can drop in without a referral.
- It is free.
- The practitioner’s approach focuses on warmth, authenticity and receptiveness.
- The report concluded that Open Kindergartens filled a gap in early years services and had a positive impact for both parents and children. Parents were very positive about their experiences – for some it was their only source of support.

After the pilot project finished, Midlothian Sure Start mainstreamed the Open Kindergarten approach in some of their settings.

In 2024, the partners were successful in gaining funding from the Scottish Government’s Whole Family Wellbeing Fund to test the upscaling of the approach – looking at how it works in different settings, times and venues.

In this phase of the plan, Midlothian Sure Start tested the model in seven settings in Midlothian, two settings in East Lothian and one setting in each of West Lothian and Edinburgh. A total of 232 adults and 270 children (225 families) signed up for the Open Kindergarten. This included 13 young parents and 12 male carers. Across the 12 groups, 198 events were run.

Groups were run in the evenings and at weekends, across rural, semi-rural and urban areas. Average attendance across all groups was five adults and six children, although the average attendance at the outdoor group was 12 adults and 13 children.

Groups ranged in size from one adult and one child to fifteen adults and eighteen children (and 39 adults and 55 children at the summer event).

Dr Hannah Hale from the Open University has evaluated this expansion and her report is available on the Parenting Across Scotland website. Dr Hale's report highlights that Open Kindergarten provides a uniquely effective, relational form of early support that fills a long-standing gap for families with children under three. It shows that parents consistently experience increased confidence, reduced isolation, and a stronger sense of belonging through the model's low-threshold, stigma-free design.

Practitioners report that the universal, drop-in structure enables earlier identification of emerging needs and more natural pathways into additional support, strengthening local early-help systems. The evaluation also demonstrates that Open Kindergarten reaches families who are often under-represented in formal services, including migrant, isolated, and first-time parents, and that its flexible, community-based delivery adapts well across diverse local contexts. Overall, the findings position Open Kindergarten as a scalable, policy-aligned approach that advances Scotland's ambitions for relational, preventive, and equitable early years support.

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## Principles and Core values of an Open Kindergarten

- **Openness and accessibility**

Sessions are drop-in, free of charge, and open to all families including expectant families.

- **Respect and inclusion**

Respect and inclusion are woven through the Open Kindergarten model, shaping both the atmosphere and the relationships that develop within it. Families are welcomed as they are, with their cultural identities, languages, parenting styles, and lived experiences treated as assets rather than barriers. Practitioners create environments where every parent and child feels valued, listened to, and free from judgement, ensuring that no one is singled out or made to feel "othered." This commitment to dignity and belonging enables families who may feel marginalised in more formal settings to participate confidently, build trust, and form meaningful connections within their community.

- **Relational practice**

Relational practice sits at the heart of the Open Kindergarten model, shaping how practitioners build trust, safety, and genuine connection with families. It emphasises attunement, warmth, and presence – meeting parents and children where they are, responding to their cues, and offering support through natural, everyday interactions rather than formal assessments or instruction. Practitioners create an atmosphere in which families feel seen, respected, and free from judgement, allowing concerns to surface gradually and conversations to unfold at a pace that feels comfortable. This relational foundation not only strengthens parental confidence and

wellbeing but also enables earlier, more meaningful pathways into help when needed, making it a cornerstone of effective early years support.

- **Non-stigmatising support**

Because attendance is voluntary, universal, and free from referral pathways, parents do not feel labelled or singled out, and their presence does not imply that they are struggling. This removes the psychological barriers that often prevent families – especially those with previous negative service experiences, migrant parents, or those feeling vulnerable – from engaging with early help. Instead, support is offered naturally through everyday interactions, allowing parents to access guidance, build confidence, and form relationships in a space that feels safe, equal, and genuinely welcoming.

- **Child-centred learning**

Child-led learning is a central feature of the Open Kindergarten approach, creating space for babies and young children to explore, experiment, and follow their own curiosities at a pace that feels natural to them. Rather than directing activities, practitioners design environments rich in open-ended materials and opportunities for sensory, social, and imaginative play, allowing children to take the lead in shaping their experiences. This autonomy supports early confidence, problem-solving, and emotional regulation, while also giving parents the chance to observe their child’s interests and developmental cues in a relaxed, supportive setting. Through this gentle, responsive approach, children build early learning foundations rooted in joy, agency, and secure relationships.

- **Capacity building**

Capacity building within the Open Kindergarten model is grounded in strengthening the confidence, skills, and agency of both parents and practitioners, with a particular emphasis on empowering parents through shared experiences. Rather than positioning the practitioner as the expert, the environment encourages parents to offer one another advice, stories, and practical support, creating a peer-led culture where knowledge is exchanged horizontally rather than delivered top-down. This approach helps parents recognise their own strengths, see themselves as capable and resourceful, and build confidence through mutual learning.

*“Always feel a bit better following the group. Enjoy the company of other parents and nice to be able to share and normalise experiences.”*

Parent



- **Sustainability**

The Open Kindergarten model is able to be integrated into existing community settings. By operating from libraries, community centres, schools, and other familiar venues, the model enhances what is locally available rather than creating parallel systems that require significant new infrastructure. Careful scheduling ensures that sessions complement – rather than compete with – other early years groups, reducing duplication and supporting a coherent local offer for families. This approach not only maximises reach and efficiency (cost and resource) but also builds long-term viability, embedding Open Kindergarten as a natural extension of the community’s existing early years ecosystem.

- **Cultural accessibility**

Families valued spaces that felt welcoming, familiar, and free from judgement, with practitioners skilled at creating environments where diverse cultural identities, languages, and parenting norms were respected.

- **Physical accessibility**

Physically accessible venues that are easy to reach, suitable for prams, and designed to support babies' and toddlers' movement and play are essential. It is vital to ensuring that all families, including those with mobility needs or limited transport options, could participate comfortably and confidently.

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## Setting up an Open Kindergarten

### Recommendations for staff recruitment

The Open Kindergarten evaluation recommends that sessions are led by experienced early years practitioners or family support staff who are trained in relational practice, cultural humility, and gentle, non-directive approaches to early help.

A sustainable staffing model for Open Kindergarten should prioritise continuity, relational skill, and the ability to work confidently in community-based, low-threshold environments.

Consistency of staffing is essential so that families can build trust over time, while flexible deployment across venues allows the model to integrate smoothly with existing services.

The evaluation found that it is beneficial to have two practitioners particularly in settings with larger numbers of parent and children. Having two practitioners present, enables the environment to be supported and remain calm, safe, and responsive even during busy periods, allowing one practitioner to focus on relational engagement while the other supports the flow of play, setup, and practical tasks. This shared presence makes it easier to notice emerging needs, offer gentle guidance, and hold space for sensitive conversations without leaving the room under-supervised. It also strengthens inclusivity – families who may feel anxious, isolated, or new to the community have more opportunities to connect with a practitioner who feels approachable to them. Two practitioners also provide enhanced capacity to deal with incidents or accidents without impacting on the quality of the provision.

Staff who have trialled the Open Kindergarten approach report that it is manageable to run an Open Kindergarten with one practitioner when the group size is small (up to five parents and carers and their children) but if the group is larger or in a setting which requires the practitioner to be outwith the group space e.g. to be welcoming or directing new families, two practitioners are required for a quality provision.

The evaluation highlights the value of integrating Open Kindergarten staff in small, stable practitioner teams who can both support the work through providing referral pathways and can provide opportunities for debriefing and reflective practice.

*If practitioners are lone working it is essential that they have opportunities to link into supervision and reflective practice.*

In addition to recruiting an Open Kindergarten practitioner who recognises the importance of relational practice, it is essential that they are able to demonstrate a commitment to inclusive and respectful practice and strengths-based practice.

Parents often report that one of the most enjoyable and helpful aspects of attending a group for parents is the opportunity to socialise with others going through similar experiences and getting support from peers. Group facilitation skills are therefore of particular importance so that professionals can ensure that all families are welcomed and included.

As part of your recruitment process for this role working with children and families, you will need to undertake two reference checks and undertake a Protecting Vulnerable Groups (PVG) check.

A draft job description is included in the appendix.

### **Recommendations for staff induction**

A strong staff induction should equip practitioners to work alongside families using relationship-based practice. The aim is not to “fix” families but to work in co-production with them to provide person and child centred play opportunities for the child and opportunities for parents and carers to make connections with others and seek support for any of their concerns/ support needs.

The induction process should provide opportunities for practitioners to reflect on:

- The diversity of families they will meet, ensuring they understand how to create welcoming, culturally sensitive environments.
- Consider the facilities that they will be using and ensure that risk assessments and planning address areas such as health and safety, safeguarding procedures, first aid, confidentiality, and maintaining clear professional boundaries.
- Strong understanding of the local community: This includes an awareness of key partners and referral pathways. Exploring local community assets – such as libraries, family centres, outdoor spaces, and third-sector supports – helps staff embed Open Kindergarten within the wider ecosystem of early help, ensuring families can be connected to relevant opportunities and resources in a seamless, respectful way.

### **Recommendations for training**

In order to prepare the Open Kindergarten Practitioner to deliver an Open Kindergarten they will require core training and induction which blends the theory around the approach, practical skills, and reflective learning. The e-learning module provides a core foundation. It will assist you to:

- Learn about what Open Kindergartens are and understand the fundamental principles of the Open Kindergarten approach
- Understand the importance of building strong relationships with parents and carers of children aged 0-5 years and the role this plays in improving outcomes for children and families.
- Understand how Open Kindergartens support current policies and best practice when working with children and families (including the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC), Getting it right for every child (GIRFEC) and whole family support).
- Increase your confidence and learn practical tips to help support your work with parents and carers.

In addition, practitioners will benefit from an understanding of attachment theory and how to support the parent-infant relationship. A range of providers have courses. The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) has an introduction which can be found [here](#). The Tavistock and Portman NHS Foundation Trust has a 5-hour continuous professional development course found [here](#).

Midlothian Sure Start provides training on the Erikson Institute FAN approach (facilitating attuned interactions). FAN is a conceptual model and practical tool for relationship building that will help practitioners:

- Improve their ability to read parents' cues and respond with interventions that match what parents most need moment-to-moment
- Recognise and regulate their own feelings when working with families to build their reflective capacity
- Improve the relationship they have with harder-to-engage families
- Enhance their ability to provide attuned developmental information in a way that increases parental capacity. You can contact Midlothian Sure Start [here](#) for more information.

Practitioners should also have a strong grounding in child development 0-3. A range of modules are available to support this through local colleges, Early Years Scotland, and Children in Scotland.

NHS Education for Scotland provides a range of learning resources to help practitioners become trauma informed. [Opening Doors: Trauma Informed Practice for the Workforce](#) and [Sowing Seeds](#) provide an introduction to trauma informed practice. It is important to be aware of your own self-care when accessing these resources and being aware of where you can receive support if this information is triggering to you.

Last but by no means least, practitioners will benefit from training in group work. A range of providers including local community learning and development teams in local authorities provide a range of group skills training courses.

*“[Practitioner] often makes me a cup of tea... a hot cup of tea. That is not a small thing. It is the only time in the week someone looks after me like that.”*

Parent



*“Co-facilitation also allowed for deeper observation, more responsive engagement and shared decision making. Practitioners valued the opportunity for real time collegial reflection during sessions, noticing children’s play, discussing parent concerns and thinking together about emerging needs.”*

Dr Hannah Hale, Researcher



## Recommendations for practical arrangements of a new Open Kindergarten

Practical arrangements for running an Open Kindergarten involve thoughtful planning that aligns the model with local community needs and existing assets. This includes:

- **Physical location:** Identifying suitable locations is the first step – venues should be accessible, familiar, and welcoming, such as libraries, community centres, or school spaces that families already use and trust.

*“The findings show that the model worked well in a variety of settings, including large halls, small community rooms, libraries, outdoor parks, newly built housing estates, long-established towns, and areas characterised by either affluence or deprivation. While the essence of Open Kindergarten remained consistent, the ease with which families accessed the groups and the kinds of relationships that formed varied from place to place.”*

Dr Hannah Hale, Researcher



- **Transporting resources:** As Open Kindergartens are by their nature “pop ups” practical considerations are important to ensure that the space meets the needs of parents and carers and infants. Trolleys are helpful in transporting the range of equipment including books, sensory toys/ loose parts etc, snack, first aid kit, register and baby essentials required for the session. If possible, it is helpful to negotiate with the key holder of the building for a storage cupboard to keep regular items that will be used, e.g. first aid kit, play equipment etc.



- **Designing a timetable:** This requires coordination with local partners to avoid clashes with other early years groups and to ensure sessions are spread across the week and across neighbourhoods to maximise reach.

While Open Kindergarten is designed as a flexible, low-threshold model, experience suggests that groups run most effectively when run for around 90 minutes with around five (one practitioner) to 15 (two practitioners) families at a time, ensuring the space remains calm, relational, and safe for both children and adults.

- **Developing Partnership arrangements:** Strong links with key stakeholders – health visiting teams, family support services, community organisations, and local authority partners – help embed the model within wider early-help pathways. Practitioners also need to familiarise themselves with community agencies and referral networks so they can confidently signpost families when appropriate.

- **Curating the space:** Curating the physical space is really important: environments should be warm, safe, and intentionally designed to support child-led play, parent comfort, and relational connection, ensuring every session feels predictable, inclusive, and inviting. Be aware of barriers (e.g. adult chairs and tables) that could create a barrier to achieving this objective.



- **Advertising and promoting Open Kindergartens:** Advertising and promoting Open Kindergartens works best when awareness is built through multiple, community-rooted channels that feel familiar and trustworthy to families.

Strategies can include posters and flyers in libraries, GP surgeries, community centres, and supermarkets; social media posts through local authority and partner pages; word-of-mouth via health visitors and family support workers; and visibility at community events or toddler groups.

Clear, simple messaging helps families understand that sessions are free, drop-in, and open to all. Where bookings are used, they should be light-touch – ideally a simple online form, use of eventbrite or phone option – to avoid creating barriers or implying assessment.

- **Engaging with families:** Engaging with families in an Open Kindergarten begins with creating a genuinely safe, non-judgemental space where parents feel able to share worries, admit to mistakes, and still experience acceptance and support. Practitioners have found that this emotional safety is one of the most important factors for families – it allows them to relax, reflect, and gradually build confidence in their own parenting skills.

Practitioners play a central role in creating this climate through warmth, attunement, and a calm, non-directive presence.

For families who feel anxious about joining new groups, engagement begins long before they enter the room. Offering a home visit or a soft introduction can make the difference between a parent attending or withdrawing. This approach aligns with the model’s low-threshold ethos: families do not need to prove need, complete assessments, or meet criteria. Instead, practitioners meet them where they are – literally and emotionally.

*“It has a positive impact on my mental health as I find it helpful to get out the house and socialise with other families and Open Kindergarten is a positive space for me to go.”*

Parent



A warm welcome at the door sets the tone. Remembering names, asking about a parent's week, or following up on something previously shared signals that each family is recognised as an individual, not a case or a number. These small relational gestures – noticed repeatedly in the evaluation – are often what make families feel safe enough to return.

Maternal mental health emerged as a significant theme across the evaluation. Many parents arrived carrying isolation, anxiety, or exhaustion. Practitioners therefore remain attentive to emotional cues, offering 1:1 support when needed, signposting to wellbeing resources, and promoting healthy routines in a way that feels supportive rather than directive. Because the environment is non-stigmatising, parents often disclose concerns earlier and more openly than in formal settings. It is important to build time at the end of sessions to be able to offer this 1:1 support and/or signposting or to arrange follow up support.

Communicating with families can include a range of methods e.g. email, WhatsApp etc.

Across the evaluation, families described Open Kindergarten as a place where they felt “good enough,” where they could be honest, and where they could connect without pressure. Engagement, therefore, is not something practitioners do to families; it is something that grows through trust, consistency, and relational presence. When families feel safe, welcomed, and valued, participation becomes natural, meaningful, and sustained.

### **Recommendations for supporting neurodiverse children**

All children and young people need support to help them participate and the nature of the support needed will be different for every individual child. See above re physical and cultural accessibility.

Early learning and childcare practitioners are in a unique and important position to influence children's development, and have the capacity to create environments that encourage equality and inclusion from the early stages. ‘Building confidence in identifying and responding to additional support needs’ is a free online [continuous professional development module](#) that provides focused learning on how to support children with additional support needs and their families.

Further resources that you may find useful when working with children and families with additional support needs include:

- Enquire – A factsheet about Additional Support for Learning in Early Years
- Scottish Commission for People with Learning Disabilities Wakelet – A toolkit for Autism.

***“Neurodiversity was a key strength of the non-structured approach. Parents and carers who were themselves neurodivergent particularly valued the absence of rigid start times and fixed expectations, which reduced their anxiety and removed the pressure of having to be “on time.” For those who find social situations challenging, the demand to follow a set programme while supporting a young child can be overwhelming and often leads to avoidance of more structured groups. This approach was equally beneficial for children with additional support needs, as it removed the expectation to conform and allowed them the freedom to play, engage, and regulate in ways that felt safe and appropriate for them.”***

Open Kindergarten Lead Practitioner



## What engagement looks like in practice

Once the relational foundation is established, sessions flow naturally through activities that support connection, learning, and community building. These may include:

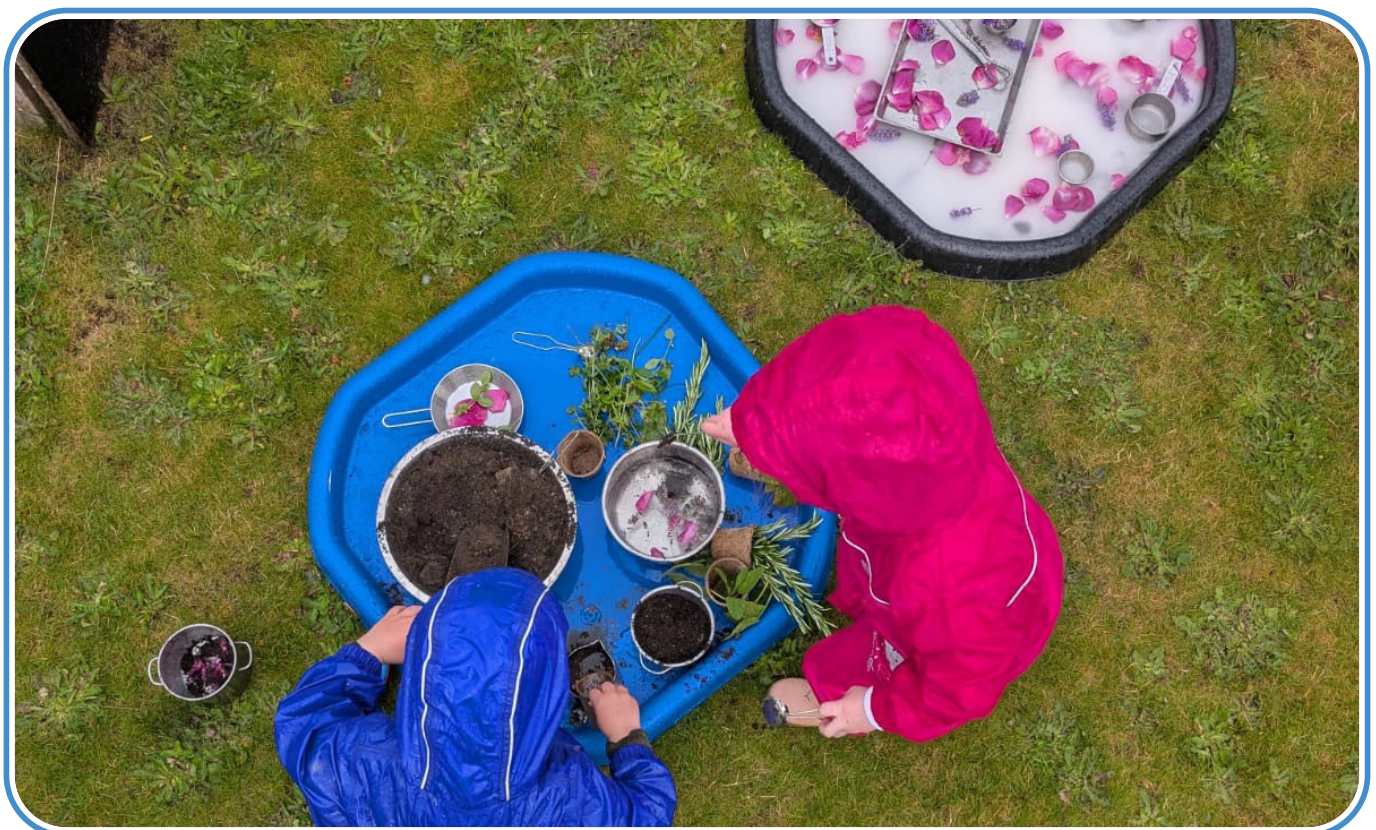
- Free play, allowing children to explore at their own pace
- Chat and a cup of tea, giving parents space to breathe and connect
- Themed discussions, such as sleep, feeding, or toddler behaviour
- Practical activities, like preparing finger foods for baby-led weaning
- Visits from external services, such as Citizens Advice may visit on the request of parents and carers to offer informal support
- Exploring community resources, including libraries, parks, and local walks.

These activities are not the goal – they are the vehicle through which relationships, confidence, and community are built.

## Outdoor Open Kindergartens

Open Kindergartens can work well in outdoor settings, particularly during the warmer months. The following resources provide specific guidance for delivering outdoor sessions. Scotland's Outdoor Learning Directory coordinates a number of partners – including Scottish Forestry, Scottish Environmental Protection Agency, Historic Environment Scotland and national parks – to provide a single portal to services supporting outdoor learning. This includes access to a wide range of training opportunities and events. Other particularly useful resources to support the use of the outdoors are:

- Out To Play, a how to guide on utilising local outdoor space to enhance children's learning
- Inspiring Scotland, Thrive Outdoors, Staying out to Play
- Local authorities' play action plans.



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## Reflecting on your Open Kindergarten

Data collection in Open Kindergarten is intentionally minimal. Practitioners gather only what is necessary to understand reach, emerging needs, attendance patterns, demographic insights, and parent and carer feedback. This avoids creating barriers or introducing a sense of surveillance, which parents associate with more formal services.

Gathering informal feedback through everyday conversations helps practitioners understand what families value and what barriers they may still face. The practitioner can use this feedback in a feedback loop, using this information to support families co-produce further sessions.

Tracking patterns – such as who attends, who returns, and who does not – offers insight into reach and equity.

Practitioners can also evaluate their Open Kindergarten through observation – paying close attention to the relational, environmental, and developmental dynamics that unfold within the space – noticing which interactions felt supportive, where moments of connection emerged, and where families appeared hesitant or disengaged. Practitioners can also observe how children use the environment, how confidently parents and children settle, and whether the atmosphere feels warm and predictable. Practitioner diaries can support this reflective stance.

Finally, practitioners can reflect on their own emotional labour, boundaries, and support needs, recognising that the quality of the space is closely tied to their ability to remain attuned, present, and well supported.

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## Maintaining fidelity

Maintaining fidelity in an Open Kindergarten setting means holding tightly to the key attributes, principles and core value while adapting sensitively to the needs of each community.

Practitioners can safeguard fidelity by regularly reflecting on whether the space still feels genuinely low-threshold, whether interactions remain non-directive and attuned, and whether families experience the environment as safe, predictable, and free from judgement.

Troubleshooting often involves noticing early signs of drift: sessions becoming overly structured, practitioner workload eroding relational presence, or certain families dominating the space in ways that unintentionally exclude others.

Addressing these issues requires gentle recalibration – revisiting boundaries, adjusting the environment, or seeking reflective supervision to restore balance.

Ending things well and ethically is equally important. Whether a family stops attending, a practitioner is moving on, or a session is closing, endings should be handled with transparency, warmth, and respect. This includes acknowledging relationships, offering clear information, avoiding abrupt withdrawal of support, and ensuring families know where they can continue to access help. Ethical endings honour the trust families have placed in the space and reinforce the model's commitment to relational integrity.

## Budget setting

Budgeting for an Open Kindergarten requires a realistic understanding of the relational nature of the model and the practical resources needed to sustain it. The largest element is typically staffing, as skilled practitioners are central to creating a warm, attuned, and predictable environment. Budgets must account for hourly delivery time, preparation, set-up and pack-down, time to provide 1:1 support and follow up and essential reflective space.

Supervision costs are equally important, ensuring practitioners have protected time for reflective practice, emotional processing, and professional guidance – critical for maintaining relational quality and preventing burnout.

Training costs should cover induction to the model, ongoing professional development in relational practice, trauma-informed approaches, child development, child-led play, and safeguarding.

Venue costs vary depending on local partnerships but may include rental fees, utilities, cleaning, and storage.

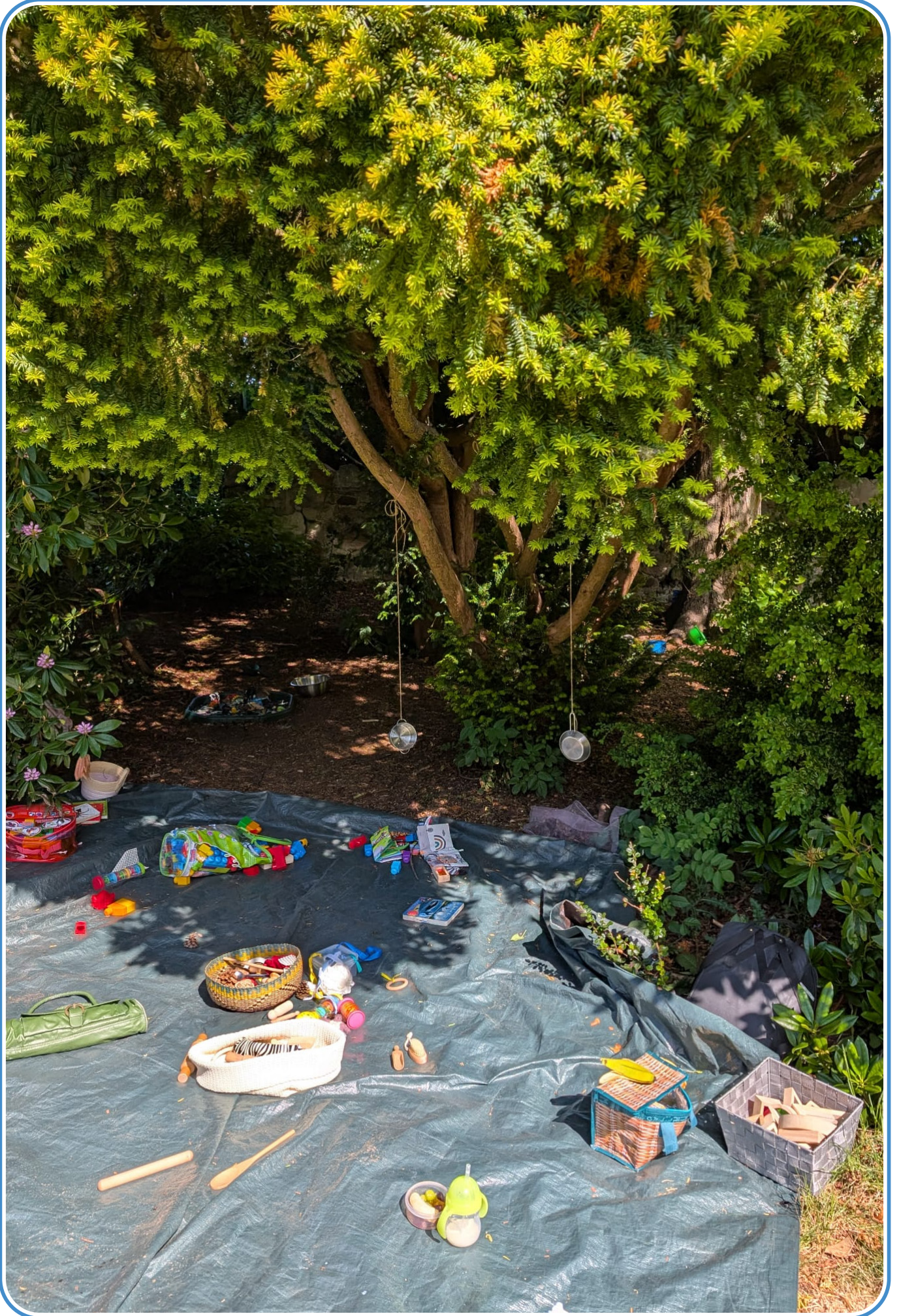
Supplies and equipment – such as open-ended play materials, art resources, soft furnishings, refreshments, and replacement items – require a modest but consistent budget to maintain a welcoming and developmentally rich environment.

Taken together, these elements form the core financial structure needed to deliver Open Kindergarten with fidelity, safety, and sustainability.

***“As a manager, I found it essential to keep the qualities that parents valued during the initial OK pilot at the heart of every group we delivered. Remaining true to the OK ethos required consistent supervision and providing practitioners with protected space to reflect, revisit and strengthen the core elements of the model. While explaining a concept such as OK could be challenging and complex, it was equally important to allow practitioners flexibility and a sense of ownership over their groups, recognising that no two groups would ever be the same. Embedding and sustaining the OK approach was therefore a key managerial responsibility, requiring intentional support, guidance, and reinforcement within practice.”***

Open Kindergarten Pilot Lead





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## Appendix 1: Job description

### Position

**Early Years Practitioner – Open Kindergarten**

### Location

Local Authority Nursery / Family Centre

### Purpose

To provide high-quality relational support to parents and children (0-5 years) in a drop-in setting. Foster peer engagement and developmental guidance.

### Key duties

- Co-facilitate weekly parent-child sessions (90 minutes each)
- Build positive relationships with families
- Support child development through playful activities
- Enable parental confidence through informal discussion
- Work collaboratively with visiting specialists and local agencies
- Maintain health and safety, recordkeeping, and reflective practice logs

### Qualifications and experience

- SVQ Level 3 in Childcare or equivalent
- Experience working with young children and families
- Strong interpersonal and communication skills
- Knowledge of trauma-informed or inclusive practices
- Previous experience in outreach or community work

## Appendix 2: Induction checklist

Checklist (Adapted from National Induction Resource)

Focus area	Tasks to complete
Before start date	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• PVG check</li><li>• Provided copy of policies &amp; safeguarding guidance</li></ul>
Day one	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Meet team, clarity on job role and responsibilities</li></ul>
Week one	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Begin relevant training</li><li>• Clear understanding of what open kindergarten is</li><li>• Start researching areas there is a need for groups &amp; what support is already available</li></ul>
Month one	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Establish positive links with services in the area you plan to run your group – HV, Social work, other third sector services, etc</li><li>• Continue training</li><li>• Start gathering play resources</li><li>• Research appropriate venues &amp; other similar groups in your focus area</li><li>• Request referrals from relevant organisations – HV, Social work, etc</li></ul>
Month two	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Depending on referral numbers begin advertising your OK groups on local Facebook pages, etc</li><li>• Visit venues to check accessibility and advertise locally in shops, etc</li><li>• Reach out to referrals to begin establishing supportive relationships and assess needs</li><li>• Set up way for families to book into groups (we used Eventbrite), decide personal information needed from families</li><li>• Aim to begin running Open Kindergarten groups</li></ul>
Month six	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Reflect on impact</li></ul>

## Appendix 3: Implementation plan

### 1. Early Years Practitioner – Open Kindergarten

The Management team will implement a detailed implementation /phase in plan. A few key tasks are highlighted below. These can be expanded as per the programme.

### 2. Preparatory stage

The Management team will implement a detailed implementation /phase in plan. A few key tasks are highlighted below. These can be expanded as per the programme.

Activity	Led by	Comments	Completion
2.1.1 Establish communication plan with .....			Within .....
2.1.2 Review partnership agreements and sign (where applicable)			

### 3. Financial, administrative and asset management

Activity	Led by	Comments	Completion
3.1.1 Review financial procedures			
3.1.2 Find appropriate Venues			
3.1.3 Audit available resource and purchase new resources			
3.1.4 Undertake new equalities impact assessment			
3.1.5 Review project tracking system (CRM) fields and add to ensure system in place to capture outcomes			

### 4. Staffing

Activity	Led by	Comments	Completion
4.1.1 Advertise for staff/ sessional workers			Generally Induct within 2 - 2.5 months of start.
4.1.2 Undertake safe recruitment checks			
4.1.3 Induct and Train staff in preparation for service delivery			

Activity	Led by	Comments	Completion
4.1.4 Undertake 6 month and 12 month reviews (as appropriate)			

## 5. Service provision / families

Activity	Led by	Comments	Completion
5.1.1 Advise referrers			
5.1.2 Review Marketing			
5.1.3 Plan the Open Kindergarten			
5.1.4 Deliver services			
5.1.5 Evaluate delivery			

