


February 2022



Engagement work: Non-maintained sector update

Autumn term 2021

Context

This report summarises the findings from 57 engagement visits to non-maintained settings during the autumn term 2021. It is based on the information discussed with setting leaders and staff.

This report also includes a summary of the feedback from 12 area meetings with early years advisory teachers and support partners from local authorities, regional consortia and umbrella organisations (referred to in the report as support partners).

The focus for each discussion was the wellbeing of children and staff, curriculum and teaching, professional learning, setting leadership and additional learning needs. Proportions relate to the sample of settings with which we have had contact in this reporting period.

This report is also available in Welsh.

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Main findings

Curriculum and teaching

- 1 Most practitioners have continued to plan and deliver suitable activities that engage learners appropriately, despite the ongoing disruption caused by COVID-19.
- 2 A majority of leaders have started to ensure that learners have increased access to authentic resources, such as everyday household items, in the different indoor and outdoor areas of the setting.
- 3 Most settings have increased the use of the outdoors for learning. A majority provided opportunities for children to flow freely between indoor and outdoor provision.
- 4 Many support partners felt that during the pandemic a minority of settings have embraced the opportunity to try new ways of working, in preparation for the Curriculum for Wales. There has been greater focus on play and play-based learning and more opportunities to respond to children's interests.
- 5 Many leaders told us that they continued to provide a balance of child-initiated and adult-led activities. Even in cases where settings are experimenting with a more responsive approach, most continue to use a variety of teaching methods.
- 6 Support partners talked about a general feeling that the Welsh language skills of children that do not speak Welsh at home had regressed during periods of lockdown. However, many leaders told us that children were acquiring Welsh language skills well during the autumn term.
- 7 Ongoing issues with recruiting Welsh speaking staff have meant that practitioners do not always have the Welsh language skills to support children effectively and this could have implications for the roll-out of the curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings.
- 8 Most support partners said that there was considerable variability across settings in their area and their readiness to embrace a new way of working. Most felt that practitioners are seeking clarity about future assessment arrangements.
- 9 Overall, practitioners who had been involved in the construction and testing stage of the non-maintained curriculum document had a good understanding of its main principles and how it linked to the other aspects of Curriculum for Wales.

Professional Learning

- 10 Throughout the period of the pandemic, leaders told us that they had worked hard to maintain a consistent focus on ensuring professional learning opportunities for practitioners.
- 11 Many leaders and support partners told us that it had been difficult for setting leaders to release practitioners to attend training due to staff shortages related to COVID-19.

Support partners said that uptake of professional learning was generally good but had often waned as more settings struggled with staffing issues and fatigue.

Leadership

- 12 During the autumn term, nearly all leaders maintained their well-established protocols to ensure the safety of children and staff despite the challenges posed by COVID-19. However, leading their setting from day to day, maintaining staff morale and adhering to the evolving safety guidance continued to be challenging.
- 13 Many leaders told us that managing staff absence due to self-isolating had been challenging especially as cover staff were in very short supply. A minority of leaders expressed their concerns that several staff had gained alternative employment, and that recruitment remained a significant challenge. These concerns are even more acute in Welsh medium settings.
- 14 Many leaders told us that it remained a very difficult time to maintain momentum and introduce strategic changes in their settings. Despite the constant challenges of COVID-19, they continued to evaluate their provision and the experiences they provide for the children.

Wellbeing

- 15 Most children settled in well during the autumn term and enjoyed their learning. However, a few leaders noted that more children who started during the autumn term, appeared to have less well developed personal and social skills than usual.
- 16 Most support partners agree that more children appear to have greater social and communication difficulties and are less independent as a result of the pandemic. They also noted that settings were now more aware of the impact of adverse childhood experiences on children during the pandemic, and the need to continue to support children and their families.
- 17 Most leaders ensured supporting staff wellbeing remained a priority for them during the autumn term as the COVID-19 coronavirus continued to impact on their work.

Additional learning needs

- 18 Most support partners informed us that they had been working with setting leaders over the past year to prepare for the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act (ALNET).
- 19 Many leaders told us that they valued the training they have received from their local authorities and welcome the new role of Early Years Additional Learning Needs Officer (EYALNLO) to coordinate support for children and to provide staff with appropriate advice and guidance.
- 20 Leaders in a few Welsh medium settings and support partners have expressed concerns around the availability of specialist support for children and their families through the medium of Welsh.

- 21 Many leaders and support partners reported an increase in the number of children experiencing speech and language issues as well as emotional and behavioural issues over the course of the pandemic.

Curriculum and teaching

Most practitioners explained that they have continued to plan and deliver suitable activities that engage learners appropriately, despite the ongoing disruption caused by COVID-19. Nearly all settings continued to have additional safety measures in place such as limiting the number of visitors, but most delivered sessions without many changes to their normal practice.

Many larger settings continued to avoid mixing large groups of children and staff, for example by operating bubbles for those who are based in different rooms. On the whole, most practitioners allowed children to mix freely with their friends and adults during sessions. Many provided access to a suitable range of resources, taking additional steps to protect children from infection as appropriate. For example, practitioners changed malleable resources regularly. This ensured that children continued to receive valuable experiences in a safe manner, although this higher turnover of resources created an additional financial burden on settings.



Most settings reintroduced access to water and sand play, with control measures in place such as additional handwashing. A majority of settings adapted their snack time in order to manage additional cleaning procedures put in place due to COVID-19. In many cases, this meant that snack time was not always used as effectively as previously to promote children's independence. A very few settings continued to provide children with uninterrupted access to a 'snack café', where they were able to serve themselves as and when they felt hungry.

A majority of leaders have started to ensure that children have increased access to authentic resources, such as everyday household items, in the different indoor and outdoor areas of the setting. Where this approach is new, leaders adapted their practice in line with the principles of the Curriculum for Wales with a greater emphasis on authentic learning experiences. For example, in one setting the home corner was stocked with a telephone, china cups and plates, real utensils for the kitchen and real vegetables for the children to explore. A few practitioners have started to provide more natural or open-ended resources for children to experiment with such as pinecones, sticks and logs to stimulate children's curiosity and imagination.

Most leaders stated that they have increased the use of the outdoors for learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. A majority provided opportunities for children to flow freely between indoor and outdoor provision. In the strongest cases, children chose when they would like to play outdoors, regardless of the weather conditions and were encouraged to dress themselves suitably, for example by fetching and putting on waterproof clothing and wellington boots. This provided children with valuable opportunities to access the outdoors in all weather conditions. For example, in one setting, children jumped in muddy puddles on the grass. They collected rainwater with a variety of utensils and discovered that a sieve was not suitable for this purpose and a large ladle was better. However, a few support partners said that they thought that the outdoors was used well during warmer months, but practitioners were less keen to be outdoors once the weather became colder. A few pack-away settings and those with limited outdoor space still faced challenges with accessing suitable outdoor areas. Support partners from one consortium told us that their focus had been on creating authentic learning experiences in the outdoors, such as planting, growing, and harvesting, as opposed to creating artificial outdoor environments. A few settings reintroduced visits to the local community that had been curtailed due to COVID-19 such as providing valuable opportunities for children to visit the local park, woodland or beach.

Many support partners felt that during the pandemic a minority of settings have embraced the opportunity to try new ways of working, in preparation for the Curriculum for Wales. There has been greater focus on play and play-based learning and more opportunities to respond to children's interests. For example, they provided regular opportunities for children to suggest ideas during circle time and planned themes accordingly. In the strongest cases, practitioners observed children's interests during sessions, and adapted the provision accordingly. In a few instances, settings have moved away from a strict daily routine to respond more purposefully to children's needs. As a result, children are more engaged in their learning and sustain concentration for longer periods. In the strongest cases, staff enabled children to access learning by modelling, encouraging, suggesting and providing verbal cues.

A minority of leaders told us that their teaching approach is now less formal and more responsive.

Cameo – responding to children’s interests

Practitioners at The Owl and Pussycat Nursery in Newport local authority have become more child led in their approach to teaching than previously. They are following the children's interests and providing fewer adult led activities. For example, a child showed an interest in bones and skeletons and staff built on this through having x-ray pictures available on the light box and purchasing books on X-rays and the body to extend on the child's knowledge. Another child showed an interest in owls and staff provided a range of owl resources to make a story basket for her to explore, such as puppets and books about owls. Practitioners feel that this was empowering for the children as it increased a sense of ownership over their own learning and allowed them to develop their own interests and share their knowledge and interests with their peers and practitioners.

Many leaders told us that they continued to provide a balance of child-initiated and adult-led activities. Even in cases where settings are experimenting with a more responsive approach, most continue to use a variety of teaching methods. For example, they continue to use circle time to discuss feelings, to read stories, or to introduce Welsh vocabulary. In the strongest cases, practitioners ensured that whole group sessions were succinct, had a lively pace and kept children engaged. In experimenting with approaches for the Curriculum for Wales, a minority of settings no longer provided pre-planned focused tasks led by practitioners in order to increase the emphasis on children leading their own learning. Leaders in Welsh medium settings told us that they continue to identify opportunities to introduce Welsh vocabulary through a combination of planned activities and responding to children's interests. For example, practitioners facilitated a game of word bingo related to the current theme.

Support partners generally felt that the Welsh language skills of children that do not speak Welsh at home had regressed during periods of lockdown. However, many leaders told us that children were acquiring Welsh language skills as expected during the autumn term. For example, most children could understand and respond to instructions, but few were using Welsh independently. Ongoing issues with recruiting Welsh speaking staff have meant that practitioners do not always have the Welsh language skills to support children effectively in Welsh-medium settings. This could have implications for the roll-out of the curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings.

Support partners generally felt that the main pedagogical principles of the new curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings are clear. They welcomed the focus on child development and play based learning. A few expressed concerns about how consistently all practitioners apply the principles of child development in their planning. A few also expressed concerns about the differences in pedagogy between schools and settings and felt that the role of the enabling adult would require more training across sectors.

Many settings continued to assess children's skills on entry during the autumn term. For example, many continued to use the foundation phase profile. However, a minority of leaders adapted their approaches to assessing children's progress in preparation for the Curriculum for Wales. For example, practitioners are simplifying their assessment processes by placing an increasing emphasis on observation and making links to the next step in the child's learning. Many recorded children's progress visually, by adding photographs to treasure books or apps that parents can access. A very few practitioners were beginning to familiarise themselves with specific aspects of the non-maintained curriculum, such as the significance of schemas, effective interactions, good quality observation, and an understanding of authentic learning in child development. A minority of support partners suggested that practitioners need to demonstrate a sound understanding of these aspects before they move on to responsive planning. Most said that there was considerable variability across settings in their area and their readiness to embrace a new way of working. Most support partners felt that practitioners are seeking clarity about future assessment arrangements.

One consortium told us that they had held events for settings to respond to the consultation on the curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings and that these had been well attended. Overall, practitioners who had been involved in the construction and testing stage of the non-maintained curriculum document had a good understanding of its main principles and how it linked to the other aspects of Curriculum for Wales.

Professional learning

Throughout the period of the pandemic, leaders told us that they had worked hard to maintain a consistent focus on ensuring professional learning opportunities for practitioners. They accessed a wide range of practical support relating to elements of health and safety, including risk assessments, and safeguarding.

Most leaders told us that they already had well established strong relationships with support partners and expressed their appreciation of the range of help and advice provided. Many told us that practitioners had benefited from sessions on different topics, for example supporting elements of wellbeing, understanding the impact of adverse childhood experiences and promoting Welsh language development.



Support partners told us that they had matched their professional learning offer to Welsh Government initiatives, such as fulfilling the terms of the recruit, recover and raise standards grant funding. A minority of leaders told us that members of staff have continued to undertake professional qualifications, increasing leadership capacity within their settings.

Most leaders told us about the wide range of activities that had been provided to support them as they develop their approaches to the Curriculum for Wales. They feel that training opportunities have been useful and have provided an opportunity for practitioners to develop their understanding of the curriculum, and how it should impact on their practice. For example, one leader told us that training on developing practitioners' understanding of child development had been very valuable and led them to look at how they support the learning as enablers, rather than leading activities.

Cameo – professional learning by observing effective practice

Leaders at The Homestead Day Nursery, Wrexham local authority, place great emphasis on observation in their practice and are pleased with the prominence it receives in the new curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings. Leaders use clips of interesting practice during professional learning activities with practitioners. Through discussion of key points, staff then make suggestions about what they would do next in different situations. This type of professional learning activity aligns closely with responsive planning. Staff are encouraged and empowered to ask themselves 'why' in terms of why children do certain things, act in particular ways or respond as they do. Practitioners develop deeper understanding of the stages of child development and understand which skills and confidences children need to strengthen to be able to access different activities. Staff grow in confidence and realise that sometimes, doing less is the right thing to do.

The setting was part of a local authority pilot aimed at promoting the use of open-ended materials such as boxes, crates, seashells and feathers. This has been valuable when preparing for the Curriculum for Wales by encouraging children to use their imagination and creative skills. Leaders were keen to build on their existing practice rather than making radical changes.

Many leaders told us about useful professional learning activities that they had undertaken with practitioners at their settings. One leader described using photos of children playing to promote discussion amongst staff about the importance of observation to plan responsively to children's learning. Another leader told us that she had produced an activity to deepen practitioners understanding of the five developmental pathways.

Many leaders and support partners told us that it had been difficult for setting leaders to release practitioners to attend training due to staff shortages related to COVID-19. Support partners said that uptake of professional learning was generally good but had often waned as more settings struggled with staffing issues and fatigue. A minority of leaders told us that members of staff have continued to undertake professional qualifications, increasing leadership capacity within their settings.

Professional learning had continued to be mainly remote, but a few sessions were beginning to be held face-to-face. Most agreed that they had found remote drop-in sessions had been very useful to talk about concerns. On the whole, leaders felt that distance learning was generally successful and easier to access for practitioners. For example, one leader at a rural setting told us that it suited practitioners to engage with professional learning remotely as it avoided having to travel a significant distance to a central location and reducing the amount of time away from home. However, a minority felt that remote sessions should not take the place of face-to-face meetings entirely. A few leaders also shared their frustration that the lack of connectivity at their setting meant that access was impossible at times. Generally, there was a feeling that a combination of both approaches should be maintained in future.

Leadership

During the autumn term, nearly all leaders maintained their well-established protocols to ensure the safety of children and staff despite the challenges posed by COVID-19. Staff took regular tests and liaised closely with parents if there was an outbreak at the setting.

Leaders also ensured that settings and equipment were cleaned and sanitised according to the latest guidance. Many leaders continued to appreciate the support of colleagues and support partners from different organisations to alleviate the considerable additional pressures. However, leading their setting from day to day, maintaining staff morale and adhering to the evolving safety guidance continued to be challenging. Leaders felt that it was important to ensure a consistent supply of information for parents and carers, despite the additional workload involved.



Many leaders told us that managing staff absence due to self-isolating had been challenging especially as cover staff were in very short supply. They appreciated the increased flexibility provided by the temporary relaxation of the national minimum standards in respect of staff qualifications and adult to child ratios. A minority of leaders expressed their concerns that several staff had gained alternative employment, and that recruitment remained a significant challenge. These concerns are even more acute in Welsh medium settings. A few leaders explained that they had been able to reintroduce placements for students during the autumn term.

Nearly all leaders and practitioners have continued to use technology to communicate, often building on new skills they have acquired during the pandemic.

Cameo – making increased use of technology to communicate with parents, carers, and professionals

Leaders at Standing to Grow Playgroup, Bridgend local authority, explained that introducing an ‘app’ for parents and carers had been very successful. Parents and carers appreciated being kept up to date with what their children were doing and receiving information on special events and celebrations. They communicate with the leader more readily using the app. This will be a permanent change to practice.

The leader also feels she has met with a greater range of professionals online during the pandemic. As such, she has developed a good working relationship with local health professionals and educational psychologists who provide advice and guidance on supporting children with additional needs.

Many leaders told us that it remained a very difficult time to maintain momentum and introduce strategic changes in their settings. Many settings continued with regular staff meetings to discuss their provision and teaching. Leaders continued to see this as a key part of their work; something which needed to be maintained. Despite the constant challenges of COVID-19, they continued to evaluate their provision and the experiences they provide for the children, for example when adapting their learning areas and planning greater use of the outdoors. A few told us that this was particularly valuable as they prepare for the new curriculum for funded non-maintained nursery settings.

Cameo – ensuring smooth transition between settings and schools

Leaders at Sêr Bach Y Cwm, Powys local authority, have developed a close partnership with the local school. There is purposeful collaboration between the setting and the school. For example, they worked together to agree an overall vision which contributes to their work when considering how they will implement Curriculum for Wales. In agreeing a vision, they found that there were many aspects that were common to the school and the setting but that they also wanted to make certain elements bespoke to reflect their individual needs. This step has helped the setting to focus on what is important to the children and families who use the setting and to think about how they can develop their curriculum to meet their needs. The setting leader feels that working with the school in this way means that staff feel part of a holistic approach to childcare and education and that transition from the setting to the school is a seamless process.

Wellbeing

Children's wellbeing

Most leaders told us that children settled in well during the autumn term and enjoyed their learning. In general, the children made new friends quickly and enjoyed exploring their new learning environment.

Although many of these children may have missed out on attending mother and toddler groups for example, a few leaders felt that this cohort settled in quicker to routines than those from the previous two terms. However, a few leaders noted that more children who started during the autumn term, appeared to have less well developed personal and social skills than usual. In these settings, staff provided children with more opportunities to settle in and to make new friends through a range of engaging activities.



Cameo – improving children’s personal and social skills

Leaders and practitioners at Busy Bees Nursery, Bridgend local authority, decided to focus on improving children’s personal and social skills during the autumn term. Practitioners had noted that more children than usual appeared to lack the necessary skills to socialise and mix with other children at the beginning of term. When not at the setting, these children have had little contact with others. Leaders and practitioners have addressed this issue by holding enjoyable and interactive special days to support children. They decided to hold a ‘Glastonbee’ festival in the garden, where children wore costumes and went on stage to sing and dance together. These special days have helped children to flourish emotionally and socially, and practitioners can see the impact when children are playing in the learning environment.

A few leaders also noted that some new starters often lacked independent and self-help skills, including knowing when they need to use the toilet or exploring learning areas on their own. Most support partners agree that more children appear to have greater communication difficulties and are less independent as a result of the pandemic. They also noted that settings were now more aware of the impact of adverse childhood experiences on children during the pandemic, and the need to continue to support children and their families.

Many leaders told us that they were more aware this term of the anxiety felt by parents and carers who found it difficult to leave their children at settings following extended periods at home. In most cases, parents and children were unable to visit before starting in September due to COVID-19 guidance on limiting visitors to the setting. This may have added to the anxiety of children and their parents and carers at the beginning of term. However, a few settings succeeded to provide outdoor ‘open days’ for parents and carers and children during the summer term to help them get to know the staff and each other prior to starting in September. The continued use of a range of apps and social media platforms also help alleviate parents and carers concerns by keeping them informed of their child’s day at the setting as well as their general progress.

Cameo – organising transition arrangements during the pandemic

Leaders at Cylch Meithrin Cynwyd Sant, Bridgend local authority, organised a "meet and greet" day at the end of the summer term so that the new children and their families could visit the setting before starting in September 2021. Parents and carers met with the leaders in the outdoors first while the children were playing in the outdoor area and then each child had an opportunity to look inside the building, one family at a time. The day was very successful and helped parents and carers to get to know the setting and its staff. Due to the success of the event, leaders plan to organise a similar day in 2022.

Leaders noted that staff have a better understanding of the importance of children’s emotional wellbeing allowing them to provide purposeful activities to help children share their feelings with others. Many settings now provide more opportunities for children to share their feelings through large group sessions such as circle time as

well as through more discrete methods, such as choosing which card best reflects their feelings on arrival.

Cameo – supporting children’s wellbeing

Practitioners at Burleigh House in Newport local authority, have tried to make the setting as welcoming as possible despite the COVID-19 restrictions and strive to provide a home from home feeling for children. They have focussed on children’s emotional wellbeing and have introduced a feelings board where children identify how they feel as they self-register. This provides practitioners with an opportunity to discuss children’s feelings with them. If children have indicated that they’re not happy for any reason, staff will have a chat with them and try to resolve any issues. Practitioners have also introduced sessions to equip children with skills and strategies to help them relax and regulate their emotions. For example, two children who do not always get on are encouraged to take deep breaths if they feel themselves getting cross with each other. These strategies have helped children settle in well to their new environment and allowed practitioners to identify better those who required extra support.

Staff wellbeing

Most leaders told us that supporting staff wellbeing remained a priority for them during the autumn term as the COVID-19 coronavirus continued to impact on their work. They reported that most staff had adapted well to the Welsh Government’s COVID-19 guidance for keeping children safe in settings and were generally less anxious compared to the previous year. However, the increased spread of the Omicron variant along with the relaxation of the rules for PCR testing for those under five years old, made staff worry more about their own wellbeing towards the end of the term.

Leaders continued to do their best to support staff throughout the autumn term. In many settings, leaders held regular "time to talk" sessions with staff members to allow them to discuss their feelings or worries they may want to share. Leaders often extended the allocated time for supervisions to allow staff plenty of opportunity to talk and to help resolve any personal issues they may be experiencing due to the pandemic, for example issues around personal childcare or personal finance. In a few settings, leaders arranged remote yoga sessions for staff or provided snacks, magazines or small treats for staff to enjoy. One leader told us, that they encourage staff to write positive and inspirational comments about each other on Fridays to help raise morale.

Additional learning needs

Most support partners informed us that they had been working with setting leaders over the past year to prepare for the Additional Learning Needs and Education Tribunal (Wales) Act (ALNET).

They felt that the Act provides them with an opportunity to better align policies and procedures for identifying and supporting children with additional learning needs (ALN) in settings. However, a few expressed concern at the variation in the delivery of training and the implementation of the Act across local authorities. Overall, leaders and support partners also welcomed the fact that there is now greater support from different agencies across and between local authorities.



Many leaders told us that they valued the training they have received from their local authorities and welcome the new role of Early Years Additional Learning Needs Officer (EYALNLO) to coordinate support for children and to provide staff with appropriate advice and guidance. Leaders told us that the training has allowed them to begin adapting their ALN provision in readiness for the ALNET Act. In these settings, staff are now more familiar with new terminology and the main implications of the Act, particularly the use of individual development plans which replace all existing statutory and non-statutory plans. However, a very few leaders told us they have not yet received training from their local authority and do not fully understand the implications of the ALNET Act. This has been recognised as a concern by some umbrella organisations as the amount of support and training continues to vary across Wales. In addition, leaders in a few Welsh medium settings and support partners have expressed concerns around the availability of specialist support for children and their families through the medium of Welsh.

Many leaders and support partners reported an increase in the number of children experiencing speech and language issues as well as emotional and behavioural issues over the course of the pandemic. In a few examples, leaders noted that these children had also missed out on early contact with professionals, such as health visitors, during the pandemic. As a result, routine screening processes have not always taken place and issues like speech and language difficulties have not been identified until the child started at the setting. Leaders also reported that this was further hampered by the inability of professionals, such as speech and language therapists, to conduct face to face consultations during this period.

Early years advisory teachers reported that there has been a considerable increase in the number of ALN panel meetings in a few local authorities and these take up a large amount of their time. A few felt that their role was expanding rapidly and that this was putting extra pressure on them and reducing the time that they had to work directly with children and setting staff. However, in a few cases, the roll out of training for the ALNET Act has helped leaders improve the quality of the evidence provided when referring children to the panel, which has helped the local authority to provide the right targeted support for them. Support partners believe that a consistent roll out of further training is required to ensure that all practitioners are equipped with the right skills to identify and support children with ALN at an early stage. A minority of leaders told us that they had benefitted greatly from sharing practice with other settings online, often facilitated by support partners.

Cameo – supporting children with ALN

Leaders at Rachael's Playhouse in Rhondda Cynon Taf local authority, have established strong partnerships with other providers who have strong practice in supporting children with ALN. The setting lead has arranged visits to a special school to learn from good practice as well as inviting practitioners from the school to the setting. The leaders feels that this has informed their ALN practice and helped staff to adapt their own. As a result, they now implement a graduated response method to provide targeted support for their children who may require additional support. For example, leaders routinely write and implement play development plans in the first instance to support children with emotional or behavioral issues, before escalating support from external specialists if required. This has also improved the relationships between the setting staff, parents and carers as well professionals such as health visitors as they now write play plans together. The plans are evaluated and reviewed regularly to identify progress against the targets. The leader believes that their person-centered planning approach allows them to plan support more effectively and to seek further bespoke support for children through a graduated response method, if required.