



HM Government

Switch into something BIG

Your guide to getting started with a career in early years and childcare



Do something BIG
Work with
small children



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Years
Careers**

Introduction

Big changes start with small steps.

If you're ready for a fresh start in a role that's flexible, fulfilling and makes a difference, working in early years and childcare could be your next chapter. Whether you're returning to work after starting a family or looking for a more rewarding role, this guide is here to help you.

With expert insight from career change coach Alice Stapleton, and inspiring stories from people who've made the switch, this guide will walk you through everything you need to know. It's designed to give you the confidence to take your first step toward a career working with pre-school children—into the rewarding world of early years education.

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Starting a new chapter in early years

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A career that shapes lives—and fits around yours

No two days are the same working with small children. It's a rewarding and joyful job with impact, where you get to be part of their early education and help to give them the best start in life.

There's space in the sector for all sorts of skills and ambitions. You could work in a team in a nursery or pre-school, step into leadership, or become your own boss as a registered childminder. Whatever path you choose you'll be playing a key role in children's early education, supporting their development and opening their minds to new ideas every day.

If you're a parent, you'd be surprised how many of the skills you already use are exactly what's needed—like recognising the rhythm of a child's day: the routines, the mess, the big emotions, and the small victories. That experience gives you a strong head start.

What does 'early years' mean?

Early years refers to the care, learning, and development support offered to children from birth to age five. It's a rewarding career that's more than just childcare—it's about early education, wellbeing, and growth.

Where you can work in early years and childcare

- [Nursery](#)
- [Pre-school or nursery school](#)
- [As a registered childminder](#)
- [In before and after school clubs](#)



About Alice Stapleton

Having experienced her own turning point in her 20s, Alice turned experience into purpose—researching why people switch careers. Since then, she's coached hundreds of people through career change and helped them find something they truly love.

Alice says:

“Fear is a natural part of change, but so is growth. The things we're most nervous about often point to the choices that'll change our lives for the better.”



“I didn't have experience in nurseries, but I'd raised three children. Turns out, that gave me so many of the skills to get started that I didn't even know I had!”

— Samira, nursery assistant

“I used to work in admin. Now I run my own childminding business and have never felt more fulfilled.”

— Ben, childminder

You've already got what it takes to get started

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Using the skills you already have

Whether or not you've helped raise children, you could already have skills that transfer well into a role in early years.

If you have supported children—whether as a parent, older sibling, auntie, uncle, or grandparent—you've already been using many of the core skills needed to get started in early years. But experience from other jobs, volunteering, or daily life can be just as valuable.

Think of all the times you've helped a child learn something new, soothed their emotions, solved unexpected problems, been prepared and adapted to a change in plan. These everyday moments have given you a toolkit that's perfect for supporting early learning.

Core skills in early years:

- Creativity
- Adaptability
- Teamwork
- Patience
- Empathy
- Organisation

“I worried about not having the right qualifications, but once I started, I realised my parenting experience was my best asset in terms of giving me the skills I need.”

— Laura, Early Years Educator

Begin your journey in early years

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Where to find jobs

Start your local job search on the government's [Find a Job](#) site. With over 30,000 nurseries and pre-schools across the UK there will be plenty of opportunities. Each vacancy will include information about the experience, skills and qualifications you'll need for that role.

There is also the option to become a registered [childminder](#), where you could change lives from your living room.

Earn while you learn with an early years apprenticeship

As an apprentice, you'll be employed and gain hands-on experience working in a nursery or pre-school with children aged 0-5, helping them thrive from the very start.

- Start working now and train on the job from day one
- Earn a salary as you learn
- Get a recognised qualification that opens doors for your future career
- No experience? No problem, apprenticeships are a great start

You'll need GCSEs in English, maths and science at grade 4 (C) or above (or equivalent) to apply—but there are options if you haven't got them yet, and support is available to help you get there.

Entry routes:

- **Level 2 Early Years Practitioner** – Great for getting started
- **Level 3 Early Years Educator** – A step up for more responsibility and what many employers are looking for
- **Level 6 Degree Apprenticeship (from 2026)** – Become an Early Years Teacher

To find out more about the different early years apprenticeships - [click here](#)

Career progression

There's plenty of room to grow. Many start their journey as assistants and work their way up to room leaders, nursery managers, or even regional managers.

“I started part-time while my daughter was in nursery. Five years later, I’m a deputy manager and studying for a leadership qualification.”

— Hannah, Deputy Manager



Want to see what that looks like in real life? Head to our [Real Stories](#) page to watch videos of people sharing their journeys and explore the different roles a career in early years can take you to.



Making the switch with confidence

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3 tips for overcoming 'switching' fears

Test drive it first

Try the career before committing to it. Look for opportunities to work or volunteer with young children, or set up an interview or job shadow with an early years practitioner. Take a short course or attend industry events to see how you feel in that environment. This can help build confidence in your new path.

Plan for the 'what if'

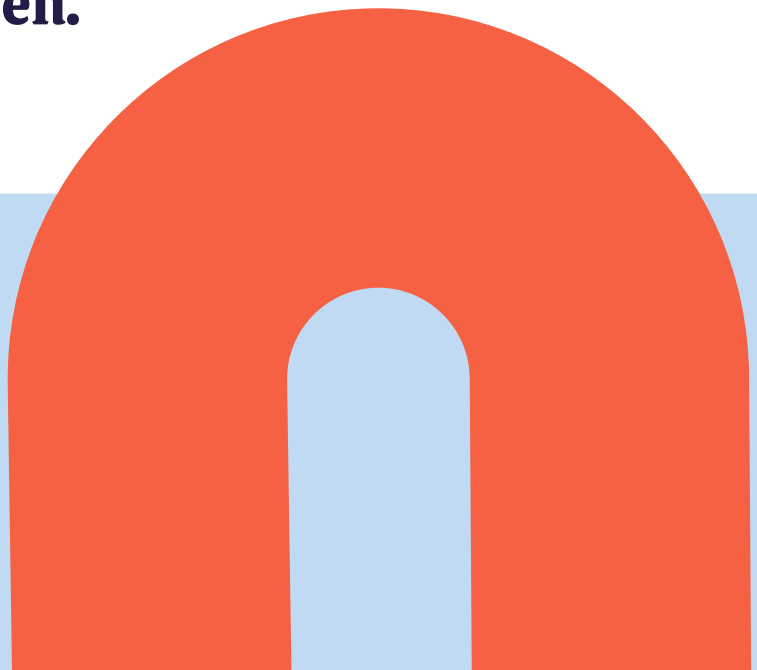
On a piece of paper, write down your worst-case scenarios in one column and a plan for how you'd address each one in the other. Score the likelihood of each scenario and note what you can do to reduce the risk.

Take one step at a time

Break the transition into small, manageable steps. What's the next thing you can do? Start there. Give yourself a simple deadline and keep going from that point. Bit by bit, it all starts to come together.

“Changing career can feel scary, but things staying the same is often scarier. We may not like change, but sometimes it’s the best thing for us. The key is to take things one step at a time, and believe in your ability to make it happen.”

— Alice Stapleton



Making the switch with confidence

3 tips for mastering your CV and interview

Try a skills-based CV

A skills-based CV lets you lead with your strengths. Instead of listing jobs in order, you focus on the skills that matter most for the role making it easier to show how you're a great fit. It's a clear, simple way to show what you can do and the difference you've made.

Highlight your achievements

On your CV, include details of the results you achieved in previous roles. Make them relevant to the job you're applying for. This might include specific outcomes, improvements you made or positive feedback you received.

Ask smart questions

Before your interview, prepare two or three strong questions to ask the panel. Get clear on what you want to know about the role and the organisation. Remember, interviews are a two-way conversation - it's also your chance to see whether the organisation feels like the right fit for you. There are many different types of early years careers, so asking about their approach and environment can help you find the right setting for you.

“I wish you all the best in this new chapter of your career. You’ve got this!”

— Alice Stapleton



Useful resources

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Wherever you're starting from, there's a path for you. Below are helpful links to support your journey.

- [Find a job in early years](#)
- [Apprenticeship information](#)
- [Explore careers in education and childcare](#)

Need support?

We're here to help.

Call: 0808 178 7880

Email: earlyyears.careers@education.gov.uk

(Monday to Friday, 9:00am to 5:30pm, excluding bank holidays)

Or visit our help and support page [here](#).

“It's easy to second-guess yourself. But choosing something purposeful and fulfilling is always a step in the right direction.”

— Alice Stapleton

“Making a change is scary at first, but I've never looked back. I'm proud to be part of children's lives.”

— Tasha, Early Years Educator

