

childcare counsel



April brings an increase to the National Living Wage, as well as the lowering of the age threshold at which it applies,

from 25 to 23. By **Hannah Belton**, director of Morgan La Roche

Statutory payments

As of 4 April, the following statutory rates will apply in respect of maternity, paternity, adoption, shared parental, bereavement and sick pay.

Weekly statutory payments for time off work

Maternity/adoption/paternity/shared parental/bereavement pay: £151.97
Sick pay: £96.35
Lower earnings limit (the amount of earnings that allow an employee to qualify for certain state benefits): £120

National Minimum Wage

From 1 April, the National Minimum Wage rates per hour will increase to the figures as shown below. Importantly, for the first time, the National Living Wage age threshold has been reduced from 25-plus to 23 years and older, which will increase staffing costs.

National Minimum Wage per hour

Apprentices: £4.30
Age 16-17: £4.62
Age 18-20: £6.56
Age 21-22: £8.36
National Living Wage (23-plus): £8.91

Compensation limits for employment tribunals

There are no increases being made to the compensation limits, but as a reminder, they continue to apply as set out below.

Compensation limits

Week's pay (for example, when calculating statutory redundancy pay): £538
Statutory redundancy pay (maximum award): £16,140
Unfair dismissal basic award (maximum award): £16,140
Unfair dismissal compensatory award (the amount a tribunal considers just and equitable compensation for unfair dismissal) (maximum award): £88,519
Automatically unfair dismissal basic award (minimum): £6,562
Guarantee pay (per day) for lay-off: £30

training

Digital play

Quality child development training can be hard to come by. **Charlotte Goddard** looks at one new, low-cost, research-backed course on the most topical of subjects: digital play



PHOTO LYDIA PLOWMAN

Some early years settings have found lockdown to be an ideal time to focus on staff training. Of course, with low occupancy and funding constraints, budgets are stretched, but 89 per cent of settings are still offering training, 70 per cent of these opting to go further than the mandatory minimum, according to the National Day Nurseries Association and the Education Policy Institute.

With 71 per cent of the early years workforce furloughed at some point between March and August 2020, according to the same research, and furlough now extended until September this year, there is more scope for settings to upskill their staff. Training is allowed during furlough, but staff must receive at least minimum wage during the time spent training – so if the 80 per cent salary does not take them up to minimum wage, the setting must supplement their salary during training time. If training is not undertaken 'at the request of the employer', the minimum wage ruling does not apply.

Trainer Kathy Brodie says there has been a particular interest in online training on maths, observation, assessment and planning and outdoor play, although she points out numbers are skewed by the prevalence of available videos on each topic. 'We did lots of online training for

furloughed staff', says Ali Earley, manager of Kiddiwinks Pre-School in Trowbridge, Wiltshire. 'This was mainly EduCare, through the Early Years Alliance – this training is free because we are members and we have always found it easy to navigate around and well-laid-out. Staff can print off a certificate and add it to their CPD folder and also reflect back to other staff as to whether they found the courses beneficial.'

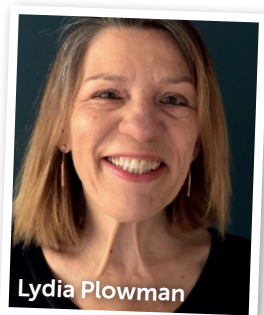
Amid financial uncertainty, many settings have been looking out for low-cost or free options when it comes to online training. However, it is also important that training is high-quality and evidence-based, and such courses are not always easy to find.

Child development: digital play

Pre-pandemic, children had already proved adept at using digital devices, while the pandemic has necessitated a huge upsurge in remote working and home schooling, and widespread adoption of video as a means for communicating and learning as a consequence.

Charity Playbase, which designs and runs child development training, decided last year to create an online version of its course on digital play and its role in child development. The course was developed in partnership with the University of Edinburgh's Professor Lydia Plowman,

drawing on hers and others' research. 'Used with care, digital media can provide opportunities to play, learn, communicate and be creative,' says Professor Plowman. 'We can lay the foundations for positive use later by thinking about digital play during early childhood.'



Lydia Plowman

'Digital play' can comprise anything from singing along with a song on YouTube, to drawing and colouring using an app, to pretending to talk to somebody on an old mobile phone that doesn't work any more. It can include problem-solving, self-expression and developing the imagination.

Early years educators can find digital play quite difficult to integrate into the nursery, and may have some ideas about 'screen time' which are not necessarily backed up by research, says Professor Plowman. 'We found educators felt a bit nervous about digital media in their setting,' she says. 'Partly that was a lack of confidence – not around using the devices, but around how they fit into early years pedagogy – and partly it is a genuine questioning about whether this is the right thing for children to be doing; shouldn't they be playing outdoors, or in traditional ways?'

During her research, Prof Plowman watched children playing on tablets, and found that almost all of the types of play that are found in the non-digital world were replicated online. Imaginative play was a common feature of digital play with apps, e.g. children treating digital pets as 'real' animals and pretending to care for them.

Prof Plowman also found digital devices have revolutionised young children's experiences of communication. One three-year-old, for example, was regularly communicating with relatives in Australia by sending photos, messages containing emoticons and using a webcam, developing communication and social skills that in the past he would only have been able to develop once he could read and write.

The Playbase course, for which participants pay the amount they choose, covers the pros and cons of digital play, and the impact it can have on development. It also covers the concept of hybrid play, where children combine digital and non-digital – for example, incorporating mobile phones and laptops into their role play, drawing characters from their favourite video games and combining non-digital items such as cardboard boxes and conventional dolls with toys such as digital pets.

Learners also find out how to extend children's digital play, for example by using Fitbits to measure activity, incorporating

outdoor learning, physical activity and maths.

'Lydia's work is gold-standard research, and our training is giving people access to it at different levels,' says Freda O'Byrne, Playbase trustee and volunteer.

Professor Plowman received funding from the University of Edinburgh to create the

original, tutor-led course for Playbase, conditional on the training making academic research more accessible. 'I was careful to use really accessible language, and to explain any terms people might find a bit tricky,' she explains. Professor Plowman has also created a free booklet (see Further information), which incorporates a lot of the learning from the training course.

The training aims to empower practitioners with the latest research and ideas, so they can decide for themselves what is most appropriate for the children in their care, including making choices about when to play alongside a child and when to step back, and selecting suitable activities and digital content. 'One thing the course doesn't do is to say "this is what you should do",' says Ms O'Byrne. 'It says "the research says this".'

Professor Plowman says, 'Articles in newspapers or TV programmes sometimes refer to "research" as if all research is equally trustworthy. But just because something has been published in an academic journal doesn't mean that it's true: researchers have their own biases and beliefs.'

The course focuses on young children aged up to five or six. Eight sessions each take around two hours to complete, and cover what digital play is, screen time, play and learning, extending play, choosing products, learning and playing together, safety and security online and changes the learner might make to their practice going forwards. Different levels of training have been devised for parents and early years practitioners, with practitioners encouraged to complete the optional further reading section in each session, which provides links to research papers.

Each session includes a recap of what has been covered so far, an introduction to the topic, a short video or magazine article, some text, and activities that need to be completed before the learner can progress. These include reviewing and comparing different apps, involving children in digital play and taking notes on their engagement, and creating a screen-time diary for adults and children.

The normal price for this digital play training is £25, but over the course of the pandemic, Playbase is asking people to pay what they can. ■

The search for high-quality child development CPD

Early Years TV

Trainer Kathy Brodie's online platform gives free subscribers' access to five videos, with a new video every month. Expert presenters include writer Michael Rosen, June O'Sullivan, chief executive of LEYF, and consultant Di Chilvers. Paid subscription at £12 a month gives access to more than 150 videos: www.earlyyears.tv. Ms Brodie also offers short courses such as Observations Short Course + Sociograms, which reviews different observation types and costs £20.40 including VAT: <https://www.earlyyearstraining.org.uk>.

EY smart, PACEY

Free online training, offering short ten- to 15-minute courses that can be done on any device at any time, and has been developed in conjunction with a range of experts including PACEY president Penny Tassoni, the Open University and childcare practitioners from across England and Wales: <http://bit.ly/3eEjAQo>.

EduCare, Early Years Alliance

Alliance members have access to free EduCare online learning endorsed by the Council for Awards in Care, Health and Education (CACHE). Non-members can buy courses directly from EduCare – the hour-long Improving Children's Learning Through Play course, for example, costs £14 excluding VAT: <https://www.eyalliance.org.uk/educare>.

Open University

The Open University offers a range of free courses including the five-hour Children's Perspectives on Play, the 12-hour Childhood in the Digital Age, and the eight-hour Level 2 course Children's Experiences with Digital Technologies: <http://bit.ly/3eGi0gK>.

Siren Films: Child Development video based training

Some video clips are free to access and others require subscription at £49 a year for learners and £99 a year for professionals. The organisation offers a 30-day free trial: <https://www.sirenfilms.co.uk>.

Further information

→ Playbase booklet: <https://bit.ly/3tqOEhg>