



Mental health and wellbeing in play and playwork – the NEST framework

A resource for playwork trainers

Acknowledgements

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About this resource

This training resource considers the crucial role of children's play in promoting positive mental health and wellbeing. The resource offers an introduction to the Welsh Government NEST framework for mental health and wellbeing and relates use of the framework to playwork practice.

Why it's been developed

Play and wellbeing are closely linked and the key principles of the NEST framework align well with playwork practice. The resource is intended to support playwork trainers with making the links between playwork and the NEST framework and supporting playworkers to reflect on how their practice contributes to wellbeing.

How to use this resource

This resource has been created for play and playwork trainers to use when delivering both formal and informal playwork training. The sessions can be delivered as shown or adapted to meet the needs of learners.

Who it's for

This resource is intended for play and playwork trainers. Its purpose is to support with delivering training, qualifications and other professional development opportunities about mental health and wellbeing, aimed at playwork practitioners. Trainers who have completed the Level 3 Award in Delivering Dynamic Playwork Training (ADDaPT) will find these training resources support playful and participative learning.



What is NEST?

NEST stands for:

- **N**urturing – taken care of and cherished
- **E**mpowering – feeling strong and listened to
- **S**afe – feeling protected and able to be yourself
- **T**rusted – reliable and there for you.

Young people came up with the term when asked by the Welsh Government what words best described how support for mental health and wellbeing should feel.

The NEST framework is a whole-system approach to supporting the mental health and wellbeing of babies, children, young people and their families, focusing on early help, trusted relationships and joined-up support. For playworkers, it highlights the important role they play as consistent, trusted adults who create safe, inclusive and nurturing environments where children can play freely. Through play, children can build resilience, express emotions, develop relationships and strengthen their wellbeing.

The framework emphasises a no wrong door approach, meaning playwork settings are a key part of a wider network of support, working alongside families, schools and other services to ensure children receive the right help at the right time.

Linking the NEST session plans to playwork qualifications

This resource includes two session plans, which you may choose to use.

Session 1 is broadly intended to support playwork qualifications at level 2. The session provides an introduction to the NEST framework and begins to get learners thinking about how playwork contributes to the key principles of the framework. The homework for this session may be adapted as an assessment method and linked to assessment criteria around playwork and children's wellbeing.

Session 2 supports progression and gets learners thinking more deeply about their practice in relation to the NEST framework. This session looks more closely at playwork practice in settings and the recommended assessment gets learners making use of the NEST self-assessment tool. This session is intended to complement playwork qualifications at level 3 and even on to level 5.

The 2026 National Occupational Standards (NOS) for playwork include knowledge around 'National frameworks and guidance to support children's wellbeing'. Qualifications that reference these NOS can also make use of these training resources.

Supporting materials

As part of this training resource, we have included links to existing materials for the NEST Framework. The links include online videos, the NEST website and Play Wales' *Focus on play – How play supports children's mental health* briefing sheet. In addition, a range of materials are included as annexes to support training delivery and assessment.

Supporting quality

Whilst the NEST framework is not a comprehensive quality assurance process, settings that undertake the self-assessment may use it to support other quality processes as part of Care Inspectorate Wales' Quality of Care Review and *Chwarae o Safon* – Play Wales' playwork quality mark.

Session plan 1 – Introduction to NEST

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Timing	Activity	Outcome	Resources
0:00	Watch the What is the NEST Framework? video The video talks about the importance of trusted adults in children’s lives. Playworkers are trusted adults for many children and teenagers. Discussion: How can playworkers support children’s mental health and wellbeing? Jot the responses on a flipchart (examples in Annex 2).	Learners start to learn about the framework and reflect on links to playwork	What is the NEST Framework? video Flipchart and pens
0:20	Watch the NEST webinar (You can also deliver yourself if you feel confident, using the script)	Learners understand the key principles of the NEST framework	NEST webinar or webinar script – Annex 1 and PowerPoint presentation
0:40	Build your own NEST Ask learners who or what makes them feel Nurtured, Empowered, Safe and Trusted. You could provide craft materials and ask learners to physically build their NESTs whilst discussing in groups. Or learners can draw their NESTs or virtually, learners can put their ideas in the chat bar. Flipchart/virtually whiteboard the different elements of learners’ NESTs (see Annex 3 for expected examples). Link the elements of the NESTs you have recorded to different children’s rights.	Learners build understanding of the wider determinants of mental health and wellbeing and can relate these to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)	Children’s rights poster Optional – craft materials, felt pens and paper

Timing	Activity	Outcome	Resources
1:15	Watch the Good practice example video (up to 4:40 minutes)	Learning about best practice	Good practice example video
1:20	Reflection In pairs or individually, ask learners to reflect on their playwork practice in relation to NEST and supporting children's wellbeing. Ask learners to use the NEST postcard to write three actions they will take away to use the framework to better support children's mental health and wellbeing. Learners should take these postcards away with them.	Relating personal practice to the NEST framework	NEST postcard (Annex 4) Pens
	Homework (optional) Talk to the children and teenagers in your setting about how well your setting is supporting their mental health and wellbeing. Use the NEST engagement resource to help you.		NEST engagement resource

Extension task: Complete the [NEST training \(2 x 30 minute online modules\)](#)

These online sessions can be completed at any time. They give an overview of children's rights and the NEST framework. They are free to access for all sectors but you will need to create a free account on the training platform.

Session plan 2 – NEST and playwork practice

(for level 3 and above)

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Timing	Activity	Outcome	Resources
0:00	Recap the NEST framework Use the blank template in Annex 5 and ask learners to work in groups to fill in the blanks. This should be a quick fire activity. You can make it a competition of which group can remember the most. Virtual option – use an interactive whiteboard so learners can populate the image. You can give clues – for example, the acronym goes on the outside circle and the stakeholders go in the second circle.	Recap the framework and embed learning	Blank NEST framework diagram (Annex 5) Pens
0:10	Read <i>Focus on Play – How play supports children's mental health</i> (this could be set as homework prior to the session) Then, individually or in pairs, write a list of bullet points on: - how play supports children's mental health - what playworkers can do as 'trusted adults' to support children's mental health.	Gain in depth knowledge of the application of NEST in the play sector	Copies of <i>Focus on Play – How play supports children's mental health</i>



Timing	Activity	Outcome	Resources
0:40	Using the six key principles of NEST, ask learners to discuss how play, playwork and playwork settings support the framework's aims of a joined-up system of support for mental health and wellbeing. This can be done as a carousel activity with a key principle on each table, asking learners to move around the room, or you can use the worksheet in Annex 6.	Understand how playwork contributes to the wider mental health system	Worksheet in Annex 6 Pens
1:10	Working in small groups, ask learners to consider who is part of the children's NESTs they work with. Learners can use the worksheet in Annex 7 to note down the different people and organisations. Then ask learners to consider: • what this means for them • with who should they be partnering • how often and by what means? Ask learners to consider individual contacts, forums or network meetings, face to face events and so forth. Key question: who are your setting's key partners to create a joined up, no wrong door approach.	Understand who key partners are to create a whole system approach to mental health	Worksheet in Annex 7 Pens
	Homework (optional) Use the NEST self-assessment tool in a team meeting to run a reflective discussion on how your playwork setting supports mental health and wellbeing.		NEST self-assessment tool

Annex 1 – NEST webinar script

If you would like to deliver the presentation in Session 1 yourself, instead of using the recorded webinar, you can use this script as a basis alongside the PowerPoint presentation. The presentation is available on our website.

NEST presentation transcript for playwork

Welcome to this presentation about the NEST framework. I'm going to begin by showing you a short video, created by young people to explain the framework.

Video: What is the NEST Framework?

'A little bird has been spreading the word about the NEST framework: a planning tool designed to help services make sure mental health and wellbeing are at the heart of everything they do. It is for everyone: babies, children, young people, parents, carers, wider families and professionals.

The framework helps make sure people feel supported and can get extra help if needed. Time was taken to speak to lots of people and listen to their ideas. It was agreed that nests were a good way of explaining what helps children of all ages grow strong, aim high and be the best they can be. This happens when their everyday relationships feel nurturing, empowering, safe and trusted.

Everyone's nest is unique. It is made up of the people closest to them, the things they enjoy and that help them grow, their communities, and the places they go in their day-to-day lives. Trusted adults play a vital part in a young person's nest. They can lift them when they are sad, encourage them to try new things, help them join in with others, and make them feel valued and cared for. This is the everyday magic that builds and maintains positive mental health and wellbeing.

The NEST framework aims to organise services so that more people experience this everyday magic in their daily lives. It also aims to help children and young people feel a sense of belonging, which is so important to mental health and wellbeing, whether at home, in school, at a club, with friends, or in their community.

When things are not going well, for example when a child or young person is feeling sad, anxious, left out, or so angry that they push people away, the trusted adults who know them best should have access to support, ideas to try, and the confidence to keep helping. Sometimes what a young person needs most is for trusted adults not to give up. NEST recognises how important trusted adults are; when they are well supported, it can make all the difference.

Sometimes, of course, extra help is needed. The NEST framework's no wrong door approach recognises that everyone is different and that there should be lots of different types of help available. This means services come together to work out who can best meet the unique needs of each person. It helps make sure children and families are not bounced around services, and that they can access the right help at the right time, in the right way for them.

We all need different kinds of help at different times along the way. The NEST framework aims to support children of all ages, parents, carers, wider families, and the professionals who help them. It is about making sure everyone has opportunities that are nurturing, empowering, safe and trusted.

As the video explained, NEST is about a whole-system approach. It joins up different sectors to support the mental health and wellbeing of babies, children, young people, parents, carers and wider families. It was created as a planning tool that can be used by anyone, from Welsh Government to children's services, CAMHS teams, playwork or childcare settings. It was developed with children and young people themselves, alongside parents, carers and professionals.

The main aims of NEST are to make expertise and advice easier to access, and to give trusted adults the expertise and confidence to support children where they are. It also promotes a no wrong door approach across the whole system.

The strapline for NEST is: right help, at the right time, in the right way. We want to broaden the conversation away from the idea that only specialist services

provide help. Everyone has a part to play in building the layers needed for positive mental health and wellbeing.

Let's move on to the acronym NEST: nurturing, empowering, safe and trusted. This is what young people said they wanted mental health and wellbeing support to feel like and look like.

The NEST framework is not a large or complex document. It is represented by a circular diagram. Around the outside are the words nurturing, empowering, safe and trusted, reflecting both the acronym and the metaphor of mental health and wellbeing support being built in layers, wrapping around the child, holding them until they are ready to fly the nest, and being there for them to return to when they need it.

In the next circle are the key stakeholders in NEST. Most importantly, these are babies, children and young people, their parents and carers, and wider families. The wider system includes health, social care, children's services, the third sector, charities, voluntary and community groups, education, childcare, playwork and youth work. Education includes schools, pupil referral units, home education and other forms of education.

NEST is about all parts of the system working together. We could also include housing, youth justice, the police, further education and many more areas of support. Everyone who has an impact on babies, children and young people needs to consider their mental health and wellbeing needs.

The white segments of the diagram show the key principles of NEST, which I will discuss shortly. The dark green circle shows the fundamental values of NEST: psychologically informed, rights-based, equality, diversity and inclusion, values-led, and child development-focused. NEST takes a children's rights-based approach to everything it does.

Let's now look at the key principles of NEST.

First, trusted adults. NEST recognises that it is important for children and young people to build relationships with trusted adults, but that this takes time and continuity. Playworkers are a significant

source of trusted adults for children and young people accessing playwork settings.

Playworkers, like other trusted adults, can help by listening and empathising, naming emotions, helping children understand what they are feeling and why, demonstrating ways of managing difficulty, and understanding that behaviour can be a communication of emotion.

It is important to recognise the role of trusted adults in focusing on an individual's strengths, encouraging them, celebrating their achievements, and providing the everyday magic that trusted adult relationships can offer.

The next key principle is wellbeing across education. Children and young people spend a great deal of time in education, so it is important that education settings support their mental health and wellbeing and are part of the whole system that wraps around the child. For playwork, this might include working with schools to share coping mechanisms and communicate concerns about mental health and wellbeing.

For schools, this means reaching out to community support and making sure mental health and wellbeing are supported for all learners.

The next principle is co-produced innovations. This is something play and Playwork Principles strongly champion: babies, children and young people have a right to have their opinions heard and acted upon. In NEST, we talk about "nothing about you without you". Services should be shaped by feedback from children and families. In playwork settings, this is often done naturally through relationships with children and young people. It is important to consider how their feedback is included in evaluations of provision and how families' views are listened to.

This connects to Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which highlights the importance of children's voices. When we listen to children's voices and they help shape services, those services become better and more appropriate for the children accessing them.

The next key principle is easy access to expertise. This could come from a variety of sources, such as helplines, visits from specialist services, or multi-

agency teams. Playworkers may want to consider how they can integrate with multi-agency panels or single points of access in their region or local area, to share their own expertise and bring in the mental health and wellbeing expertise needed to support children in their settings.

Another key principle, particularly relevant to playwork settings, is safe and supportive communities. The NEST framework recognises that many different factors contribute to positive mental health and wellbeing. Wider determinants of mental health are central to helping babies, children and young people feel well within themselves. These include safe places to live, time, space and permission to play, opportunities to exercise, organised activities, access to healthy food and arts activities, freedom from pressing financial concerns at home, and feeling safe and nurtured in the spaces they use.

These are problems that cannot be fixed in health clinics alone. Their importance is often underestimated when we look to improve mental

health services. We want those delivering mental health services to think about these wider determinants. This is where playworkers, as trusted adults around children, can provide many of those safe and supportive experiences.

Finally, no wrong door. Extra or specialist help is an important part of the NEST framework. Sometimes children need specialist support. Unfortunately, families seeking that support can find themselves navigating a complex system. They may fall through gaps or spend a long time on waiting lists. We want families to receive the right help at the right time, in the way that is right for them, and to be supported throughout that journey.

As playworkers, you can have a positive effect by helping families navigate that system, particularly where you are working in partnership with other services.

Thank you very much.'

Annex 2 – flipchart prompts

For the exercise in Session 1

Discussion: How can playworkers support children's mental health and wellbeing?

Below are examples of the kinds of responses to expect and what can be used as prompts. Trusted adults can help babies, children and teenagers to learn to manage their feelings. Trusted adults can help by:

- listening and empathising
- helping find words for difficult emotions
- showing ways of managing difficulty
- helping to sort out problems
- understanding that anger can be about worry.

Co-regulation, where strong emotions are contained by someone trusted, is fundamental to self-regulation. It is a vital building block in psychological development. It is important there is support for trusted adults who care for babies, children and teenagers. Trusted adults can:

- focus on an individual's strengths
- encourage them to not give up
- celebrate their achievements
- provide the 'everyday magic' of a trusted relationship.

Annex 3 – flipchart prompts

For the build your own NEST exercise in Session 1.

These are the kinds of elements that you can expect in response and can use as additional prompts.

Common elements of NESTs:

- **Friends, colleagues and family** – relationships are key to feeling nurtured and supported (Article 9 and 15).
- **Pets** – children also tell us how important pets are to their mental health and wellbeing.
- **Safe and secure house, including warmth, enough money, food** – all things that children talk about needing and worrying about if there is a lack of (Article 24 and 27).
- **Sports and leisure** – exercise and taking part in leisure and cultural activities is important for a sense of wellbeing for all ages (Article 15).
- **Access to the outdoors/green spaces** – for children this might look like access to nature and play spaces (Article 31).
- **Fulfilling work** – this could also be the case for older young people. For children we might relate this to education, as a positive working or school environment will have a positive effect on wellbeing (Article 28).
- **Being listened to/knowing your voice matters** – this is important for us as adults but is also really important for children (Article 12).
- **Religion/faith** – young people talk about their faith relating to all elements of NEST (Article 14).

Annex 4 – worksheet

To support reflection at the end of Session 1.

Ask learners to complete their postcard.

Write three actions that you take away to use the NEST framework to better support children's mental health and wellbeing.

1.

2.

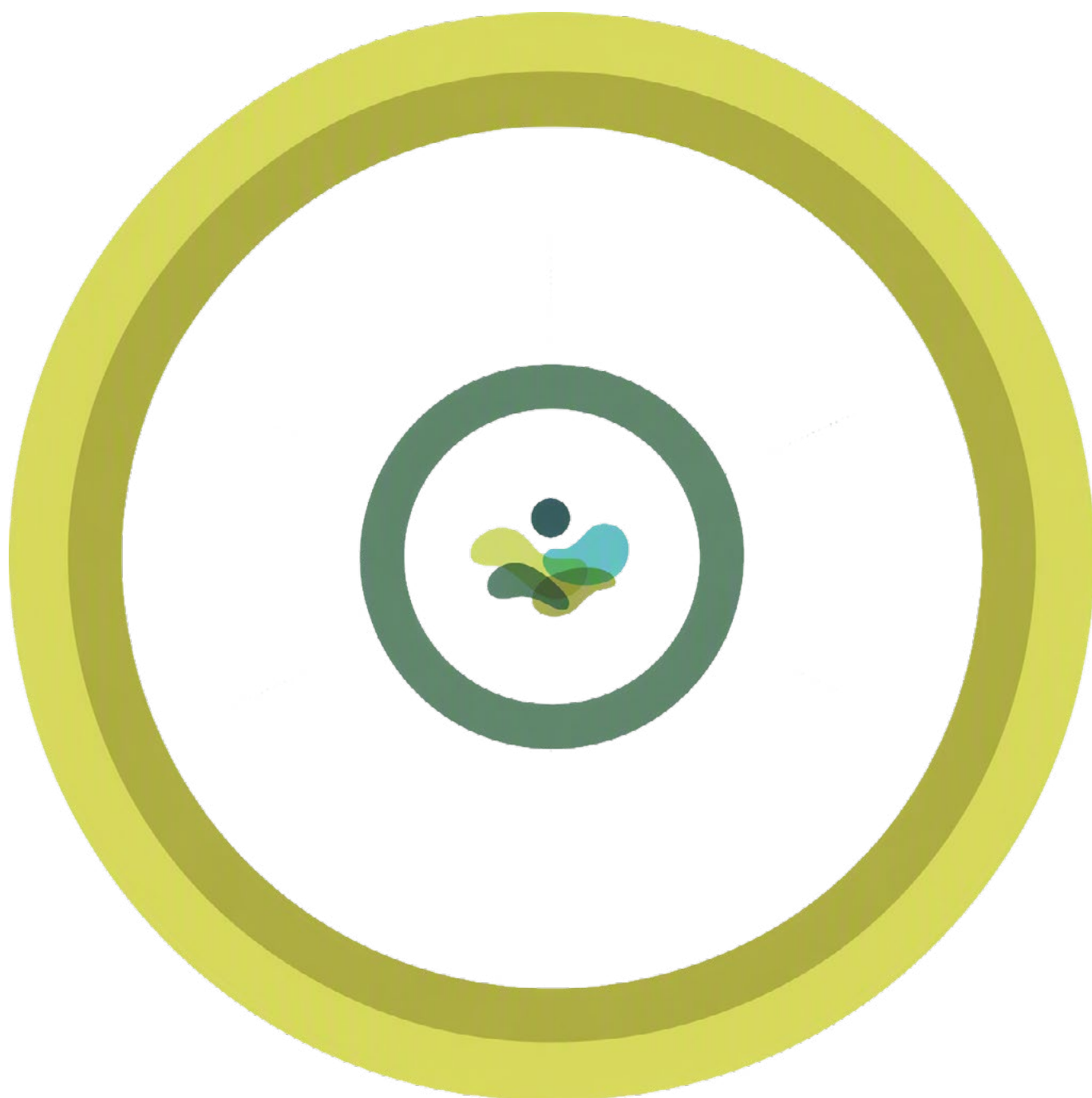
3.



Annex 5 – worksheet

Recap the NEST framework

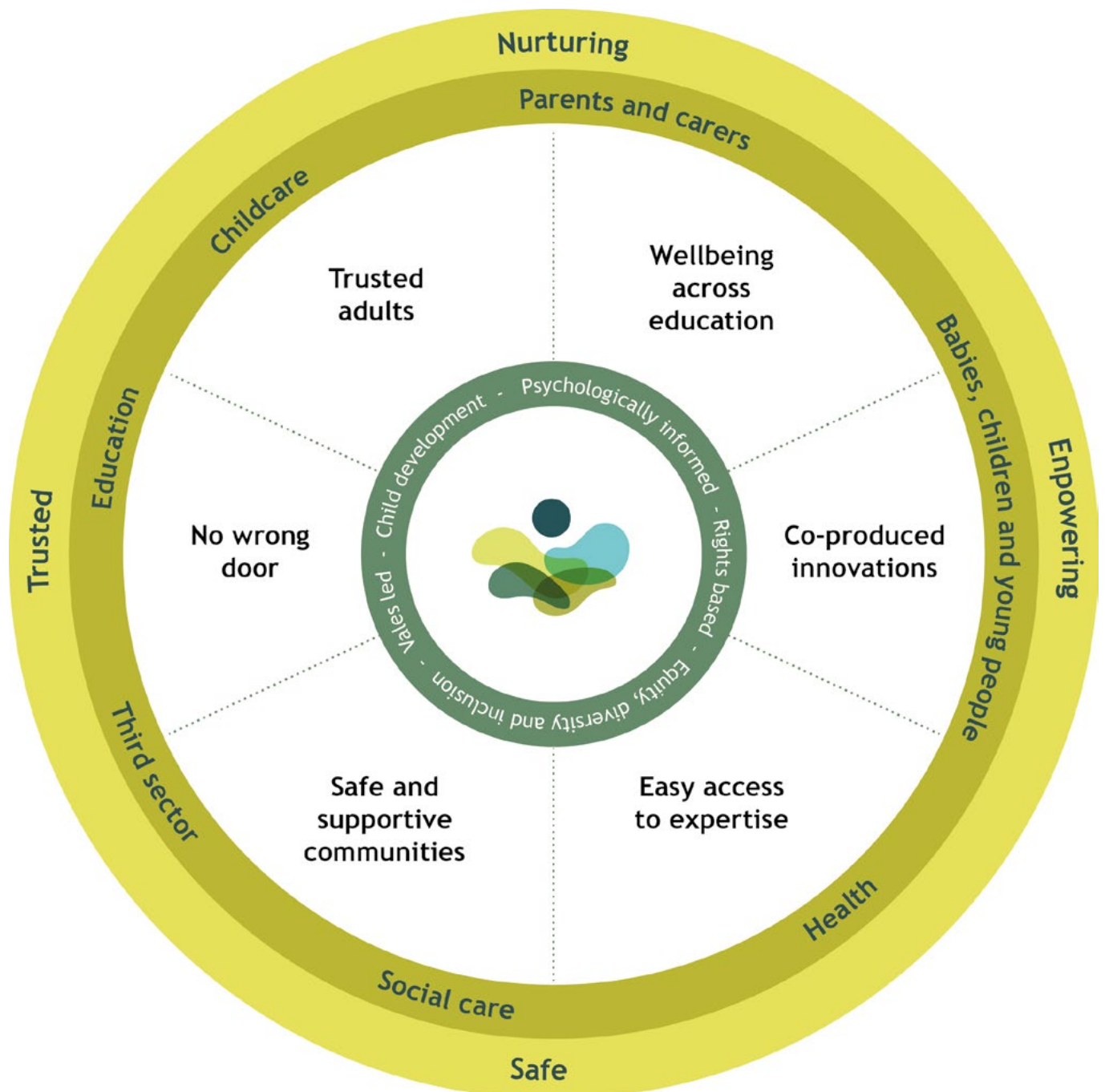
Work in groups to fill in the blanks, with the key principles of NEST.



Annex 6 – worksheet

For the exercise in Session 2

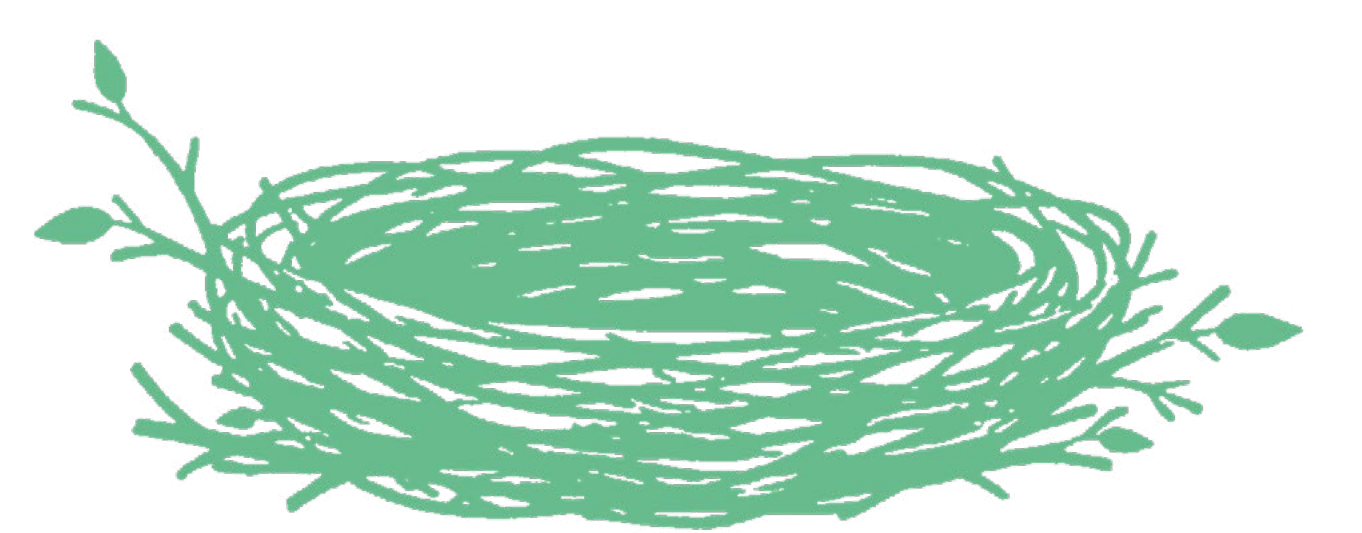
Using the six key principles of NEST, how can play, playworkers and playwork settings support NEST's aims of a joined-up system of support for mental health and wellbeing?



Annex 7 – worksheet

For the final exercise in Session 2

Working in small groups, consider who is part of the NESTs of the children you work with.



To create a joined-up system for mental health and wellbeing support, my playwork setting should therefore be working with...

Partner	How to contact



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