

Choosing to work with an assistant

As demand for childcare grows, many childminders are asking: should I work alone, or bring in an assistant?

It's a question that more and more childminders are facing. With increasing pressure on childcare places, longer working hours for parents, and the need to deliver high-quality care, working alone can sometimes feel limiting.

Bringing an assistant into the setting is becoming an increasingly popular solution. For many, it offers a way to grow their business sustainably and provide more flexibility. But it's not just about numbers, it's about support and partnership and the chance to raise the quality of their provision.

In this blog, we'll explore what it really means to work with an assistant, the benefits and challenges involved, and what you need to consider before taking that next step.

What is a Childminding Assistant?

A childminding assistant is someone who supports a registered childminder in delivering care in their setting. Their role can include helping with daily routines, engaging children in activities, preparing snacks/meals, supporting outings and ensuring a safe, nurturing environment. While assistants play an important part in the day-to-day running of the setting, they do not hold overall responsibility for the provision. Instead, they work under the direction and supervision of the registered childminder.

The key difference between a registered childminder and an assistant lies in accountability and regulation. A registered childminder is approved and inspected by the governing body for your nation and is legally responsible for meeting all the statutory requirements, including safeguarding, learning and development and compliance with ratios. An assistant, on the other hand, is not individually registered; however, they are named on the Registered Childminders registration and must meet suitability requirements. Assistants work under the supervision of a registered childminder, who remains responsible for ensuring that all requirements are consistently met in practice.

Legal requirements and ratios

When working with an assistant, you must understand how legal requirements and ratios apply to your setting. A registered childminder can usually care for a set number of children based on their registration, but having an assistant may allow this number to increase, provided all ratio requirements are met, and the quality of care is maintained. The assistant can support with these ratios, but the childminder remains responsible for ensuring that children are always adequately supervised. In some cases, assistants may be left alone for short periods (in England, according to the EYFS, an assistant can be left alone for up to 2 hours, providing they have specific parental permission).

The benefits of working with an assistant

Increased capacity: The biggest advantage of working with an assistant is the potential to care for more children within the legal ratio. This can make a significant difference to your income, allowing you to grow your business. With assistants supporting you, you may be able to offer additional places to families in your community, particularly in areas where childcare demand is high.

Flexibility: Having an extra pair of hands can really help with the flexibility within your day-to-day work. Whether it's managing school runs or simply having support during busy parts of the day, an assistant can make your routine more manageable.

Quality of care: Working with an assistant can have a positive impact on the quality of childcare you provide. With more adults available, children can benefit from increased one-to-one interaction, which supports their emotional well-being and development. This can often help when working with different age groups, for example, you might split into smaller groups, with one adult focusing on baby routines while the other engages with older children.

Professional support: Childminding can sometimes feel isolating, especially when working alone for long periods. Bringing an assistant into your setting introduces opportunities for partnership working and shared thinking. You can exchange ideas, reflect on practice and support each other through the challenges of the role. This teamwork can boost confidence, inspire creativity, and contribute towards your ongoing professional development.

Challenges to consider

Costs: While working with an assistant can increase your earning potential, it also brings additional financial commitments that need some careful consideration and

planning. Wages are the most obvious cost, but there are other expenses to factor in, such as employers' liability insurance, national insurance, pension contributions and ongoing training. You may also need to invest in extra resources, equipment, or even adapt your space to accommodate more children and another adult comfortably. It is important to weigh these costs against your potential income to ensure the arrangement is financially viable.

Paperwork and responsibilities: Bringing an assistant into your setting inevitably increases the amount of paperwork and responsibility you hold. This includes drawing up contracts, updating policies and procedures to reflect the role of the assistant and ensuring everything aligns with the requirements set out by your governing body. You will also need to keep records of suitability checks, training and supervision.

Payroll becomes another key responsibility. This will involve registering as an employer with HMRC, managing tax and National Insurance contributions, and keeping accurate financial records. In some cases, a childminding assistant may operate on a self-employed basis rather than being taken on as an employee; however, the Childminder may have less control over availability, so it would be vital to explore the assistant's availability and agreed hours to ensure the care for minded children is reliable and secure.

Managing an assistant: One of the biggest adjustments can be moving from working independently to managing another adult in the setting. This will involve clear delegation, knowing what tasks to share and ensuring your assistant understands their role and responsibilities. Good communication is essential, from setting expectations at the start to having regular supervision meetings (regular check-ins and feedback conversations).

It is crucial to maintain consistent standards of care. As a Registered Childminder, you remain responsible for everything that happens in your setting, so it is important that your assistant works in line with your values, policies and routines. This can take time to establish, and there may be moments when you need to address issues or provide additional guidance. Developing confidence in leadership and management is key, but it can be a learning curve, especially if you are used to working alone.

Safer recruitment principles

Safer recruitment is about putting children's safety first at every stage of the hiring process. It is extremely important that anyone who is going to have contact with children is thoroughly vetted. Before advertising for an assistant, a clear job description

should be created, outlining the responsibilities and expectations. Include a person specification (skills, experience and qualities). Safeguarding should always be a priority, and this should be made clear. Adopting these formal steps helps set the right tone from the beginning.

Application and interview process: Candidates should be asked to complete an application form and a face-to-face interview should be conducted. During the interview, assess their understanding of working with children and look at attitudes as much as qualifications. Ask some safeguarding-focused questions (e.g. “What would you do if....?scenarios). Trust your professional judgment, but always back it up with evidence.

Essential checks: Before employing an assistant, you must ensure they are suitable to work with children.

This includes:

- DBS check (Disclosure and Barring Service)
- Identity verification
- References (ideally two, including most recent employer)
- Right to work in the UK

You will also need to inform your governing body (ie, Ofsted in England) about your assistant, as they must be approved as suitable to be around children in your setting.

Induction and Training: Safer recruitment doesn’t stop once someone is hired. It continues through the induction period.

Ensure your assistant:

- Understands your safeguarding policy and procedures
- Knows what to do if they have a concern
- Completes a paediatric first aid course
- Receives ongoing supervision and support

A structured induction helps them settle in safely and confidently.

Clear Policies and ongoing monitoring: You should have clear policies in place covering:

- Safeguarding
- Whistleblowing
- Staff behaviour

Regular supervision meetings are important to review performance, address any concerns early and maintain high standards of care. Remember, as a registered childminder, you are ultimately responsible for your assistant's practice.

Safer recruitment might feel formal for a small setting, but it is essential. Following these steps will not only protect the children but also protect you and your reputation.

Conclusion

Working with an assistant can be a rewarding step forward for many childminders, offering opportunities for growth and flexibility. However, it's not a decision to be taken lightly. Balancing the benefits with the added responsibility is key to making it a success. Every setting is different, and what works for one childminder may not suit another. By carefully considering your circumstances, planning and keeping children's well-being at the heart of every decision, you can determine whether bringing an assistant into your setting is the right next step for you.

About Childminding UK

Childminding UK has been supporting childminders for over 30 years. Formed in 1991 by and for local working childminders in Northamptonshire, we now support childminders across the country. A registered charity, we are the only national organisation that solely supports childminders, and we have recently achieved the Princess Royal Training Award for 'Ensuring high quality childcare through training and support'. All staff are experienced childcare professionals, and have been childminders themselves, and our trustees are working childminders or have knowledge of childminding, so we have a good understanding of the sector.

To find out more about Childminding UK or to get in touch - childmindinguk.com-