

The promise of CCTV in early childhood settings in England

Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood

2026, Vol. 0(0) 1–7

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DOI: 10.1177/14639491261495403

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Abstract

Recent cases of serious abuse and neglect in early childhood settings in England have intensified calls for mandatory closed-circuit television (CCTV). This colloquium examines the growing association between safeguarding and visibility, distinguishing CCTV's evidential value from the less established claim that continuous surveillance can prevent harm. Drawing on Berlant's concept of cruel optimism and Lyon's work on surveillance culture, I consider how CCTV becomes invested with the promise of the safe nursery. I argue that this risks narrowing attention towards individual deviance while obscuring the organisational, cultural and workforce conditions through which abuse may occur or continue. The paper concludes by considering the implications of mandating CCTV for trust, privacy and the normalisation of surveillance.

Keywords

CCTV, surveillance, early childhood, safeguarding, child protection

Introduction

Recent cases of serious abuse and neglect in early childhood settings in England have prompted renewed scrutiny of safeguarding and growing calls for the mandatory use of closed-circuit television (CCTV). In several high-profile cases, CCTV footage has played an important role in identifying abuse, establishing what happened to children and enabling action against those responsible. At the time of writing, an independent expert panel commissioned by the Department for Education has concluded its review of CCTV and digital devices in early years settings, including whether CCTV should become mandatory, with its findings awaiting publication (Department for Education, 2026 #6933).

This colloquium critically examines the case for mandatory CCTV, considering its value in revealing abuse, establishing evidence and prompting intervention, while questioning the further claim that continuous surveillance can itself prevent harm. Caregivers understandably want to

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know that children are safe, while practitioners and providers may value the reassurance that harmful conduct can be detected and allegations properly investigated. It is precisely because CCTV can do these things that its evidential value can become attached to a wider promise: that greater visibility will itself produce safer early childhood settings. As a former early years practitioner, I also approach this debate with a lived awareness of what safeguarding children feels like in practice. I share the same ethical commitments motivating calls for CCTV: that children should be safe in settings and failures to protect them demand serious scrutiny. From within that commitment, I question whether permanent surveillance offers the preventative response currently being promised. I locate this promise within a wider cultural attachment to surveillance and, drawing on Berlant's (2011) concept of 'cruel optimism', consider how CCTV might become invested with the promise of the safe nursery while remaining ultimately insufficient in terms of addressing the *conditions* through which abuse becomes possible or why concerns sometimes fail to prompt action. My concern is what happens when the understandable desire to keep children safe becomes increasingly attached to permanent visibility, and when surveillance begins to reorganise care around a bad-faith expectation of suspicion rather than trust.

CCTV and the English safeguarding context

Calls for mandatory CCTV have emerged within a profession already governed by statutory safeguarding requirements intended to prevent, identify and respond to harm (Department for Education, 2025b). Safeguarding itself is not a culturally neutral concept, however, and England has developed within a regulatory tradition that places particular emphasis on statutory responsibility, procedural accountability and organisational vigilance (Brocki, 2026). This is salient because any case for mandating CCTV must consider what it would *add* to the existing safeguarding architecture, and why that architecture has sometimes failed to prevent or interrupt harm. The death of nine-month-old Genevieve Meehan in 2022 was an important precursor to the current debate. CCTV footage captured the circumstances leading to her death and later formed a significant part of the evidence used to convict the nursery deputy manager of manslaughter (Greater Manchester Police, 2024). After the case, Genevieve's parents began campaigning for reforms to nursery safeguarding and, by May 2025, an Early Day Motion tabled in Parliament called for compulsory CCTV in early years settings, alongside routine review of footage during inspection (UK Parliament, 2025 #6923). Further cases have since strengthened these calls, and at the outset of 2026, an expert advisory panel was established to consider the use of CCTV and digital devices, including whether CCTV should become mandatory (UK Parliament, 2026). These cases create a compelling argument for CCTV's evidential value, with footage exposing concealed harm by adults and supporting subsequent investigation. Yet moving from these cases to a broader claim about prevention is more challenging. At present, they tell us much less about whether continuous surveillance reduces the likelihood of abuse or addresses the conditions that make it possible.

The promise and politics of visibility

The promise attached to CCTV begins with its capacity, in plain terms, to make visible what might otherwise remain hidden. This has considerable force, particularly where young children may have limited capacity to communicate what has happened to them. The desire for greater visibility should therefore be taken seriously as part of the desire to keep children safe. Yet Berlant's (2011) concept of 'cruel optimism' becomes useful at the point where this capacity acquires a more expansive promise. Cruel optimism describes an attachment to something that appears to offer a desired

form of flourishing while potentially obstructing the conditions necessary for its achievement. CCTV might, on these terms, become an object around which desires for the safe nursery are organised precisely because it can reveal conduct, provide evidence and offer reassurance. The difficulty arises when these capacities begin to carry the further expectation that surveillance itself can secure safety.

Such an attachment to visibility can also be situated within what Lyon (2018) describes as a broader ‘culture of surveillance’, in which practices of watching have become incorporated into the routines and expectations of social life and are increasingly initiated as well as accommodated and welcomed by those being surveilled. His concept of ‘surveillance imaginaries’ captures the shared understandings through which these practices come to appear reasonable, including the familiar proposition that ‘we need surveillance to keep us safe and secure’ (Lyon, 2018, p. 7). This has particular resonance for childhood, where technologies for monitoring children have become increasingly commonplace and can recast surveillance as a feature of ‘good’ parenting (Mavoa et al., 2023; Song et al., 2026). CCTV would sit alongside an expanding ecology of baby monitors, nursery apps, location trackers and other technologies through which care is increasingly mediated by watching, recording and data. Lyon’s (2018) concern is that familiarity with these practices can domesticate and naturalise surveillance. Introducing CCTV into early childhood provision would itself contribute to that wider culture, potentially shifting expectations of responsible care toward greater observability. As a result, privacy may become harder to defend, and professional trust between staff and caregivers – already comparatively low within the profession (Royal Foundation, 2020, p. 35) may become even more conditional, and provision without continuous monitoring could be more easily regarded as insufficiently safe. Put simply, the normalisation of surveillance can change what safety means.

Who becomes subject to this extension also matters, especially as 98% of paid staff in group- and school-based provision are women (Department for Education, 2025a), working within a low-paid sector marked by longstanding gendered and classed devaluation of caring labour (Bonetti, 2018). Continuous recording would intensify scrutiny of a workforce whose professional status and expertise have historically received limited recognition. The implications may be particularly complicated for the small minority of men, given research documenting suspicion around their motives for entering early childhood and anxieties surrounding allegations and intimate care (Wilkinson et al., 2023).

There is also a political attraction to the legibility CCTV offers. Abuse and its continuation raise difficult questions about institutional cultures, professional judgement, leadership, responses to emerging concerns and, more fundamentally, why adults abuse children. A focus on observable individual conduct may narrow attention towards the deviant practitioner, even though prevention requires consideration of the contextual and usually less visible conditions in which behaviour occurs and concerns are interpreted (Rayment-McHugh et al., 2024). Similarly, a camera provides something considerably easier for policy to specify, mandate and inspect, while its installation offers evidence that action has been taken. Fussey and Webster’s (2023) analysis is instructive here because they caution that simplification in surveillance governance can obscure the complexity of what is being governed and weaken attention to wider questions of rights and public interest. A similar political preference for readily communicable interventions can be seen in debates concerning children’s social media use, where broad age-based restrictions can displace attention from the particular design features through which harms are produced (House of Commons committee report, 2026). In the case of CCTV, once insufficient visibility is established as part of the diagnosis, greater surveillance becomes an intuitively available response. Yet making conduct more visible provides comparatively little explanation of the multifaceted conditions through which abuse occurs, continues or fails to prompt intervention.

Safeguarding in a surveillance culture

On the basis of the argument developed here, I make four recommendations for the current policy debate. First, the case for mandating CCTV requires a stronger evidence base. England is considering compulsory CCTV without a substantial domestic body of research examining its effects within early childhood provision. Evidence from South Korea, where CCTV has long been mandatory, identifies evidential benefits alongside effects on practitioner self-consciousness, stress and professional trust (Lee et al., 2023). Before England follows this route, research is needed to examine whether CCTV enables earlier interruption of harm, how it affects reporting and practitioner behaviour, and what consequences follow for children, practitioners, and relationships with families. The current policy debate is moving considerably faster than the English evidence base. Remarkably, the debate is taking place without a clear national estimate of the prevalence of practitioner abuse itself. England employed an estimated 353,700 paid early years staff in 2025, yet Ofsted's published data do not provide a corresponding count of substantiated allegations against practitioners, while allegation outcomes overseen through Local Authority Designated Officer arrangements are recorded primarily at local level. Research should also account for different forms of provision, as mandating across nurseries, childminders and nannies would raise substantially different questions of privacy, implementation and regulatory reach.

Second, greater attention should be paid to the workforce conditions through which safeguarding is enacted. The Early Years Foundation Stage (Department for Education, 2025b) establishes requirements for recruitment, supervision, whistleblowing and safeguarding training, although each ultimately depends on practitioners having the time, confidence and professional knowledge to recognise concerns and act on them. This directs attention towards questions that sit beyond the possession of safeguarding procedures: high staff turnover, reliance on bank or temporary staff, the size and organisation of staff teams, continuity of leadership and whether supervision provides meaningful opportunities to discuss emerging concerns. These are especially pertinent within a sector continuing to experience significant recruitment and retention pressures; turnover among staff in private group-based provision, for example, was 16% in 2025, compared with 7% across school-based provision (Department for Education, 2025a). The wider political economy of early year provision is a salient factor surrounding all of this, where much Private, Voluntary, and Independent provision operates within a highly marketised system increasingly characterised by consolidation, large for-profit chains and financialised forms of ownership (Farris et al., 2024; Roberts-Holmes and Moss, 2021). Workforce instability cannot therefore be understood entirely at the level of individual settings. Qualification levels also warrant consideration, given the professional judgement safeguarding demands and wider evidence associating higher-qualified workforces with better-quality provision (Department for Education, 2025 #6871). The Government's Giving every child the best start in life strategy already commits to a more stable and highly skilled workforce, including clearer career progression, increased access to qualifications and an ambition for every setting to have an early years teacher (Department for Education, 2025c). I would argue that these commitments should also be understood as part of the safeguarding infrastructure of early childhood provision, placing workforce stability, protected supervision and sustained professional development alongside any consideration of technological intervention.

Third, inspection should continue to scrutinise how safeguarding operates in practice. Ofsted's renewed framework already asks inspectors to consider safeguarding culture, practitioners' confidence in raising concerns, and responses to previous concerns and allegations (Ofsted, 2026). How effectively inspection can do this is also likely to depend upon the relationship between the regulator and the profession. Ofsted's *Big Listen* found trust among professionals to be notably divided,

with 41% reporting that they trusted Ofsted and 43% that they did not, while almost half indicated that they would be uncomfortable raising a concern during an inspection (Ofsted, 2024 #6934). This is consequential for safeguarding: an inspection system seeking to understand whether practitioners can speak openly and challenge concerning behaviour may itself be limited where relationships with the regulator are characterised by anxiety or distrust. Particular attention might therefore be given to how low-level concerns accumulate over time, whether practitioners feel able to challenge colleagues and leaders, and how earlier concerns were interpreted before clear evidence of harm emerged.

Finally, where CCTV is used, its purpose and limits should be made explicit. Providers should be able to identify the safeguarding problem cameras are intended to address and demonstrate why their use is proportionate, while establishing clear limits against expansion into routine performance management or unrestricted parental observation (Koops, 2021). These considerations should include children's privacy and dignity, particularly in relation to intimate care and spaces where some retreat from adult observation would ordinarily be expected. Given surveillance technologies' capacity to be used beyond their intended purpose, cameras should never become a proxy for safeguarding quality. A nursery may be highly visible while still failing to recognise, interpret or act upon concerning behaviour before harm becomes incontrovertible.

The ethics of being watched

CCTV can make harm visible and, in some circumstances, that visibility can protect children. My concern has been with the wider promise attached to surveillance once visibility itself begins to stand in for safety. A more fundamental ethical question also arises. A culture organised increasingly around surveillance risks beginning from suspicion: that people cannot quite be trusted unless their conduct remains available for observation and verification. In early childhood, where care necessarily involves relationships, professional judgement, intimacy and trust, this is not an inconsequential shift. I am therefore concerned with the kind of early childhood culture that mandatory CCTV might help to normalise. Children should be protected from harm, and practitioners should be accountable for their conduct, but neither principle requires us to accept permanent visibility as an ordinary condition of care.

I find something troubling about responding to the possibility of the worst in human behaviour by designing institutions around that expectation. The policy question extends, then, beyond whether CCTV can contribute to safeguarding. It concerns what kinds of relationships we want early childhood settings to be built upon, and whether a society increasingly organised through suspicion and surveillance is one we should be willing to reproduce for children.

Acknowledgements

None.

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Ethical approval

Ethical approval was not required for this article because it is a conceptual and policy-focused colloquium based on published literature and publicly available policy and regulatory materials and did not involve human participants.

Informed consent

Informed consent was not applicable because the article did not involve human participants.

Funding

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Data availability statement

No new datasets were generated or analysed in the preparation of this article. All materials discussed are publicly available through the sources cited in the manuscript.

Generative AI statement

During the preparation of this article, the author used OpenAI's ChatGPT to support exploratory literature searching, identification and verification of relevant sources, and iterative development and editing of the manuscript. The author reviewed and revised all AI-supported material, consulted the original sources cited, and retained responsibility for the conceptual argument, interpretation and final manuscript.

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