



Save Childhood
Movement

Manifesto for the Early Years

Putting children first



Introduction

There can be no keener revelation of a society's soul than the way in which it treats its children.

Nelson Mandela

As countries transition towards knowledge-based economies, policymakers need to consider what can be done to develop their stock of human capital. Encouragingly, this highlights the growing global recognition of the importance of the whole of a child's development, rather than just from the start of primary school.

Those countries that do this best will position themselves well for success in the decades ahead. Put another way, as countries increasingly compete on the basis of their talent and human capital, they need to invest in all their people as early in life as possible.

Starting Well, Economist Intelligence Unit, 2012

This period of life sets the foundation for everything that is to come. It is when we learn whether the world is an exciting or a fearful place, it is when we establish vital relationships, take tentative first steps into the larger environment and continue the extraordinary biological processes that facilitate human development. Even before we are born we are dynamic learners, literally absorbing our experiences as we grow. We come into the world full of potential, each one of us uniquely different, and the experiences that we then have will further the amazing diversity that is human society. Depending on the families and cultures that we are born into we may develop very different ways of looking at the world, but beneath it all we have the same fundamental physical, emotional, mental and spiritual needs.

A 1999 review of the scientific evidence on consciousness concluded that 95% of our actions are unconsciously determined¹ with the neurological patterns laid down in early childhood substantially influencing our unconscious. It seems that we have 'sophisticated, flexible, and adaptive unconscious behaviour guidance systems'², with young children effectively tuning-into and absorbing local environmental conditions. We therefore develop both conscious and unconscious motivations that drive our individual responses and behavior. The process of learning is a social, dynamic and interactive one, but is highly context-led with every child having to adapt to his or her unique life circumstance. It is vitally important, therefore, that we recognize this wide diversity of experience and can respond to the needs of every child as an individual. As Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett write in their book, *The Spirit Level*, "Growing up in a society where you must be prepared to treat others with suspicion, watch your back and fight for what you can get, requires very different skills from those needed in a society where you depend on empathy, reciprocity and co-operation".³

Young children today are subject to a range of cultural pressures that were simply unknown to previous generations. Family life has significantly changed, they live in a rapidly advancing digital world, they are much less trusted and more controlled, they have fewer freedoms and significantly less access to nature, they are highly vulnerable to the dangers of commercialization and sexualisation and the quality and depth of their learning in the early years has moved from being intrinsically connected to family and community to become increasingly seen as primarily a preparation for later schooling. Child wellbeing in the UK has been the subject of increasing concern. Currently one in ten children is being diagnosed with a mental health disorder,⁴ one in three is clinically obese,⁵ one in 12 of our adolescents deliberately harm themselves and nearly 80,000 children and young people currently suffer from severe depression including 8,000 children aged under 10 years of age.⁶ This is a deeply worrying situation that needs to be tackled head on.

In recent years there have been great advances in the developmental sciences and, in particular, in our understanding of early brain neurology. This has revealed the enormous importance of neurodevelopmental maturity, or 'developmental readiness' for early learning and the great dangers that lie in exposing children to developmentally inap-

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appropriate pressures before their brain architecture has been fully established.^{7,8,9} We now know that you may be able to push children to achieve tasks before they are developmentally ready, but that it is likely to be at the expense of their wellbeing and subsequent disposition to want to continue. In other words you put them off continuing with the very thing that you want them to do.¹⁰ There is, as far as we know, no evidence to support the claim that an early start to formal learning impacts positively on long-term outcomes. In fact the opposite is the case.

A growing body of research recognises that Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) brings a wide range of benefits that include: better child wellbeing and learning outcomes as a foundation for lifelong learning; more equitable child outcomes and reduction of poverty; increased intergenerational social mobility; more female labour market participation; increased fertility rates; and better social and economic development for the society at large. But, as pointed out by the OECD all these benefits are conditional on “quality”.¹¹

“Expanding access to services without attention to quality will not deliver good outcomes for children or the long-term productivity benefits for society. Furthermore, research has shown that if quality is low, it can have long-lasting detrimental effects on child development, instead of bringing positive effects.” OECD, 2012

We are currently very concerned that universal childcare provision is being pushed through in England without due attention to the vital quality of care that includes developmentally appropriate environments, greatly improved parental support and engagement and the training and empowerment of a skilled workforce. One of the key aims of any ECEC system is to allow every child to flourish and to achieve his or her full potential and we believe that there is a real danger that without the necessary quality controls English children will be greatly disadvantaged. The current government and its predecessors have committed themselves to promoting equity in the education system, but the most disadvantaged children continue to be at the risk of impoverished educational experiences and this could be exacerbated by poor provision that fails to sufficiently acknowledge the vital importance of family and community life or to identify and support the values that we wish to see in larger society.

We share the growing concern about the current erosion of children’s centres, many of which provide highly valued services to their local communities, and support 4England’s call for the creation of Children and Family Centre Hubs in every community.¹² We also support the conclusions of the 2013 Parliamentary Education Committee’s report on Sure Start Centres that called for:

- clearer purpose
- fully integrated provision
- ring-fenced funding
- better defined policies and practices with full community involvement
- improved leadership
- more appropriate child and family-centred accountability measures.¹³

Measures of health and social problems in other countries have revealed that it is not poor material conditions that necessarily imply that richer countries do better than others, but the scale of material differences between their citizens. In other words it is how we compare ourselves to others. Child wellbeing is strongly related to inequality and the sense of inequality begins in early childhood. The single most effective investment that governments can make is to ensure that all children are given the same early support, but this does not mean a ‘one-size-fits all’ system, but, instead, one that is highly responsive to the diverse needs of individual children, families and communities. Countries that do well on indices of child wellbeing have invariably invested heavily in the importance of family life and early relationships and we know that social inequalities in early childhood are entrenched long before the start of formal education.

“ There is striking evidence that performance and behavior in an educational task can be profoundly affected by the way we feel we are seen and judged by others. When we expect to be viewed as inferior, our abilities seem to be diminished.” Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, *The Spirit Level*

We know that high quality early childhood programs help close the achievement gap, reduce social costs and increase later adult productivity. Investing in these programs, especially for disadvantaged children, is fiscally responsible because they pay for themselves not only in improving wellbeing, but also in improved individual and economic performance. The government funded EPPE programme itself revealed the enormous value of such high quality early years provision.¹⁴

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There has been a commendable recognition of this fact by all parties with the result that in recent years we have for the first time seen a framework introduced for children up until the age of five. This has, however, unfortunately resulted in a substantial accompanying system of accountability and those on the ground have seen increasing warning signs that children are being negatively impacted by the top-down pressures of the larger system and by a lack of understanding about the vital importance of physical and neurological readiness. Summerborn children and those suffering from early disadvantage are those most at risk from this situation with widespread concern about the possible misdiagnosis of special needs.^{15,16,17}

It is not the school starting age that really matters therefore, as school environments can, if necessary, be suitably adapted and staffed to serve the needs of young children. What we need to ensure is that our youngest children can engage playfully in sensitively structured, creative and responsive environments, in the company of well-trained, professional and loving adults who invest in a link with the whole family. This then gives them the opportunity to develop all their physical, mental, emotional and social capacities and, most importantly, enables the healthy neurological development of their brain architecture that can then support higher-level learning. Nearly 9 in 10 of the world's nations currently have a school starting age of 6 or 7 – and hardly any countries have England's effective starting age of 4. We believe that English children are significantly disadvantaged by such an early start.

“There is no evidence that a child who spends more time learning through lessons – as opposed to learning through play – will ‘do better’ in the long run. In fact, research suggests the opposite; that too formal too soon can be dangerously counterproductive. In 14 of the 15 countries that scored higher than England in a major study of reading and literacy in 2006, children did not enter school until they were six or seven. And more children read for pleasure in most of those countries than do so in England”

Professor Robin Alexander, *Cambridge Primary Review*

We need to also explore the current relationship between childcare and education and to ensure that we prioritise loving and caring relationships within consistent environments as essential to serving the best interests of the child. The Early Years is the single most important period of life in its own right with children acting as theory-builders and meaning-makers from birth. It is important, therefore, that we see children as powerful and competent researchers and investigators of the environment and that we do not diminish their capabilities by viewing such a dynamic learning period as simply a preparation for later schooling.

As stated in Article 3 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child “In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration”. We believe children in England have natural developmental rights that need to be protected and that we need to look more urgently at the kind of values that we wish to see reflected through our care and education services.



Wendy Ellyatt
Chief Executive, Save Childhood Movement

Manifesto for the Early Years

We believe that all Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) systems should be based upon the three core elements:

- 1 an integrated, holistic and appropriately financed system built upon
- 2 an evidence-based understanding of the child as
- 3 a citizen with developmental rights and freedoms

and that they should:

- 1 respect and support the rights and freedoms of children to be provided with environments that allow them to develop all their natural dispositions and capacities to the fullest potential. This must include regular and open access to the natural world
- 2 re-instate the importance of early relationships and better support the health and wellbeing of parents and families
- 3 address inequalities and ensure that every child can develop to his or her full potential
- 4 ensure that the values we are modelling for children are those that we want to see in a 21st century world
- 5 ensure that developmentally appropriate play-based care and education governs children's experiences until at least age 6
- 6 ensure that we have a cohesive and integrated ECEC system that is evidence-led and that has the best interests of the child at its heart. This should not be a 'one-size-fits-all' solution but should be responsive to the diversity of parental and local community needs
- 7 reverse the existing funding curve so that we prioritise the vital importance of the early years
- 8 underpin all ECEC services and provision with the latest scientific evidence and global examples of best practice
- 9 review, consolidate and evaluate all policies and evidence through a new National Council on the Science of Human Learning and Development
- 10 provide formative assessment and screening of children's development from birth and ensure that we are measuring what matters for children's long-term health and wellbeing
- 11 ensure that the adults working with young children are highly trained, emotionally mature and appropriately valued and remunerated.

**All components matter
and should be treated as one system.**

‘One Seamless experience’

‘Early Childhood Education and Care’ (ECEC) is the terminology used at European level to describe services that broadly combine education and care in one seamless experience for young children and their families. It was the subject of a European Commission Communication published in February 2011, which offered an important policy framework for all EU countries.¹⁸

This period of life has the single greatest impact on whom we grow to become as adults and, as such, demands knowledge, understanding and excellence from those in governance. Although children born today will need to develop profoundly different skillsets from those of their parents and grandparents, they all start life with the same natural characteristics of childhood. ECEC systems should therefore be responsive to the needs of the future, but, most importantly, they should acknowledge the natural developmental rights, freedoms and potentials of the child.

The following ten structural components to an integrated care and education system should be understood as a broad, holistic concept concerned with all aspects of child wellbeing and development. They include:

- understanding the child
- family life, parenting and adult wellbeing
- equality of opportunity

- cultural values
- the vital role of play
- infrastructure and funding
- the science of early learning and development
- planning and policy
- outcomes and assessment
- human resources.

We believe that all future policies should be evaluated with this in mind and that we urgently need new measures of wellbeing that will allow us to ensure a more balanced and evidenced-based approach to policymaking.



1 Understanding the Child

Nurturing Relationships

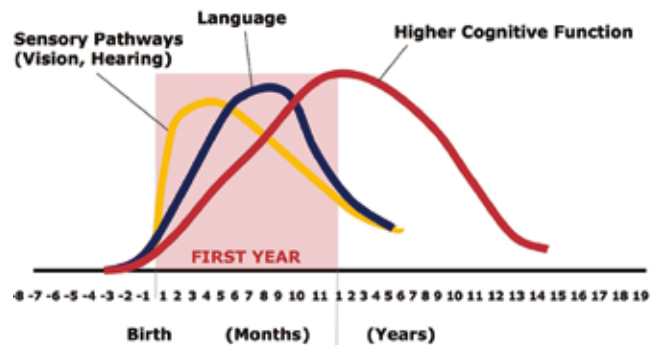
Newborn and young human beings are particularly vulnerable to their environment. They remain reliant on others for an extraordinarily long period of time, and effectively absorb into themselves the impressions and experiences that they receive. They are, therefore, literally shaped by the worlds within which they live, with each child developing a unique neurology and personality.

Positive, nurturing and creative relationships are essential for healthy child development. Children need the company of knowledgeable, mature and emotionally balanced adults who fully understand their developmental needs. Children with poor initial home relationships gain the most from caring, high-quality relationships in preschool environments. Nothing, however, is more important for child wellbeing than the first loving home relationships. We believe a much greater effort should be made to support parents in caring for their children in ways that they feel best suit their child and their family life choices. Governments should promote, and accord priority to, effective policies and actions that result in positive/secure attachment between very young children and their parents and primary carers.

The basic architecture of the brain is constructed through a process that begins early in life and continues into adulthood. The first two years of life see the greatest growth of synapse development in the brain, but over the next critical years of childhood, this is followed by a period of neurological and psychological consolidation that will determine subsequent learning dispositions and behaviour.¹⁹

The first 1001 days of development is therefore recognized as a period of unique importance for healthy neurological development. Those working with and advising mothers, fathers and carers during this period of a child's life need to be highly trained with their involvement focused on the development of effective, positive and child-centred support and relationships.

Human Brain Development
Synapse Formation Dependent on Early Experiences
(700 per second in the early years)



Data source: C. Nelson (2000); Graph courtesy of the Center of the Developing Child at Harvard University

From the age of 2 to 7 certain characteristics can be seen in young children around the world and these include: a need for security and relationship, curiosity, risk-taking, playfulness, humour, creativity, an affinity with the natural world and a love of learning. Whether or not they are met then shapes their subsequent extrinsic values, dispositions and mindsets. It is immensely important, therefore that all ECEC services and supports, supplemented and extended as needed, are based upon rigorous global and scientific evidence and are designed and delivered in ways that result in the healthy physical, emotional, social and intellectual development of all children in this period.

Nature and Nurture

We now know that children have unique genetic predispositions that will influence their particular capacities and interests, but that the environments that they are born into also significantly shape the development of their personalities. Although genes play a part, of by far the most importance is how children get to see and understand the world, especially in the early years of life. According to the Cambridge psychologist Felicity Huppert this early nurturing can account for as much as 50% of our overall sense of wellbeing.²⁰ The other 40% is what she calls the "intentional activities". In other words the choices that we can all make about how we think, feel or behave.

Dispositions

Dispositions are intrinsic qualities or habits of mind that then influence our behavior. Children are born with an innate disposition to learn from the environment and will seek out those experiences that best enable them to do so. They also have an innate desire to interact with the world and to make sense of their experiences through personal 'meaning-making'. Dispositions cannot be learned from instruction, but they can be damaged by premature didactic teaching or by developmentally disruptive reward systems.²¹

Cognitive functions

Through their life experiences, children develop different ways of perceiving and judging the world. In modern cognitive psychology these ways are commonly defined as "thinking", "feeling", "sensing" and "intuition".²² Over the first seven years of life these functions then form a hierarchy within the child's personality with the most important referred to as the "dominant" function. Depending on their early experiences, therefore, children develop different personality types and behaviour and favour different ways of processing and responding to information. By the age of seven we are definitely not all the same.

Meta-cognition and Self-Regulation

It is now recognised that metacognitive and self-regulatory abilities are of fundamental significance for children's general and academic development, and also, that these abilities are highly teachable. The question of when these skills emerge and how they develop is, however, still open to debate. The evidence currently suggests that these abilities begin their development right from infancy and through the preschool years. Recent research has shown that the sensitivity and responsiveness of parental interactions with infants may play a significant role in facilitating the organisation of the infant's psychological system necessary for achieving self-regulation with a number of similar studies emphasizing the mediational effect of certain features of parental interactions during infancy.²³

It is clear that we need more observational studies of children in naturalistic contexts, or undertaking playful tasks that are developmentally appropriate. It is also clear that many of the tasks developed to investigate

executive functioning and self-regulation experimentally are remote from young children's everyday experience and likely to provide results which under-estimate young children's real abilities. There are clear and fundamental implications of the kind of research reviewed here for education. Metacognitive and self-regulatory abilities, underpinned by efficient executive functioning, have a major impact on children's general and academic development. It is also evident that adult intervention and social mediation can have significant influence of this development, and that there are marked individual differences in the skill and sensitivity with which adults are able to fill this role.²⁴ The Cambridge developmental psychologist Dr David Whitebread has written extensively concerning pedagogical principles to support and nurture self-regulation in children in the first few years of schooling²⁵ and we are keen to further develop research which can inform the efforts of carers and early years practitioners and teachers to most effectively mediate the learning of young children and help them develop into independent, metacognitively skilled and self-regulating learners.

Mindsets

According to the Canadian psychologist Carol Dweck, young children also quickly develop a fixed set of beliefs or 'mindsets' about themselves (e.g I am stupid, I am a failure etc) that is then very difficult to undo. Depending on whether they develop a 'fixed' or 'growth' mindset they will react to the world in very different ways.²⁶ The former produces 'helpless' responses to challenge in the environment whereas the latter is more likely to result in 'mastery' responses. It is essential, therefore, that adults working with young children do what they can to promote the development of positive mindsets and are aware of the messages (both verbal and non-verbal) that they are conveying to children.

Intelligences

As they grow children manifest different interests and abilities through what is now understood as a range of developing intelligences with each individual possessing a unique blend.²⁷ In order to maximise the development possibilities it is important that we value all intelligences equally and do not over-emphasize some to the detriment of others. According to Harvard psychologist Howard Gardner these may include:

Linguistic and verbal intelligence
people scoring high in this category
may be good with words

Logical intelligence
people scoring high in this category
may be good with math and logic

Spatial intelligence
this type of intelligence is helpful
for navigating and “finding your way”

Body/movement intelligence
people scoring high are coordinated
and good with activities

Musical intelligence
this type of intelligence indicates
people who are good with rhythm

Interpersonal intelligence
high scorers in this category are good
with communication

Intrapersonal intelligence
these high scorers are good with
contemplating and analysing things

Naturalist intelligence
people who score high in this area
are especially adept at relating to
the natural world

Existential intelligence
common to all children is a sense
of ‘spiritual’ connection to the wider world

Moral intelligence
a sense of intrinsic values
that guide social behaviour

The development of knowledge and understanding

Every culture decides what knowledge it considers important and worthwhile for its children to know. For young children knowledge is acquired most effectively through learning environments that support their innate curiosity and desire to make sense of, and build on, their experiences. It is important to ensure a focus on areas of knowledge and understanding that not only serve the wider culture, but have real meaning and purpose for the child.

Skills

Skills are those actions that are improved with practice and develop over time. These include verbal and mathematical skills, social skills and fine and gross motor skills. To be effective for young children they need to be acquired in a meaningful context. We now know that the developmental window for developing neuro-motor, mathematics and language skills is in the first three and a half years of life and children with immature motor skills do not perform as well on educational measures at eight years of age. Neuro-motor skills are developed in the context of free physical space, while mathematical and language skills develop through social engagement, free play and imagination.

Connection to the Natural World

Young children have an holistic ecological receptiveness which manifests as a deep love of the natural world. They have a natural capacity for wonder and awe and an innate desire to search for meaning and purpose. This deep connection manifests in young children as joy, playfulness, concentration and flow and is essential for their wellbeing. Early Years policies need to acknowledge the importance of this ‘spiritual’ aspect of childhood that allows children to connect to this deeper and more connected aspect of themselves prior to the development of the personality.

Children also need the time and space to develop all their senses and physical capacities. Obesity in England is currently reaching alarming proportions with a January 2014 Report from the *Obesity Forum* stating that the

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previous estimate that half the UK population will be obese by 2050 was underestimating the problem.²⁸ Professor Kevin Fenton, director of health and wellbeing at *Public Health England* (PHE), said obesity was a problem that required action at national, local, family and individual level. “Everyone has a role to play in improving the health and wellbeing of the public, and children in particular.”²⁹

The World Health Organization (WHO) regards childhood obesity as one of the most serious global public health challenges for the 21st century. Obese children and adolescents are at an increased risk of developing various health problems, and are also more likely to become obese adults.³⁰

The National Child Measurement Programme (NCMP) measures the height and weight of around one million school children in England every year, providing a detailed picture of the prevalence of child obesity. The latest figures, for 2012/13, show that 18.9% of children in Year 6 (aged 10-11) were obese and a further 14.4% were overweight. Of children in Reception (aged 4-5), 9.3% were obese and another 13.0% were overweight. This means almost a third of 10-11 year olds and over a fifth of 4-5 year olds were overweight or obese.³¹ Data are also available from the Health Survey for England (HSE), which includes a smaller sample of children

“ The need of quiet, the need of air,
the need of exercise...the sight of sky and
of things growing,... seem human needs
common to all”

Octavia Hill, co-founder of *The National Trust*

than the NCMP but covers a wider age range. Results from 2012 show that around 28% of children aged 2 to 15 were classed as either overweight or obese.³²

According to the Department of Health problems associated with being overweight or obese cost the NHS more than £5 billion every year.³³ We know that a lack of appropriate nutrition and exercise in early childhood is a significant predictor. We also know that it is the choices and restrictions placed upon children by the adults in their worlds that create the necessary conditions for this to be initiated. There is a significant amount of evidence to show that regular access to nature not only helps children maintain their physical fitness, but that it also helps to promote positive social and emotional development. According to the Children and Nature Network these positive states then result in improved academic attainment.³⁴



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‘Although human beings have been urbanizing, and then moving indoors, since the invention of agriculture, social and technological changes in the past three decades have accelerated that change. Among the reasons: the proliferation of electronic communications; poor urban planning and disappearing open space; increased street traffic; diminished importance of the natural world in public and private education; and parental fear magnified by news and entertainment media.

An expanding body of scientific evidence suggests that nature-deficit disorder contributes to a diminished use of the senses, attention difficulties, conditions of obesity and overweight, and higher rates of emotional and physical illnesses. Research also suggests that the nature deficit weakens ecological literacy and stewardship of the natural world. These problems are linked more broadly to what health care experts call the “epidemic of inactivity,” as well as to a devaluing of independent play.

Recent studies focus not so much on what is lost when nature experience fades, but on what is gained through more exposure to natural settings, including nearby nature in urban places.’

Child and Nature Network, 2013

We need to respect and support the rights and freedoms of children to be provided with environments that allow them to develop all their natural dispositions and capacities to the fullest potential.



2 Family Life, Parenting and Adult Wellbeing

We know that positive and nurturing early family relationships have the greatest impact on the long-term wellbeing of children and we therefore need to ensure that all ECEC policies are assessed for their potential impact on family time and the quality of family relationships. Over the past few years policymaking in England has increasingly focused on the relationship between the state and children and there is mounting concern that this is bypassing the vital importance of parents and family life.

Universal childcare in many other countries is underpinned by family-friendly policies and cultures with tax systems that factor in care responsibilities at home. Families also often have extended family living closeby. Over the last few decades family life has become increasingly fragmented in the UK, with a record number of children – over three million – living in poverty and growing up in lone-parent households.^{35,36} Children with separated, single or step-parents are 50% more likely to fail at school, have low self-esteem, struggle to make friends and with their behaviour.³⁷ We believe that, rather than patch the problems with state childcare, there is an urgent need for us to better understand the stresses and strains of family life in the UK, to support the development of positive adult relationships and to encourage parents to create and maintain stable family environments.

“among parents who have not used any childcare in the past year, the main reason given was not the cost of childcare (13%) but that they would rather look after their children themselves (71%)”

DfE Children and Early Years Survey, Jan 2014

Family Life

Surveys repeatedly reveal that what parents want more than anything is more family time together. The ‘Britain Thinks’ report, commissioned in 2011 by the Labour Party, showed that families in the UK are “tired, stressed

and under pressure”. They would like to spend more quality time with their children with 80% saying that in an ideal world one parent would be able to choose to stay at home with the children.³⁸ Around a third of mothers manage to be at home full time and mothers of younger children would prefer longer at home. Indeed as many as 75% of new mothers surveyed by U Switch in 2012 said they would like to stay at home if only finances permitted.³⁹ So although many mothers welcome support with childcare and early learning, many others (often the same mothers as might use childcare later) would value opportunities to provide care themselves when their children are young and for the financial implications to be recognised in taxation.

The cost of family time

When it comes to the cost of family life, the UK has consistently failed to factor in care responsibilities within the taxation system. According to a CARE Research Paper the unfavourable position of one-earner (single-wage) families compared with the OECD average “is caused mainly by the fact that income tax does not take account of marriage or family responsibilities”.⁴⁰ They calculated that the tax burden on one-earner couples with two children (‘one-earner’ because one parent is at home investing time in caring for children) was 42% greater than the 2011 OECD average.

Unfair family taxation, low wages, high cost of living and unaffordable housing means that both parents are increasingly under financial pressure to return to paid employment. This is all too often not about children’s developmental needs or parental preferences, but, instead, about financial necessity. Parents often swap shifts and/or work long hours to make ends meet so family time is precious and there is little time for nurturing relationships. A 2011 report from UNICEF and Ipsos MORI, that compared UK children with those in Sweden and Spain, showed that UK children were “trapped in a materialistic culture”.⁴¹ Anita Tiessen, deputy director of UNICEF UK, said that much of the problem was “the long working hours of British families. Parents have a much greater pressure in fulfilling the commitment to their children. They try to make up for this by buying their children branded clothes, trainers and technology.”



By comparison, this consumer culture did not exist in Sweden or Spain. In Scandinavia, childcare duties were more equally shared and family time was prioritised. In Spain, where women tend to stay at home there was a great reliance on the extended family with grandparents and uncles and aunts helping out with children. “Consumer culture in the UK contrasts starkly with Sweden and Spain, where family time is prioritised, children and families are under less pressure to own material goods and children have greater access to activities out of the home”.

Yet successive UK governments have encouraged more parents to work when children are very young and families to access pre and after school childcare instead of strengthening existing family care systems.

Parenting and Extended Family

Parents are children’s first carers and educators and the main influence in their lives. Children thrive on consistent, loving, sensitive care and a warm supportive home life, which is hard for other agencies to replicate. They also thrive on the unique relationships and unconditional love and attention that parents and other close relations can give. No matter how experienced and dedicated other practitioners are, it is hard for them to duplicate the depth, nature and importance of these essential first relationships and those that so need to be of the highest quality. According to ‘Britain Thinks’ parents see grandparents as ‘the next best thing’ to caring for their children themselves, so family bonds really matter and extended family is invaluable in supporting parents.

In recent years many schemes have been developed to support parents on their parenting journeys. These have included parenting workshops, courses and education groups and the wide range of services provided by children’s centres. At the same time, however, many vital services have suffered cuts, including the health visiting service for new mothers, and a wide range of community facilities are constantly under threat. Much of the support on offer is currently focused on registered childcare provision but this, although of immense value to parents that need it, has increasingly undermined the fact that a loving home environment with learning opportunities

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and warm nurturing relationships is of primary importance and immeasurable value, particularly for children from birth to three.

We believe that this is highly detrimental and that we need to reinstate the importance of loving attachments and relationships for the child in the earliest months and years from conception onwards. We also believe that parents need to be better valued for the work they do in raising the next generation, and that secondary schools need to include child development and parenting classes within their curriculum.

Adult wellbeing

We know that adult wellbeing is a major factor for child wellbeing. Children need to be in the company of affectionate adults who are positive role models and emotionally stable. This is particularly so as children are highly sensitive to both the spoken and unspoken messages that adults convey.

ECEC policies therefore need to take into consideration:

- Parental physical, mental and emotional health.
- The time, space and biological need for mothers to be able to mother.
- Taxation and child allowances systems that ensure that parenting is fully supported.
- Improved investment in health visiting services for mothers.
- Better cross-departmental partnership working between health, education and housing services.
- Employment policies that cater for employees' care responsibilities whether for the young, the elderly or dependents with special needs or suffering ill health.
- More cross-departmental dialogue between children and adult support services.

We need to reinstate the importance of early relationships and better support the health and wellbeing of parents and families.

In Summary

A family and child-focused culture therefore needs to reflect the following aspects:

- It should be **adaptable** to each unique child's needs, disposition and personality and should prioritise the love that all infants need for optimum development and to meet their attachment needs.
- It respects the vital importance of **family life** and parental preferences, recognising that circumstances in families constantly shift over the course of the family life cycle and that parents and families therefore need responsive and adaptive levels of support.
- It recognises that a parent's influence, wellbeing, personal circumstances and resources are key to **childhood wellbeing**. Mothers and fathers are children's first and most significant carers and educators. They continue to provide by far the most influential relationship in a young child's life and, as such, this must continue to take precedence in policy over other relationships unless the family situation is clearly detrimental to the child's development and wellbeing.
- It acknowledges that the professionalization of childcare can disempower parents and should seek to balance **quality** provision with better parental support and education
- It embraces the **diversity** and complexity of family structures and community life in the UK and recognises the importance of the child's need for identity and sense of belonging.
- It works in **partnership** with parents as the child's first educators and provides, when and if needed, additional care and enriching learning opportunities outside the home.
- It **supports and enhances** the home-learning environment, in full and equal partnership with parents, and acknowledges the value and importance of informal family care, particularly that provided by grandparents and other family members.
- It seeks to ensure that parents can make **informed choices** about the nature and quality of early years provision that is offered to them and that they are supported and empowered to always act in best interests of their child.

3 Equality of Opportunity

There is a large body of literature showing that early years development and later life outcomes are strongly related to family characteristics such as parental SES and education, and to parental behaviour. The quality of the home learning environment and parental aspirations are found to be particularly important for children's development. In fact, one study finds that good quality HLE has the strongest impact on children's development and may counteract some of the negative effects of social deprivation (Sylva *et al*, 2007)

Equality and Human Rights Commission, Report 7

One of the core issues that we face in the UK is inequality of opportunity and we know that combatting early disadvantage is both a fundamental moral responsibility and a critical investment for our nation's social and economic future. The early years set the foundation for all that is to come: understanding what underpins the wellbeing of the nation's children is of pre-eminent importance if we want to cultivate a healthy and prosperous society.

Child poverty and social deprivation are key indicators for poor life outcomes and tackling these is essential for improving equality of lifetime opportunities and outcomes. But we also know that a loving home environment and parental aspirations are also critical for children's early development and educational attainment. Good-quality childcare is particularly beneficial for children from poor socio-economic background, but these children are less likely to have access to it.

Early Intervention

Every baby, child and young person develops as a unique individual, but children whose environments have in some way been compromised need extra help along the way. Early Intervention is about getting additional, timely and effective support to parents and children who need it - thus preventing costly, harmful, long-term consequences. It is important, however, that the child is seen in the context of the family unit and that adequate attention is paid to addressing the social and cultural pressures that may be creating such adverse environmental

situations. In recent years both the Frank Field⁴² and Graham Allen⁴³ reviews have examined the issue, and the Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) was established in 2013 to provide a more concerted focus.

According to estimates up to 1 million children in the UK are currently trapped in cycles of disadvantage and this has been exacerbated by constantly changing political and funding structures. The 2008 Action for Children *As Long as it Takes Report* found that during the lifetime of a 21-year-old there had been over 400 different policies and funding initiatives.⁴⁴ This meant that on average there were around 20 new initiatives every year, each only lasting a little over two years. Local authorities' power is consistently undermined by national political timescales and short-term funding arrangements and we agree that we need local authorities to be able to spend their money better by planning for the long term, so that ultimately they can shift their resources to focus on supporting children and families at the earliest possible stage.

Sure Start Centres

Sure Start Children's Centres were designed to provide an effective solution. They were popular with their local communities, well-embedded and aimed to bring crucial support to the most disadvantaged families. We are concerned at the number of centres that have faced closure and agree with the charity *4Children's* recent call for Children and Family Centres and Hubs to be a vital

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part of any provision.⁴⁵ Both *4Children* and Save the Children are concerned that this remains the case:

‘Save the Children supports the core purpose of Sure Start – **“to improve outcomes for young children and their families, with a particular focus on the most disadvantaged, so children are equipped for life and ready for school, no matter what their background or family circumstances”** However, we strongly urge that access to Sure Start remains universal.

4Children argues that there are a number of risks if Sure Start Children’s Centres are restricted to low-income families:

- Stigmatising those families who use Children’s Centres
- Vulnerable families who are living in poverty, but not in official ‘areas of deprivation’, falling through the net
- Preventing parents from accessing help for problems that are not related to income, such as breast-feeding and post-natal depression
- Denying children and families the social mobility benefits of interacting with children from a diverse range of social backgrounds
- Whilst we support a universal approach, we believe that Sure Start should remain a core service provider for low income families, providing high-quality services and care for children and families who are most in need.’

We agree with the 2013 Policy Exchange Report⁴⁷ that there needs to be greater transparency on exactly what each centre does, how much it spends, and what the outcomes are. We feel, however, that there needs to be a much more balanced view of desirable outcomes to ensure that the physical, emotional and social wellbeing of the children, parents and their larger communities are taken fully into account.

We would be in a very different place now if, over the past 21 years, there had been some cross-party agreement about what vulnerable children, young people and their families needed

Action for Childhood, 2008



‘The true measure of a nation’s standing is how well it attends to its children – their health and safety, their material security, their education and socialization, and their sense of being loved, valued, and included in the families and societies into which they are born.’

UNICEF, 2007

The 2010 Marmot Review recommended the following actions for children under five to improve life chances and we fully support its suggestions:⁴⁸

<p>Give every child the best start in life</p>	<p>Increase investment in early years development Holistic support for families from before birth Priority for maternal health interventions Increase paid parental leave in the first year Evidence-based parenting support programmes, children’s centres, advice, assistance Provision of good quality early years education and childcare Improve quality of early years workforce Support the transition to school</p>
<p>Enable all children, young people and adults to maximise their capabilities and have control over their lives</p>	<p>Schools develop a ‘whole child’ approach with extended school services</p>
<p>Create fair employment and good work for all</p>	<p>Better jobs suitable for lone parents, carers, people with mental/physical health problems</p>
<p>Ensure healthy standard of living for all</p>	<p>Minimum income for healthy living Review systems to remove ‘cliff’edges to facilitate flexible employment</p>
<p>Create and develop health and sustainable places and communities</p>	<p>Mitigate effects of climate change Improve active travel Improve access and quality of green and open spaces Improve the food environment Reduce fuel poverty Integrate local delivery systems to address social determinants of health Improve community capital and reduce social isolation</p>
<p>Strengthen the role and impact of ill health prevention</p>	<p>Increase investment in ill health prevention Reduce social gradient in obesity Focus public health efforts to reduce social gradient</p>

Special Educational Needs

Some children are particularly disadvantaged by physical or learning disabilities and need highly specialist support. This support should enable them to fulfill their individual potential and to feel that they are meaningful and valued members of their communities. We would like to see full inclusion for children with SEN or disabilities and area SENCOs for all early years providers.

Disabled young people currently appear to under-achieve (both academically and in the labour market) despite having similar aspirations to non-disabled peers. Both these young people and their families would benefit from more support, particularly in helping them with the transition to independent living. More data should be collected to improve our understanding of what stops them from achieving their full potential.

Equality and Human Rights Commission, 2007

We need to address inequalities and ensure that every child can develop to his or her full potential.

4 Cultural Values

Culture is all about the sets of values shared by any group - and the relationship between those values. Our values reflect what is important to us. They are a shorthand way of describing our individual and collective motivations. Together with beliefs, they are the causal factors that drive our decision-making. Culture is also about the handing down of bodies of knowledge and accumulated wisdom from one generation to the next. The values, principles and language that a culture uses have a particularly powerful impact on human social development.

All children need warmth, respect and acceptance from others, particularly 'significant others' such as their parents, teachers and carers. They need to reinforce their identities through the recognition of others, they need to know that they can relate and communicate with others, they need to be allowed to construct and co-construct meaning with others and they need to feel that they, and their thoughts and opinions, matter to others.

Adult cultures can profoundly affect the way that children view and respond to their worlds. Young children therefore have the developmental right to be protected from value or belief systems that inhibit their natural learning dispositions or ability to flourish.

We need to ensure that the values we are modelling for children are those that we want to see in a 21st century world.

5 The Vital role of Play

Play, which has been defined as ‘freely-chosen, personally-directed and intrinsically motivating behaviour that actively engages the whole child’, is so important to optimal child development that it has been recognized by the United Nations High Commission for Human Rights as a right of every child (Article 31). It comprises complex and multi-dimensional skills and is vital for the enjoyment of childhood, as well as for children’s physical, social, emotional, intellectual and spiritual development.

There is a growing body of evidence supporting the many connections between cognitive competence and high-quality informal play. It is clear that if children lack opportunities to experience such play, their long-term capacities related to metacognition, problem solving, and social cognition, as well as to academic areas such as literacy, mathematics, and science, may be diminished.

In the early years, play supports healthy brain development⁴⁹ and the key developmental abilities of symbolic representation, language development,⁵⁰ self-regulation and cognitive control.⁵¹ A lack of playfulness is associated with weak cognitive development⁵² and low levels of emotional wellbeing.⁵³ Informal play-based environments are essential for healthy learning and development. As well as opportunities to play both indoors and outdoors at home, children attending preschool need the space and time for self-directed play as well as for teacher-led activities. The much quoted EPPE Research⁵⁴ showed that teacher-led provision improved the desired outcomes (which was to be expected if adult priority was given to them), but that for developmentally appropriate practice teacher-led activities should be carefully balanced with child-initiated activities. It was also evident that co-playing, where the activity is initiated and led by the child but an adult joins in as a co-player – required skill, but was often the most productive activity of all, and very much enjoyed and valued by the children. What really matters in play is that the process is open-ended with no pre-determined desirable result.

There is overwhelming evidence⁵⁵ to show that a high quality preschool experience benefits all children, particularly the summerborn and most disadvantaged, and that an over-early introduction to formal learning can be detrimental to children’s learning dispositions and later attainment.



“ ‘Play’ is sometimes contrasted with ‘work’ and characterised as a type of activity which is essentially unimportant, trivial and lacking in any serious purpose. As such, it is seen as something that children do because they are immature, and as something they will grow out of as they become adults. This view is, however, mistaken.

Play in all its rich variety is one of the highest achievements of the human species, alongside language, culture and technology. Indeed, without play, none of these other achievements would be possible. The value of play is increasingly recognised, by researchers and within the policy arena, for adults as well as children, as the evidence mounts of its relationship with intellectual achievement and emotional wellbeing”

Dr David Whitebread, 2012

We need to ensure that developmentally appropriate and play-based care and education governs children’s experiences until at least age 6.

6 Infrastructure and funding

There has been enormous investment in the early years provision over the past fifteen years, but the ECEC model in England is not an integrated one in terms of continuity of entitlement from birth to school and is expensive for both the state and private individuals, relative to other EU countries.

Provision in England encompasses a wide range of services that include nurseries (private day nurseries, maintained nursery schools, nursery classes), playgroups, children or family centres and childminding. Young children are also looked after informally by grandparents, friends and neighbours, nannies and other home carers. There are special services for school-age children, which provide 'wrap-around' care before and after school hours.

This situation is exacerbated by unhelpful distinctions between 'education' (often termed pre-school) and 'childcare' with the divide perpetuated through the many different mechanisms for funding, access, staffing, guidance, pay and conditions.

A number of key reports have highlighted the five core issues that have arisen, namely:

- 1 the government's desire to increase maternal employment
- 2 the economic need to make childcare more affordable
- 3 the need to close the development gap in children from different backgrounds
- 4 the challenge of improving the quality of the workforce
- 5 the problems of ensuring smooth transitions.

Loving and caring relationships within consistent environments are essential for healthy child development and, as per the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, governments should always aim to put the best interests of the child above changing political ideologies or agendas.

We believe it is important to revisit the word 'deprivation' as many children from poor backgrounds may have community-rich, emotionally nurturing and loving homelives, whereas children from wealthy backgrounds may be socially and emotionally disadvantaged with less

time immersed in family and community, more exposure to commercialization and under greater threat from the developmentally inappropriate pressures of the schooling system. In our opinion deprivation should reflect the undermining of a child's ability to fulfil his or her natural potential, and this can happen at both ends of the income spectrum. One of the most interesting things to emerge from studies of wellbeing is that after a certain point happiness does not increase with income. In 2012 researchers at the Institute for Social and Economic Research (ISER) undertook the first ever UK study of children's life satisfaction levels and found no difference in the average life satisfaction score of children in families with lower incomes compared with those living in families with higher incomes. It concluded that a stable home life, a network of friends, a healthy lifestyle, a sense of

"The research suggests that a focus on just improving income and material deprivation does not necessarily represent real improvements in quality of life as it is perceived by children themselves."

Dr Gundi Knies – *Life Satisfaction and Material Wellbeing of Children in the UK*



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community and good behaviour from their classmates matter more to children's sense of wellbeing than their parents' earnings.⁵⁶

As highlighted by The Sutton Trust in its recent report 'Sound Foundations', it is imperative that statutory frameworks, practice guidance and practitioner standards reflect the following key constituents of quality.⁵⁷ It is also essential that policies are underpinned with the investment that ensures that such quality is both achievable and sustainable.

- stable relationships and interactions with sensitive and responsive adults
- a focus on play-based activities and routines which allow children to take the lead in their own learning
- support for communication and language
- opportunities, both indoors and outdoors, to move and be physically active
- knowledgeable and capable practitioners, supported by strong leaders
- stable staff teams with a low turnover
- effective staff deployment (e.g. favourable ratios, staff continuity)
- secure yet stimulating physical environments
- engaged and involved families.

We need to ensure that we have one cohesive and integrated ECEC system that is evidenced and that has the best interest of the child at its heart. This should not be a 'one-size-fits-all' solution but should be responsive to the diversity of parental and local community needs.

Funding

The current fragmented situation, combined with lack of public funding, means that ECEC provision in England is expensive for both the state and private individuals relative to other EU countries. Amidst the ongoing debate on the high costs of childcare the current Coalition government is pursuing a series of reforms to policy and services that aim to maximise their impact on outcomes (particularly for the most disadvantaged children and families) and their support for parents in seeking work.

The part-time nature of the largely publicly provided educational provision presumes privately arranged childcare in addition, should more than one of the parents be employed. In sum, for the early years, parental care followed by informal care can be said to be the predominant forms of childcare in England.⁵⁸ The current economic climate, coupled with the roll-out of the two year old education offer, not only poses sustainability challenges to private childcare providers across the country, but also creates significant risks for childcare quality. The latest DFE Childcare and Early Years Providers Survey documented profit margins and measures employed to stem losses among day nurseries, childminders and out-of-school services, but the situation is both ongoing and serious.⁵⁹

There are, therefore, significant disparities between the government's stated desire to provide a high-quality workforce and the economic viability of providing environments that guarantee quality of care. A prime example of this is the ratio debate, in which the economic argument was condemned by all those who were equally concerned about child wellbeing. Many providers are already operating at a loss in order to subsidise free entitlement places and there is an urgent need to produce an economic model that is viable and sustainable.

We were happy to see the pupil premium being extended into the early years, but societal economic outcomes need to be very carefully balanced with the social, emotional and cognitive gains for families and children within the system with a positive Social Return on Investment (SROI) seen as an essential element of a successful ECEC system.

7 The Science of Early Learning and Development



‘Early experiences shape our development as humans. Positive and negative experiences become ‘embedded’ in the biology of our brains and bodies, persisting far into adult life and influencing our health and wellbeing. Genes and environments interact to determine how early experiences affect our development. Healthy, thriving children are essential to a prosperous and sustainable society. There are profound social and economic benefits associated with an enhanced investment in the early years. Later health and education programs would be more effective and less costly if we could strengthen the foundations of social development, health, and learning in early childhood’.

Human Early Learning Partnership, <http://earlylearning.ubc.ca>

Early Years Development involves a particularly important kind of change. It comes about through a combination of biology, maturation, and lived experience within the environment, with every child developing at a rate that has both normative (i.e. what is typical of children of that age) and also unique (how the individual child responds depending on his or her prior learning experiences) dimensions. A scientific approach is helpful in that it facilitates multidisciplinary collaboration, a focus on international evidence and an avoidance of ideologies or agendas that are not serving the best interests of the child.

The last twenty years have seen enormous advances in our understanding of human learning and development. Through systematic enquiry across a broad range of disciplines we are beginning to envision the implementation of a new science of human learning and development that can provide a powerful framework for informing educational and societal priorities. As identified by the Human Early Learning Partnership, the areas concerned include:

Neurogenomics and Epigenetics inform our understanding of the biology of development, and enable us to explore the processes and structures that influence a child’s development over time. Epigenetics, in particular, confirms that the environment alters gene expression in individuals and that the constant strengthening and re-wiring of neural connections in response to experience clarifies the vital importance of positive social interactions in sculpting brain architecture.

Developmental psychology enables us to understand the development of a child’s motivations and behaviour so that we can seek to maximise social and emotional wellbeing and potential.

Developmental Trajectories allow us to build up a rich database of child development information that helps better understand children’s development over time and inform policy and practice.

A child’s brain is primed for different types of learning activity at different stages in development and some cognitive functions mature earlier than others. In the first three and a half years of life pathways involved in control of posture, balance and eye movements develop at a faster rate than they will at any other time for the remainder of life. These pathways are entrained as a result of physical interaction with the environment – through crawling, rolling, sliding, running, climbing up and down stairs, jumping, playing hide and seek, imitating what adults do and engaging in rough-and-tumble play.

There is now increasing interest in the science behind developmental ‘readiness’ and a number of studies have started exploring the neurological foundations of early learning. The cerebral cortex, the seat of cognitive learning and reasoning, develops at a prodigious rate in the early years, but different regions progress at different rates and times in development. MRI scans of the brains of healthy children carried out every two years from the ages of 4–21 have shown that higher-order association cortices mature only after lower-order somatosensory

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and visual cortices, the functions of which they integrate and are developed through movement experience. Phylogenetically older brain areas, (involved in the development of postural control and motor skills) mature earlier than newer ones.⁶⁰ While the left hemisphere of the brain is ahead in learning speech sounds in the early years, the right hemisphere is slightly in advance of the left between 4 and 7 years of age,^{61,62} and has more downward connections linking it to the areas involved in basic functions such as control of movement, sensory processing, emotion and emotional memory.⁶³ Physical input feeds higher brain centres involved in the development of cognitive spatial and visual skills. Oral learning develop language potential during this period and lays down the foundation for later literacy learning.

It seems that the right side of the brain processes information holistically seeing the whole picture (gestalt) but not the details contained within. It has limited verbal language abilities but understands the non-verbal and intuitive aspects of language. It is primarily visual in the way that it processes information and is the expert in solving spatial problems such as puzzles and mazes and it is good at drawing. The right brain has a natural ability to copy musical melodies and rhythm, meaning that it is particularly receptive to learning through song, rhythm, rhyme and dance. It is the side of the brain that can entertain fantasy and believes that anything is possible. According to Sally Goddard-Blythe, Director of the Institute for Neuro-Physiological Psychology, the years of optimum right-hemisphere development (4–7 years) are the time when learning is naturally linked to sensory-motor activity, when “perception, action and reasoning develop in parallel, and not in simple progression from sensation to higher cognition”.⁶⁴ Sequences of information like the alphabet or later on, multiplication tables, can be memorised easily if they are learned through movement or put into rhyme, rhythm or song.

These are the years when children should be engaged in play, in exploring the physical environment, building sandcastles and dens, playing games, learning traditional dances and marching in time to a tune, learning rhymes and listening to stories, learning patterns through movement which prime the brain for the pattern recognition (visual perception) of letter and number symbols, directional awareness (b or d, 3 or 5) as well as strengthening the body through gross motor activities. The right side of the brain sees whole words as pictures, but it cannot take the words apart to build words from individual letters. This is a left brain skill.⁶⁵

The left hemisphere also develops rapidly through the early years and has its own specialist functions: as it increases in maturity, the left brain is logical and analytical in the way it processes information. If it cannot solve a

problem as a whole, it will attempt to break the problem down into smaller components and examine them piece by piece. It has specialist centres for speech and understanding verbal language, for phonetic decoding, timing and aspects of numeracy, but it cannot solve problems without the cooperation of the right hemisphere.

“The executive functions of both sides of the brain are built upon the firm foundations of sensory motor integration which are laid down in the first 3½ years of life, developed between 4 and 7 years of age through physical interaction and play, and which go through an important stage of neurological re-organisation between 6½ and 7½ years of age”

Sally Goddard-Blythe, INPP



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Between the ages of 6½ and 7½ the brain goes through a major period of myelination (the neurological equivalent of insulating an electrical circuit) when millions of neural pathways which connect the two hemispheres of the cortex, the balance mechanism and the cerebellum - a part of the brain involved in the regulation of fine motor control and sequencing – are pruned, insulated, strengthened and re-organised. This is the same age when children begin compulsory education in many other countries.

This is important in educational terms because centres in the right and left sides of the brain process written material in different ways. While the right brain allows children to see whole words (like pictures) by sight, usually recognising the first and last letter and guessing at the letters in between, reading centres in the left brain and its connections to the right brain can take up to 6½–8 years of age in girls, and 7–9 years in boys to develop. “It is the reading centre in the left brain that allows children to match sounds to letters and enables them to sound out words phonetically” so that they can learn how to spell.⁶⁶ The building blocks for phonetic decoding are assembled in the early years through learning to listen to and to use the sounds of speech, music, stories, rhyme, tongue twisters and engage in conversation. Spoken language contains many elements in common with music – recognition of pitch, tone, rhythm, timing, cadence and phrasing. Written language has developed from an oral tradition, and phonological awareness is a product of listening and voicing aloud. Learning to read begins with visual (right brain) and auditory (left brain) pattern recognition; writing begins with the ability to draw simple shapes. These general abilities provide the developmental foundations for specific learning skills later on. As connections between the two hemispheres mature, the ability to match sounds to visual symbols and vice-versa improves. The early years are the time for assembling and mixing the ingredients for later learning; the baking stage starts when compulsory education begins.

“The ontology of brain development causes a progression from the salience of right hemisphere functioning to that of the left hemisphere. Children’s conceptualisation ranges from global to specific, which reflects right to left hemispherical development. The development of the right hemisphere system is required before there can adequate development (integration) of the left hemisphere system”

Trad, 1987

Why does physical development matter?

Maturation of pathways involved in control of the body, particularly those relating to balance, posture and proprioception provide the basis for subsequent control of coordination, oculo-motor functioning and visual perception. Children whose physical skills are under-developed in the pre-school years need more time and opportunity to develop these skills through free and structured play before reaching a stage of “readiness” for sedentary and fine motor tasks such as reading, writing and numeracy. “From 4 to 8 years of age movement capability is more closely related to physiological maturation than to chronological age. During ages 4–8 all basic locomotor skills mature from poorly integrated to finely coordination patterns”.⁶⁷

We need to invest in more research into developmental readiness and underpin all ECEC services and provision with the latest scientific evidence and examples of global best practice.

8 Planning and Policy

Crucial to any system redesign is demand from the ultimate decision makers for better evidence and evaluation. Just as our report on Informed Decision Making found that the dominance of the policy culture at the top of Whitehall means that there is little demand for the rigorous sort of management information that businesses use to improve performance, so the generalist culture of policy making underplays the use and usefulness of analysis in helping make better policy. The highly adversarial nature of policy making – both internally between government departments and in Parliament – means evidence and evaluation are too often seen and used as ammunition to win political arguments.

Evidence and Evaluation in Policy-making, Jill Rutter, 2012

Given the importance of the early years it is vital that all policy-making should be based on rigorous scientific evidence and reflect the best of global understanding and practice. It is also vital that evidence reflects the appropriate balance, is fully transparent and avoids political bias. We believe that the only way this can be effectively achieved is through the establishment of a new apolitical guidance body.

As identified by Professor Dominic Wyse at the Institute of Education, for consultations to be genuinely meaningful the following elements need to be in place:⁶⁸

- Analysis of consultation responses should be carried out by a neutral guidance body, independent of government and the civil service.
- A transparent methodology for analysis should be established which accounts fairly (including through statistical weighting) for the views of organisations versus individual respondents; to clearly explain the approach to analysis of qualitative answers; and more generally to be an account that would satisfy researchers of the rigor of the analysis.
- Consultation should include a question on the overall desirability of proposed changes in addition to any questions about the fine detail of proposals.

- Clear majority views should be acted on in line with the opinion expressed. A principled way to deal with less clear-cut answers should be established and the views of those expressing concerns should be fully acknowledged and investigated.
- Responses, analyses, and government actions should be available online in order to ensure public trust, and to demonstrate democracy at work.

**We need the
guidance of a new
National Council on the
Science of Human
Learning and
Development.**

9 Outcomes and Assessment

Young children have profoundly different early life experiences and it is important that these are recognised and acknowledged in any assessment system. The school curriculum should take account of parents' knowledge of their children, build on children's prior learning and experiences and promote their active engagement in worthwhile content, learned through active investigation and extended by thoughtful, responsive teaching. Ethical, valid and reliable assessment is a central part of effective early years care and education which enables staff to understand and improve children's wellbeing and learning. Ongoing formative assessment of each child's strengths, progress and needs must take account of all areas of learning and development, and be built up over time in collaboration with parents, and also other professionals, through a culturally and linguistically sensitive process. Observations of children at play and pursuing their interests reveal what they can achieve without the distortions caused by formalised approaches in unfamiliar contexts.

There are significant problems with producing meaningful and statistically valid tests on children's entry to school settings and these are exacerbated by an over-early start. Decontextualised tests cannot capture crucial aspects of the prime areas of learning and development and depend on children being prepared to pay attention to questions that may have no salience for them. Such tests undermine the responsive teaching that young children need, and risk damaging the self-confidence and self-esteem that are important aspects of being a successful learner.

Children in the UK are already among the most tested in the world and suffer the attendant stress of being judged, which contributes to the low levels of wellbeing indicated in international comparisons. Assessments of attainment for young children should be conducted by familiar and trusted adults in an informal atmosphere, in order to minimise the harmful effects on stress levels and the undermining of self-belief and confidence in themselves as learners which can have far-reaching consequences for pupils' motivation and future success. Children whose experience in the early years has supported physical exploration, emotional wellbeing,

cognitive development and self-regulation may score less well on early academic tests, but show achievement benefits in the longer term. The focus of staff at the crucial transition into school should be on settling children in to their new setting, and making sure that it is prepared to meet the needs and potential of each unique entrant.

Standardised testing is not appropriate for young children at a time in their lives when development is rapid and fluctuating. Individuals should not be compared with others at this stage, nor should arbitrary targets be set for them to reach. What matters is that each one is making progress that is appropriate for that particular child's physical and social and emotional development as well as their intellectual growth. Both formative and summative assessments are integral to this process.

A broad range of expected outcomes can inform summative assessment when considered holistically. Children start from different baselines and, in order to enable improved support for vulnerable children, information on factors that may have affected progress should be shared alongside outcomes. Summative assessment of explicit goals must take account of individual circumstances and be sensitive to factors such as month of birth and any experiences that may influence aspects of children's development. The proposed abolition of end of Key Stage 1 tests makes it straightforward to assess children on the Early Years Profile when they reach statutory school age, which means that the summer born cohort would be assessed in the first term of Year 1.

Analysis of assessments of different groups of children can help staff to evaluate the breadth and accessibility of the received curriculum, raising awareness of the effectiveness of provision, and thus contributing to a positive cycle of improvement. It is important to note children's disposition to learn alongside what they know and can do; assessment for learning should have priority over assessment of learning in the early years, and should appreciate effort and celebrate progress as much as achievement across all areas of learning. In principle, accountability should be to children, rather than to the system.

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While all children should be provided with the opportunity to develop literacy and numeracy skills in the early years, the setting of specific literacy and numeracy targets at too early an age runs a risk of labelling children as under-achievers before they even start school, also depriving them of the necessary sensory-motor and play experiences which are needed to develop the physical skills, which support all higher aspects of learning. We suggest that the EYFS Profile should be recalibrated in relation to literacy and mathematical attainment, and applied the term after children's fifth birthday when they reach statutory school age.

There are three potential purposes of measuring a child's development prior to entering the formal schooling system.

- 1 to evaluate each child's neurological, physiological and psycho-social maturity
- 2 to identify those children who may need additional help and support and
- 3 as a baseline to measure subsequent progress.

We believe that the first two are essential, but, until the school starting age is increased, there are significant dangers and difficulties in implementing the third.

The revised EYFS Profile is a useful assessment at the early years stage. But the breadth of its compass, which is an advantage for the purpose of identifying pupils' needs, is a disadvantage for the purpose of providing a baseline for narrower national tests in reading and mathematics at KS2. Whilst certain of its sub-scales could be used, they are unable to discriminate sufficiently to provide a good baseline measure alone.

Moreover, as an accountability measure, it would be undermined by pressure on teachers to bias their judgements. We certainly would not want to see the EYFS Profile made non-statutory in favour of a new, narrow 'baseline check'.

Oct 13th 2013 Letter to Michael Gove,
UK Assessment Reform Group



Top 5 Arguments against Baseline Testing

Julian Grenier, Feb 2014

1

The results will be unreliable

Testing young children to assess their ability is notoriously difficult. For a start, whilst there will be a standard test, some children (born in August) will have just turned four, and others (born in September) will be five. 11 months of development are very significant when you are five-years old. Secondly, even well-trialled tests like the British Ability Scales have problems with reliability and robustness. For example, the BAS tests have been found to be unreliable in respect of children from black and minority ethnic backgrounds, and children learning English as an additional language (Hill, 2005).

2

Testing policy is erratic

In theory, assessments could help educationalists and policy-makers intervene to identify promising practice, and could help teachers to evaluate how well their curriculum serves the different children who come into their schools. However, this would only be possible in a stable environment. Instead, in England there has been a high amount of instability: the new Early Years Foundation Stage Profile assessment (for children at the end of Reception) was first used nationally last summer; the phonics test for five and six-year olds was also made compulsory in 2013. Furthermore, the whole framework and curriculum guidance for young children (the Early Years Foundation Stage) was itself substantially revised in 2012. So teachers have been faced with constant change since 2012, and now another fundamental change looms.

3

Testing children is not the way to give them the best start to school

Starting school is a big step for children. Many children find it stressful at first to settle in and feel confident. Testing them just sets up another hurdle, and one which is likely to cause some children considerable distress. Additionally, because the children are dealing with so many new things when they start school, the tests will not show anything like their potential.

4

The tests will cost time and money which could be spent better elsewhere

94% of children have attended nursery in England from the age of three onwards. It is compulsory for early years providers to track the development of those children using the EYFS. So why test them? Not only will the tests be stressful for the children, they will create a mountain of work for teachers and they will cost lots of money, too - if children are to be tested individually, who will do that, and who will be teaching and looking after the rest of the class?

5

The wellbeing of children in England should worry everyone

UNICEF has drawn attention to the poor level of wellbeing of children in the UK, including England, in both 2007 and 2011. In 2011, UNICEF commented that "Compared with 20 other OECD2 countries, including substantially poorer countries such as Poland and Greece, the UK came bottom on three out of six dimensions of wellbeing, and came bottom overall in the league table. Other indices of children's wellbeing have also found the UK to be doing badly." Does subjecting every four-year old to a test when they start school seem like the best response?

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We therefore support:

1 A later start to formal schooling so that children have more time to mature their developmental capacities and can then commence formal learning on a more equitable basis.

2 Greater emphasis on the vital social and emotional aspects of early learning and development.

3 The current Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) Profile being re-examined for developmental appropriateness and retained until the end of the foundation stage, for reporting to parents and as the measure of each child's learning and developmental maturity.

4 Ongoing holistic forms of assessment where the progress achieved by each individual child should be considered as important as attainment and where assessment *for* learning has priority over assessment *of* learning.

5 Increased focus on neurological, physiological and psycho-social maturity (i.e developmental readiness).

6 An assessment of every child's physical development at the time of school entry and at key stages in education.

7 Consideration of greater flexibility in the time of entry into compulsory education taking individual developmental needs and date of birth into account.

8 Introduction of daily physical exercise programmes into primary schools.

9 Improved training of teachers at all levels of education in physical as well as cognitive child development.

Provide formative assessment and screening of children's development from birth and ensure that we are measuring what matters for children's long-term health and wellbeing.

10 Human Resources

Quality, Quality, Quality

We know that the health, wellbeing and emotional maturity of adults is essential to the wellbeing of young children and that this is especially so for children coming from disadvantaged backgrounds. Knowledge of child development is vital for anyone working within an early years environment, and this needs to be matched with an understanding of how sensitive children are to both the spoken and unspoken values and messages conveyed by the adults in their worlds. All adults working with

young children should be of the highest standard, they should be recognised for the vitally important role that they play, and their professional status and remuneration should reflect this fact.

Teenagers are the parents of the future and all secondary schools should include, within their PHSE frameworks, information about child development and the importance of early attachment and family life. Pupils should be better educated about the importance of the early years and have opportunities for work experience in health and social services as well as settings providing care and education for young children. Careers advice should include information about the wide range of

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opportunities in the early years that could lead to highly responsible and influential roles.

A coherent framework of early years qualifications, including induction and training modules, supported through access to supportive mentoring, appraisal and continuing professional development is essential. The Government should endorse qualifications that are suitable for staff working with children from birth to seven, with the Teaching Agency developing a more robust set of full and relevant criteria, with a stronger focus on child development and the role of play in early learning.

Recent advice from the Chief Inspector to early years inspectors has revealed a lack of understanding of the importance of developmental readiness and the complexity of the adult role in effective provision for care and education at this crucial stage. We are concerned that OFSTED is to be the sole arbiter of quality in the early years, and would like to see a more constructive inspection and advice service focused on empowering providers and mandated to work collaboratively with local authorities.

A new early years specialist route to Qualified Teacher Status, focusing on children from birth to seven and including a common core with health and social services, should be developed. Training on work with parents as well as other professionals should be included. This qualification should be equivalent to teachers working with older children, and with the same terms and conditions.

In *Foundations for Quality: the independent review of early education and childcare qualifications*, published by the DfE in June 2012 Professor Cathy Nutbrown maintains that the quality of children's experiences is central, and that the status of the early years workforce is crucial.⁶⁹ We believe that early years carers and educators should be acknowledged as professionals who should be able continually to develop their knowledge,

skills and understanding. They need to be confident in their own practice and in engaging with other professionals, such as health visitors and social workers, and also with parents. The people who make up the diverse early years workforce need opportunities to progress in their insights as well as their careers, and to become effective pedagogical leaders who understand the learning and development needs of children and can enhance and extend teaching and learning opportunities for all involved.

Proof of academic learning does not necessarily guarantee the skills needed to be a good early years provider. Young children need someone who understands sensory as well as verbal language, who is emotionally mature and who can give love and affection. We need a workforce with a sound understanding of child development in the early years, which includes the physical, emotional and psycho-social aspects. We are very concerned about the government's recent dismissal of the recommendations of the Nutbrown review and suggest that this is revisited and that urgent attention should be paid to improving the status and remuneration of early years carers and educators.

We need to ensure that the adults working with young children are highly trained, emotionally mature and appropriately valued and remunerated.

If we are to prosper and thrive in our changing society and in an increasingly interconnected and competitive world, both our mental and material resources will be vital. Encouraging and enabling everyone to realise their potential throughout their lives will be crucial for our future prosperity and wellbeing.

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Manifesto for the Early Years

Putting children first



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