

# Children's Centre Leader



## INSIDE THIS ISSUE

- 1 SUPPORTING FAMILY CHOICE
- 3 BIRTH REGISTRATIONS
- 6 FF2 CHAMPIONS IN KENT
- 8 THE RURAL WAY
- 10 PARENT EMPLOYABILITY
- 12 RECLAIMING QUALITY

## AT THE FOREFRONT

# Supporting Family Choice

by James Hemsall

You've been telling me you want to ensure children's centres continue to be at the forefront of delivering high quality services, safeguarding children and vulnerable adults, ensuring life changing interventions, and destigmatising services for those families that need those most. All of which, in turn, open up a realm of new opportunities and possibilities for the communities we work with.

The current climate remains a challenging one. Last issue, we talked about how now is the time to rethink and reenergise the children's centre offer before we need to resuscitate it. We have been promised a Department for Education (DfE) led consultation to inform the future of children's centres.

However, it has now been postponed until the summer. So, instead of a period of rethinking and reenergising, what we have, unfortunately, is a stagnant stage, rather than a 'business as usual' - one pending a consultation that may or may not happen.

The damage such inertia can cause at a time when local areas are making budget decisions is potentially huge. What centres need is a central direction and steer, and I fear we are months, possibly even years away from that. And then it might be too late for much of the excellent practice out there. So, in the absence of a national focus and the risk of ever decreasing circles, local areas need to be resolute in their drive for excellence, accountability, and the

(continued on page 2)

# Welcome

Welcome to the March 2016 issue of Children's Centre Leader.

This issue celebrates partnership working with a birth registrations project in Northumberland, explores rural issues on p8. Consider the meaning of quality in children's centres on p12 and employability for parents on p10. Also, celebrate the good work of champions in Kent raising the take up of the 2-year-old early years entitlement.

Let us know what you think by emailing: [cclr@hemsalls.com](mailto:cclr@hemsalls.com)

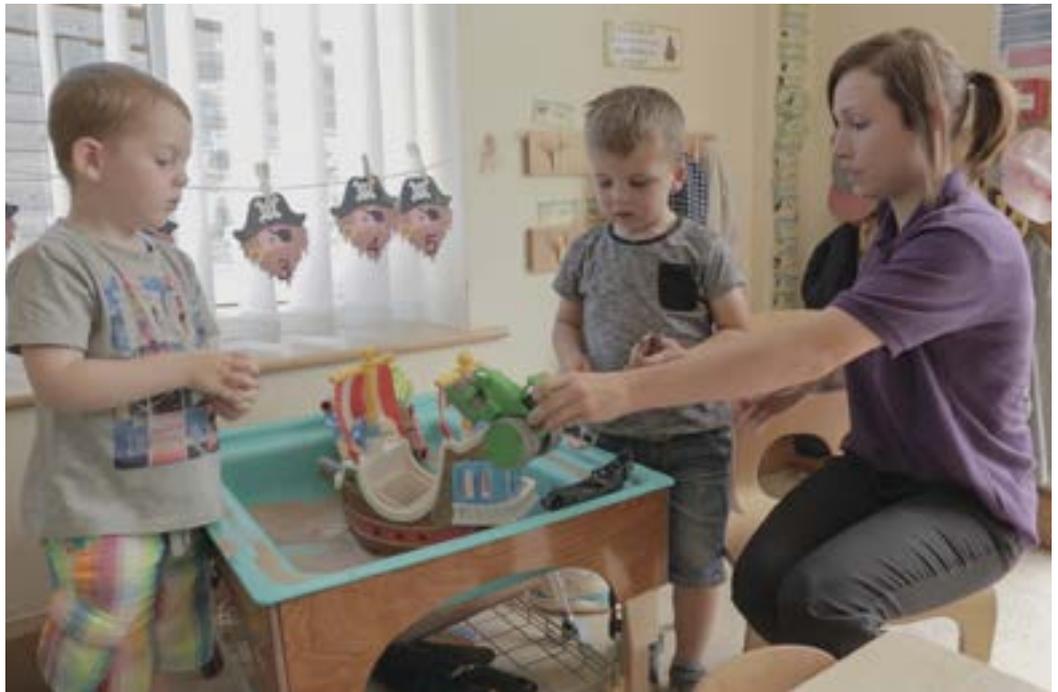
James Hemsall,  
Editor, Children's  
Centre Leader



(continued from page 1)

delivery of the best possible children's centre services. Which is easier said than done.

At a time when children's centres are under local review, local restructure and local budget scrutiny at best, and reduction or removal at worst, things change. Teams change, services change, and working relationships change. Such changes, despite our best efforts, can affect our efficiency, effectiveness and outcomes. They affect how people measure our success or the perceptions of our success. That's why Ofsted inspections should be continuing 'business as usual' until DfE direction is



Children's Centre Leader aims to be one way we can share best practice across the national children's centre community, and ensure we deliver better outcomes for children and families in the process.

In this issue, we are reminded of the importance of our role in supporting families' economic choices and journeys into successful work, and of the particular challenges in rural areas. We have also looked at how children's centres support access to wider services such as the early years entitlement. Something that offers a highly practical and valuable solution to families' juggling of needs and responsibilities. An entitlement that comes into play at a critical time in a family's development. However, it is one that for some families' needs a great deal of support, brokerage and confidence-building to enable them to take it up - an ideal role for children's centres.

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"local areas need to be resolute in their drive for excellence, accountability, and the delivery of the best possible children's centre services"  
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clear, so that all aspects of children's centre delivery, and safeguarding in particular is maintained, accountable, and continuing to improve.

Locally though, services do continue to deliver outstanding work – we see it all the time. As usual,

## HAVE YOU GOT A VIEW?

We're looking for writers for future issues of Children's Centre Leader.

So, if there's something bothering you about policy or practice in children's centres or early help and you'd like to share your views, let us know.

Or perhaps you have a success story that deserves wider recognition.

Whatever it is, please email us to discuss your ideas: [cclr@hempalls.com](mailto:cclr@hempalls.com)

# Birth Registrations in Children's Centres

Children's centres in Northumberland have piloted being the centre for birth registrations.

They are one of only 20 local authorities across the country which currently offers birth registrations at children's centres. [A new report by Barnardo's](#) includes a survey of all the register offices in England which found that nearly eight out of 10 of the registrars currently registering births in children's centres described the service as "extremely positive" or "positive" and of those, 100 per cent said they would recommend it.

## BENEFITS

The service has a number of benefits for the families, children's centres and the registration service. Overall, it helps with accessibility, data collection, safeguarding, engaging fathers. At the centre, it helps with overall reach. Engagement by parents increases and any stigma attached to the centre is dispelled when parents see the massive range of services available to them.

Benefits for the registration service include a warm and welcoming environment in which to operate and a centre team to add value to the process such as help

for parents in completing child benefit paperwork and registering for local library Bookstart packs. They also now have a drop-in service rather than appointments, which is really appreciated by new parents.

## GREAT FOR DADS

For parents, centres are accessible, child friendly and welcoming environments that can help with any queries relating to any aspect of their new babies' future development. It's great for dads too!

The children's centres are finding that it is helping them to get to know new parents and to introduce them to the range of services on offer. Registrars also welcome working in a child friendly environment and can ensure that registrations are completed.

## NATIONAL NETWORKING

The idea for moving birth registrations to children's centres came about when Jackie McCormick OBE, the county's children's centre improvement partner, attended an all-party parliamentary group (APPG) on Sure Start. In July 2013, the APPG produced



its report into the year-long enquiry examining best practice around the country's children's centres. Of particular interest to Jackie was the work highlighted by the Barnardo's children's centre in Benchill, Manchester where registrars have been working from children's centres since 2001. Jackie contacted the manager, Debbie Koroma and set about talking to the relevant people in County Hall in Northumberland for birth registrations. "Being part of the APPG gives access to new and innovative ideas and some of the best leaders in the sector; it's so good for networking too," says Jackie.

Once convinced that the idea was a good one for Northumberland, Jackie started by getting the senior manager for performance monitoring in children's services on board. "I knew if this project would help our reach and engagement, he would be interested!" explained Jackie. She then set up a meeting with senior manager with a responsibility for registrars in Durham and Northumberland, Lorraine Dewison. "Like most of the work we do in children's centres, this was a coming together of two cultures," says Jackie. "I had to get Lorraine up to speed with what children's centres do, which is never a short answer." She had to explain clearly what would be in it for the registrars. She started with this, then added what the children's centres would get from it.



The registrars would be in comfortable surroundings and could see more clients faster as they would pick up any other questions as they came out of the signing session with the children's centre staff.

### **EXTRA SUPPORT FOR FAMILIES**

Over time, the registrars have understood the children's centre offer and are enthused by the extra support they can see the families getting. Many of the registrars are grandparents themselves and some have started to

use their local centre as a resource for their families.

"I got local elected members on board with the project and they helped to endorse it," explains Jackie.

As they were piloting the project within one of the local authority commissioned localities, Barnardo's were also able to offer up their first-hand experience nationally from other Barnardo's centres.

"Together, Lorraine and I managed to get to a county meeting of midwifery in the brand new birthing unit of

the local hospital. We needed them to promote the sessions in the children's centres with new mums who had just given birth. This was a very animated session as they were very interested in the history of the registration service, which is fascinating."

Next on Jackie's list was the health visiting service who could quickly see the benefits of this as a passport to all the other services on offer in the centres. "We had to do some work with our own family support workers to introduce new families to the support on offer and take a keepsake photograph".

The service was developed as a joint project between the council's children's services and registrar teams. It was piloted in Blyth Children's Centre, in partnership with Barnardo's.

There were some difficulties in unexpected places along the way, particularly with IT when the centres were commissioned and not on the local authority network. Also, registrars need a particular kind of printer, so there were some costs they hadn't factored in. "We overcame this with a little cash from Sure Start and resourceful moving around of hardware we already had." Registrars also needed to carry around security stock of blank birth certificates. Jackie's team didn't appreciate how important this was in terms of false passports and immigration concerns.

## CONNECTING WITH MIDWIVES

Also, because midwifery services are becoming more centralised, women often give birth in hospitals in a different county, then the child has to be registered in that local authority. "We hadn't bargained for that!". However, with the help of the registrars, this can be overcome with "declarations" where the details of the birth are taken and sent to the registrars in the area where the birth

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"getting a new project off the ground is all about that initial engagement"

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took place who then issue a certificate to the parents.

"As children's centre leaders, we know that once we get the families through the doors of our centres, they return again and again. It's the initial engagement that's most important. What better than to piggy back on one of the most enjoyable outings that any family is excited to do. More often than not, the father will be at this momentous occasion, even when they are estranged from the mother. Children's centres do not stigmatise around this and instead work with the father to understand the importance of the role he plays in his child's life whether he is with the mother or not. For me this is the biggest

success of the project."

Jackie goes on to say, "everyone in the children's centres is excited by this offer to parents. We hope they will take it up, and at the same time see what we can provide throughout all stages of children's development from birth to starting school." Parents are greeted by a children's centre worker who will talk to them about what services are on offer, and as part of the registration process will be offered a framed photo of them registering their baby's birth, along with a new baby gift.

With permission of the parents, photos of all new babies who have been registered will be displayed in the centre and regularly updated. Jackie's advice to others with an idea for a new project is clear: "As leaders, we know that getting a new project off the ground is all about that initial engagement and getting the right partners on board to make that happen. Give those partners - headteachers, fire fighters or registrars - what they want. Start with what's in it for them and introduce your own purposes later!

"By default, children's centre leaders are tenacious; we have to work with such differing partners within vastly different cultures to get what we need for the benefit of our families. Getting to know the registrar service with its long history and fascinating case studies has also been an unexpected joy."

# FF2 Champions in Kent

The two-year-old learning entitlement in Kent is known locally as Free For Two – FF2 – and the authority has taken a focused approach in children’s centres to maximise reach and engagement with eligible families.

Kent has the second highest number of children eligible for early learning for two-year-olds – over 6,000 children in January 2016, covering a large geographical area with both rural and urban landscapes. This presents challenges which require coordinated and focused solutions.

A new structure was introduced in Kent in April 2014 which increased connectivity between early years and early help. Early

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years and childcare and the management of children’s centres now sits within the Education and Young People’s Services. This connectivity has increased coordination of activities to drive take-up of the two-year-old entitlement and a key element of this



is the establishment of 24 FF2 champions working in 87 children’s centres across 12 districts.

The FF2 champions were in post in summer 2015 and have the responsibility for coordinating activities to increase engagement and take up at district level. There are 12 districts in the county with at least one FF2 champion in each. Within these districts there are also five commissioned centres and they have fully embraced the FF2 role and provided champions of their own to support delivery of the FF2 agenda.

“It’s had a massive impact,” says Jo Williamson, Improvement Officer for Children’s Centres. “The main indicator is that take up of the two-year-old offer

was at 54 per cent in June 2015 but by Christmas, we’d moved up to 70 per cent. That’s a huge increase.”

Kent has invested in marketing and communications to promote the two-year-old entitlement widely, which serves to ensure a good level of public awareness, and to let eligible and potentially eligible families know they could be entitled. To maximise take-up families will often require additional contact through children’s centres, and others (for example, health visitors) to promote the benefits of the entitlement, to support engagement and to broker places. FF2 champions ensure that all staff within the children’s centres fully understand the FF2 offer enabling staff to

confidently support families to check if they are eligible for funding and to apply. Information about eligible families is disseminated to children's centres to support reach and engagement, and work with each children's centre manager to make sure all eligible families not taking up a place are contacted. Outcomes of these contacts are recorded and monitored and where a family chooses not to take up the entitlement, the FF2 champions work with open access staff to support use of children's centre services. Not all eligible families will want to take up their place (although the majority do), so this strategy means those choosing not to take up a place are given alternative ways of accessing support.

The FF2 champion role includes acting as a link between early help staff and partners to raise awareness of the entitlement and any barriers to achieving targets, as well as linking to the FF2 sustainability offer and children's centre staff to monitor and record why FF2 places are not being taken up.

Maximising take-up of two-year-old early learning relies on 'selling the benefits' not just 'telling'. For some families the motivation to take up a place will be based on aspirations for the child – to socialise, have opportunities for play, start to get into a routine early to support school readiness, for example. For other families the draw may be about having time to study or access opportunities they may otherwise not be able to take advantage of. For some,

taking up the two-year-old entitlement may mean they can work, or reduce childcare costs. It is important to match the benefit to the needs of individual families to support informed choice. And if the family doesn't want to take up the two-year-old offer, promoting it from children's centres means that they can encourage the family to come in and access the services the centre has to offer.

"The champions build the relationship with families through the children's centre. It's a safe place for them. They can come in, talk to the receptionist who supports them and tells them what's available in the area," explains Jo.

FF2 champions ensure new staff in children's centres are trained in FF2 and are able to promote the entitlement and support parents. They also promote good practice to all children's centre staff, ensuring a constant focus on maximising take-up through active reach and engagement.

Supporting the FF2 champions is crucial. They all have training in what is involved in the eligibility criteria, how they can check, complete application forms, making

sure everyone knows where the list of local childcare providers is, and encouraging staff to build links with them. This training is backed up with a support pack which includes clear roles and responsibilities not only of the champion but the early help manager and staff too, so that everyone knows who's responsible for what. There are regular champion events too, with relevant guest speakers and talks from the champions themselves, sharing what has worked well in their district and what hasn't.

Outcomes are highly positive, with children's centre activities, coordinated and supported through FF2 champions contributing to a steady increase over the past year in eligible children taking up a place and benefitting from the two-year-old entitlement, despite having fewer children eligible.

"We're giving the creativity and innovation back to the staff in children's centres," says Jo. "It's up to them how they approach the challenge, and so far the results have been brilliant."



# The Rural Way

Jan Casson, Locality Manager, North Northumberland explores the joys and challenges of working in a rural area with a sparse population.

Covering a rural patch requires a high level of organisation and the ability to think out of the box. I am a Children's Centre Locality Manager in North Northumberland. My patch is roughly 48 miles end to end, and covers around 900 square miles in total, with around 2,800 children under the age of five. We have centres in three market towns, Berwick, on the Scottish border, Alnwick and Amble, plus smaller centres in Wooler in the Cheviot Hills, and Rothbury on the river Coquet.

## A DAY IN THE LIFE

A day in the life of a rural children centre manager can be varied to say the least; we live in an area of great beauty, stunning beaches, open hills and moorland, glorious farm land, and yet the isolated nature of the area which makes it so special can also cause many issues for families, especially those who live on low wages, where a car is a necessity rather than a luxury.

## TRANSPORT BARRIER

Transport is an enormous barrier for many children and their families, even a trip to the main A&E department would take over an hour from some parts of our patch.

Berwick is a very low-waged economy, and Amble lacks jobs, so different problems but all requiring bespoke solutions. In my role, I work with many partners, to seek holistic solutions to the many problems facing our local communities. We work collaboratively to develop ideas that can support the community, but due to the ever present problem of additional costs incurred by living in a rural area, we have to be very innovative in our approach.

## FIRE STATION CENTRES

In the north we have two centres based in rural fire stations; an idea which is now accepted practice in Northumberland. We also share a vehicle with the fire service, which does duty in many different ways, from a working fire vehicle when needed, to carrying staff to run a playgroup at another centre, and when the need arises to move furniture for families requiring help for whatever reason. Each of the three main centres has a playgroup or nursery on site, and we offer universal and targeted services across the patch, working collaboratively with our colleagues in the private and voluntary sector. Many of our services are co-located, such as paediatric clinics, baby clinics, stay and weigh sessions, booking-in clinics and so on. We have to produce bespoke solutions for each area, for example for the sustainability of two-

year-old entitlement; we have worked with schools to develop provision in areas where the school is the main (or only) public building, we have also merged sites to improve viability, protecting vital services. This might be pretty standard in an urban area, but in a rural village we might be talking about six children in that age bracket.

We do have some families whose isolated homes makes access to any provision almost impossible, to this end we are trying to have regular contact with such families to act as a link and

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“We work collaboratively to develop ideas that can support the community”

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support, until they are able to access early years provision. Our health visitor colleagues visit all new births as part of the Healthy Child Programme.

In addition, our outreach team seek to do an additional visit to all newborns who live in our 10% - 40% wards. Three small play vans help support the outreach teams, providing transport and the ability to carry large items of play equipment, or providing a small mobile base as each van has rear seating, light and heat, a bit like a motor home but minus the bed!



## PLAY VAN

This van also visits our local travellers' site on a weekly basis, providing the children a mobile play base, staffed by highly skilled early years practitioners. A typical day, can see me drive over 100 miles, especially if a trip to council headquarters is required (50 miles from my office base). I usually start the day in Berwick, and then set off on my travels to attend meetings, see staff, especially the two children's centre managers who each manage three centres, meet with head teachers, health visitors, parish and town councillors, colleagues in the Citizens Advice Bureau, and voluntary sector staff and volunteers to name just a few.

We work with faith groups, schools and local agencies to coordinate our food bank, and each children centre has a supply of basic food, toiletries and baby items to support families as needed. In one fire station/children centre in Wooler we have a community allotment, where families can share produce and learn some basic gardening skills; led by

a local minister. During bad weather we work closely with our colleagues in the police, fire and rescue and primary health to ensure we support families living in the local community. There is very little new rural research; one quote from the old Commission for Rural Communities which I have used over the years states that: "Rural outreach is not only about taking services out to satellite venues or to people's homes. It should be explicitly connected to community development, building the capacity of people in the local community and supporting community providers to develop their services. Best practices also

suggest that outreach needs to be creative, not dependent on any single mechanism, but built round the needs of different individuals and communities." Commission for Rural Communities Commissioning Children's Centres: A rural perspective 2010

This quote remains as relevant today as it was in 2010. In all we do, we aim to improve outcomes for all our children, working collaboratively to utilise the skills and expertise present in every village, hamlet and town; we just have to work differently to ensure equality across our vast rural area.



**Jan Casson**, MBE, MA, BA (Hons) began work in early years education in 1975, from inner cities Liverpool, London and Hastings to the north east. She is passionate about working with communities, building networks and developing social capital, which can support the family unit, allowing children and young people to grow and thrive.

# Employability for Lambeth parents

A new project in Lambeth children's centres in Streatham, Norwood and West Dulwich is shining a spotlight on the issue of parental employment and improving the economic circumstances of families.

It follows a comprehensive process of commissioning new services across all the children's centre clusters in the borough across recent months. It is a project founded upon and informed by approaches proven to have been successful in other areas of the country within a children's centre context.

## DIFFERENTIATE APPROACHES

Using a proven, tried and tested model is one thing, but adapting it and differentiating approaches for new local areas is essential. So, at the outset the project team met with all children's centre managers in the reach areas to identify localised requirements, and to gather data (for example, families eligible for the two-year-old entitlement, and contact information on the key people who need to know about the project, including health visitors). This has been closely followed by visits to each children's centre within the clusters to get to know staff, particularly outreach and administration staff, and other service providers and partners to talk to them about the project, the target audience and its rationale so that focus is retained. Being clear about who the project is aimed at, and how it can link and support the development

of effective volunteering opportunities was quickly identified as a key objective.

## COMPLEMENT WHAT IS ALREADY IN PLACE

That said, partnership working is paramount across Lambeth, as is the culture of coproduction. So, maintaining close contact between the

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project and with children's centre managers is at the core of the approach, as well as with other service providers to ensure the best possible joined-up work. It is vital such projects work with partners to complement what is already being provided, not duplicate, unless there is a gap for particular provision. So clear signposting arrangements to Lambeth's other partners and providers is integral and a two-way process encouraging partners to signpost-in and refer parents to the project. The basis of which is building trust and confidence that parents will be properly served and respected.

At the outset, referral forms and publicity has been co-produced, distributed and placed in prominent areas, including doctors' surgeries and health centres. Working with children's centre staff and providers, the project

ensured the targeting of the correct group of parents and that they and other partners understand this and are committed to supporting families' engagement in it.

But printed information, forms and publicity is only part of the jigsaw puzzle. The project workers have started visiting children's centres and linked groups to talk about the project and engage with families right from the start. On a one-to-one or small group basis, Personal Development Plans (PDPs) have started to be completed for every parent/carer who has expressed an interest in the project. The PDPs give important information about the parent/carer, availability, childcare needs or concerns, language and transport requirements, qualifications and/or training needs, aspirations, and their dream employment/economic outcome. They provide an essential and agreed focus for everyone's time and investment.

## BUILD SOFT SKILLS

To offer a quick-win, a relationship-building opportunity and to move things forward effectively, the project offers an informal training programme to build soft-skills. This is through a series of short training sessions entitled 'Thinking about...' to further consult and coproduce, and respond to parents'/carers' needs identified through initial engagement. These sessions are 1-2 hours long and aim to build self-

esteem, and confidence in attending groups and training, offer first and supported opportunities to use crèche or childcare facilities, and look at barriers and solutions.

## COACH AND ENCOURAGE

Previous experience has shown that lots of coaching and encouragement is required at this stage to enable access, with text message reminders and friendly progress-checks. The 'extras' the project offers are always an added bonus, for example, certificates of attendance (creating a real sense of pride and achievement – often for the first time for many parents), reimbursement of travel (which is particularly important for our targeted group of low income/unemployed families), and the provision of a crèche or linking in with the free entitlement for 2, 3 & 4 year olds – hopefully raising local take-up rates in the process. Parents/carers of eligible two-year-olds and 3 & 4 year-olds are at a critical point in considering entering employment or volunteering, or preparing for this for when their children start school. If English as an Additional Language (EAL), or Level 1 and/or 2 maths and English needs have been identified, the project will be working to link with local providers to meet these needs too.

## TRY SOMETHING NEW

Further progression routes will be informed by reflecting on the 'Thinking about...' sessions and updating and revisiting the PDPs in course-based sessions to facilitate next steps to an in-house accredited training in volunteering (12-hours), or other learning – training and



qualifications, and employment opportunities. A series of 'Moving on...' sessions, more formal, more challenging and more in-depth aim to increase the knowledge of training, learning or employment opportunities; and develop participation and volunteering skills enabling contribution to the local community. Areas for delivery are chosen from a range including: CV writing, job applications, interview and communication skills, introductions to volunteering, and job-searching.

"I feel very excited that my children's centre was chosen to be part of this project," says Phyllis Hayden, Hitherfield Children's Centre Manager. "I don't believe that there has been anything quite like this in Lambeth before. Even though we are still at the initial stages I like the way that the program is set out and planned to make it seem that every stage is an achievement, a significant step towards each person's individual goal. I like that the objective is to support parents

on their way to where they want to be; it's not a race, it's ok for individuals to be moving forward at their own pace. The emphasis is equally balanced across the process of reflection, self-evaluation and perhaps trying something new rather than focusing wholly on getting a job at the end. Everyone is given the support and time to think about their individual circumstances; their own personal goals and the possible strategies of achieving them. While many of us would take this for granted it might not be so easy for some parents for whom confidence, childcare, language, recognised qualifications and experience is perceived as a barrier between them and their dream job or career, which in turn epitomises independence and fulfilment. I am looking forward to contributing to supporting the parents on their journey, seeing how well they will accomplish for themselves and the difference this program will make to their lives and the lives of their family."

# Reclaiming Quality

Quality has become a much-used term in the provision of early childhood services, but also a much debated one, particularly in regards to whether it is possible to define quality.

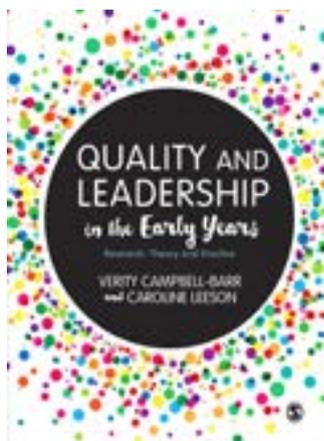
Interest in defining quality falls into two broad fields, one shaped by approaches that look to measure and assess quality and the other that is a more philosophical and interpretive approach to quality. In the first approach early childhood services are recognized as contributing to the holistic development of the child, understandings of quality therefore become the attributes that best predict a positive progression in child development. However, whilst the moral interpretation of this approach is one framed by a desire to better understand the features that will support a child's development, for policy makers (both nationally and internationally) this approach to quality has become about a 'know and fix mentality'. Understandings of child development contribute to identifying children with a-typical development, quality early childhood services are then defined by the features that will 'fix' the child. The difficulty with such an approach is that there is an assumed 'normal' child against which all children must be assessed and increasingly the understanding of the normal child is becoming

narrower and narrower. Whilst those working in early childhood services will recognize the importance of holistic child development, the interpretation of policy makers is increasingly focused on restricted understandings of cognitive development and I believe that this has consequences for understandings of quality.

The measuring of quality in relation to restricted understandings of child development is well illustrated by economic models of early childhood services as early intervention. Human capital perspectives, whereby the monies invested in a child's early years will result in economic savings in their adult life permeate global rationales for investing in early childhood services. The popularity of human capital perspectives is well illustrated by the frequency that I hear for every \$1 invested \$7 will be saved. The economic savings are based on an American study, the Perry Pre-School

Programme, which tracked the development of children who attended early childhood services and compared them to children who did not. The economic savings were in regards to reduced social expenditure on things such as crime, teenage pregnancy and additional educational support, as well as improved earnings once the children entered adulthood. There are difficulties as to whether an American-based study has relevance in the UK context (or for other countries) due to differences in early childhood services and those who work in them, not to mention different economic costs for the various outcomes. However, beyond the methodological problems, the rationale of 'invest now, save later' has saturated global interpretations of early childhood services, having consequences for understandings of children and quality.

Children are valued on the basis of what they will become, their future adult self, not their present child



## 20% Off for Children's Centre Leader readers

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self. Further, a child is only deemed to be a problem that needs fixing when there is an associated economic cost, with the focus being a deficit model of what the children are lacking rather than celebrating what they have got. The deficit model is particularly preoccupied with cognitive ability, focusing on knowledge and skills, rather than other attributes and outcomes that are just as important, such as well-being. I do not dispute that early childhood services offer value for money and that they are important for supporting the holistic development of the child, in fact I believe they offer far more value than is actually captured, particularly if assessments of value really did focus on a holistic understanding of the child. The consequences of the know and fix mentality is that quality early childhood services are determined by narrow conceptions of the role of those services and that quality assessments are equally narrow, focused on performing quality rather than really thinking about what it means.

I think that children's centres have particularly experienced this process of being expected to 'do' quality, being subjected to a number of assessment procedures that focus on the quality of services, but in relation to restricted constructions of both quality and outcomes. The Ofsted inspection is the unsurprising embodiment of doing quality, symbolizing the performativity of early childhood services.

An attack on Ofsted as the sole arbiter of quality would be easy; I recognize concerns about the duration of inspections, how meaningful the wording of the judgements are, whether the judgements are objective and the challenges to the ideology of improvement through inspection. However, my intention is not to begin a process of listing the frustrations that can be faced as a result of an Ofsted inspection, after all a national inspection body is never going to win a popularity contest.

I am interested in how understandings of quality and outcomes can extend beyond what can be seen and measured (and given an associated monetary value). There is a risk that in trying to introduce a tool to capture broader understandings of quality and outcomes that we could be faced with similar problems to now, with any kind of new tool still imposing some form of restriction. What I would propose as an alternative is to find the spaces for interpretation in understandings of quality and outcomes and embrace them as opportunities for creating understandings of

quality that are meaningful for children and families in their local context.

The wonderful thing about working in early childhood services is that when visiting a setting it is not like walking into a supermarket and I can predict the layout of the food. Walking into an early childhood setting, particularly children's centres, is characterised by wonderful variety, not just in relation to the physicality of the buildings, but the way in which the pedagogic environment is constructed, often with a clear intention to engage with the interests of children. What this illustrates to me is that there is no one model of quality and that quality standards are open to interpretation. I fully appreciate that the inspection process can feel like a cloud casting a shadow over early childhood services, but I encourage those working in early childhood services to see quality as an interpretive concept. Quality is the unquestioned prefix to early childhood services; now is the time to question it so that it becomes meaningful for those working in early childhood services and the children and families they work with.



**Dr. Verity Campbell-Barr** is a European Research Fellow at University of Debrecen, Hungary and a Lecturer in Early Childhood Studies at Plymouth University. Her research focusses on the quality of early childhood services, particularly the role of the workforce, and she is currently researching the knowledge, skills and attitudes required for working in early childhood services.

# Children's Centre Leader



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