

# Children's Centre Leader

POLICY

## The Scottish Approach - Love, Relationships and the Great Outdoors

**Joe Griffin**, leader of the expansion of funded early learning and childcare in Scotland, shares their approach, which is all about love, relationships and the great outdoors.

I'm Joe Griffin and I have the privilege of being the Scottish Government official leading the expansion of funded Early Learning and Childcare in Scotland. I am also a dad and a husband, a civil servant, policy professional and diversity champion. I am very lucky to do the job I do and have the opportunity to deliver a policy which will make such a positive difference to so many families in Scotland. Together with my team, we are determined to lead this policy in a way that improves outcomes, and to do so by working closely with, and listening

to, the 40,000 or so people in our wonderful sector.

My career has taken many different twists and turns and throughout my time in the Scottish Government, I've worked in many different areas including Safer Communities, Fair Work and Employability. As I've seen how difficult it can be for people to turn difficult problems around as adults, I've come to understand the importance of prevention and early intervention. This has seen me have a growing consciousness of the early years.

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## Welcome

Welcome to the March 2020 issue of Children's Centre Leader.

We have a wide range of articles in this first issue of Children's Centre Leader of 2020. Joe Griffin shares the Scottish approach to the expansion of funded early learning and childcare (opposite), while Brett Wigdortz, founder of Teach First, uses his experience to support childminders (p6). Loneliness among young parents and parental conflict is discussed (p14 and p16), and the role of universities in early years is considered (p9). And Liz Hodgson shares news of the LGA's search for early years experts (p19).

As always, let us know what you think by emailing: [cclr@hempalls.com](mailto:cclr@hempalls.com)

James Hempalls, OBE  
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When the opportunity arose to work for the Cabinet Secretary for Education to lead the programme of early learning and childcare expansion, I knew this was my real opportunity to make a difference to children and families right across Scotland.

## The Scottish Approach

In our children we see ourselves now and in the future. They are the measure of our wellbeing as a nation. Through early years provision, we enhance the life chances of children and we support families when they need it. Evidence tells us high-quality early learning and childcare (ELC) that is accessible to all children can be the cornerstone to closing the gap in educational attainment between the richer and poorer children in our society. This is something that the First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, has described as the defining mission of her administration.

Our offer, from this August, will be a universal offer of 1140 hours of ELC per year for all 3 and 4-year-olds per year, and for around a quarter of 2-year-olds based on eligibility criteria. 1140 hours per year equates roughly to 30 hours per week if families choose to take it during term time. However, local authorities are offering different models of ELC provision to parents/carers to suit their children and family's needs to allow much more flexibility and choice than is currently available.

We are building our expansion programme with a child first approach and measuring our success on outcomes for children and their families – in respect of their development, employment and wellbeing.

The targeted offer for 2 year olds is based on international evidence that high quality ELC makes a particular difference to children experiencing the worst disadvantage. For that reason, the eligibility criteria target children under the care of local authorities and children in families on a lower income or in receipt of benefits.

The need for high quality ELC is woven into every aspect of our policy decisions and changes. From how we communicate what we are doing, to the legislation underpinning the policy. Ultimately, though, high quality ELC can only be achieved if we have a high quality, skilled and diverse workforce across Scotland who are day in day out delivering ELC to our children.

## Love and relationships

We know that individuals who work in the ELC sector do it because they are passionate, they truly believe in giving children the best start in life and are dedicated to supporting every child's development.

I meet and speak with staff who work on the ground in ELC regularly all over Scotland, from Shetland to Dumfries, and I am mentored

by a nursery practitioner. These conversations and relationships have helped me advise ministers on shaping the policy underpinning the ELC expansion. This "coalface" perspective is invaluable to me and my team in the Scottish Government. I truly believe that those working in the ELC sector have the most important job of all – to love, care, nurture and teach the next generation. Love isn't often a word used by policymakers but I think love has to be embedded within ELC, policy, practice and everyday interactions. In fact, the Scottish National Performance Framework, which sets out what we are trying to achieve as a public sector, describes the outcome for children as "We grow up loved, safe and respected so that we realise our full potential."

We've created a range of resources, tools, documents and support packages for staff working in ELC from induction resources to new modules for continuous professional development. We are really working hard to change outdated perceptions of what it means to work in ELC. We want ELC to be valued as a lifelong career and we are working to increase the diversity of people in the sector by encouraging more men and people from ethnic minority communities to come on board. Some of the human stories here are fantastic. I was reading just last month about a 44-year-old man who swapped being a golf professional to come and



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work in ELC. He spoke about how he works with children who have additional support needs and how he adapts his approach to suit each child's need. He sees his role as much more than supporting children's development but providing them with skills for life and involving parents to be part of that journey too.

Relationships have also been key to improving some of the partnerships in the system. At points in the expansion, it has been fair to say that some of the private nursery owners have felt anxious about the potential impact of the expansion on them, and their ability to deliver high quality ELC. There have been sticking points at times around the rate being offered by local authorities to deliver the service, or

around a potential drift of staff from private to public settings. These are complex and sensitive issues, but we have worked hard with our partners in local government, and in the private sector, to promote dialogue, improve communication and foster more trust between the different players in the system. This has helped deliver real improvements in working relationships, a range of funding rates from 2020 that are fair, and an overall increase in the market share of private nurseries in delivering the funded expansion.

Importantly, in our offer, we empower parents to choose the best ELC setting for their child and family. Our Funding Follows the Child approach is provider neutral and ensures local authorities

are providing provision to suit local needs. For some families, the best environment for their child is to be with a childminder in a homely and nurturing space where they can grow and learn. Particularly for our youngest children and children with additional support needs.

## **Outdoors**

We have based our whole system of funded hours on quality. Together with local government and other partners, we've created a national standard that any provider (local authority nurseries, private nurseries, third sector nurseries and childminders) delivering funded early learning and

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childcare must meet. This covers things such as quality of care, the provision of a free nutritious meal and access to the outdoors for all children. Outdoor play and learning is something I am passionate about, Scotland has some of the most beautiful scenery in the world (yes, I'm biased!) and no matter where you live you don't need to go far to find it.

We are working with a third sector organisation, Inspiring Scotland, and with local authorities to increase the amount of outdoor provision, including fully outdoor nurseries in Scotland. Yes, that does mean children are outside in rain, snow, wind and hail, it just adds to the fun! We know that when children have regular access to outdoor environments it has a positive impact on their social, emotional and physical wellbeing and with a bit of creativity any indoor learning opportunity can be done just as easily outdoors too.

We are already seeing the positive impact of children accessing more outdoor provision, and trialled and evaluated this in a community in Glasgow, Castlemilk. Children and families were taken on a journey of transforming a woodland area which was previously a known drug-taking spot to creating a clean, safe, outdoor learning environment where Monday to Friday children are seen engaging with their natural environment. At weekends, the space is

filled with local families enjoying being outdoors together in all weathers. This is just one story of many of how the environment is delivering outcomes (including unintended ones) for children, families and communities in Scotland.

### **Where we are now**

We are now in the delivery year, with six months to go until the full rollout of the expansion. We continue to work closely with local authorities and partners and delivery thus far is going well. National-level data shows that we have over half the workforce recruited, over half the required capacity is in place and nearly 50,000 children are already receiving their extra hours. For me, as well as these quantitative "at scale" measures, stories are an important indicator in measuring our success, and it is so gratifying to hear the many positive examples of the child's development and Mums and Dads going back to college, or increasing their hours at work.

We are not complacent when it comes to delivering ELC and we know we still have a lot of work to do, as do councils and other partners. Of course, the work doesn't stop in August. August is an important milestone but it is the end of the beginning and where a lot of the work starts.

### **Beyond 2020**

Since the inception of the ELC expansion in Scotland, we have always been looking beyond August 2020 at the long-term outcomes and long-term change ELC will have for Scotland. The ELC expansion is the biggest social infrastructure programme for the Scottish Government for many years. We know this progressive policy will touch the lives of so many children and families in Scotland. We will see on so many other related public services, and most importantly in communities up and down the country. But we know one 'service' can't fix everything and we continue to work across sectors and boundaries to improve and make things better for children and families in Scotland beyond August and beyond ELC.

Whenever we create or develop policy and deliver change and practice if we have kindness, love and relationships embedded we won't go far wrong.

'Whatever the question is the answer is always relationships,' John Carnochan, previous leader of the Scottish Violence Reduction Unit.



**Joe Griffin** was appointed Director for the newly formed Directorate of Early Learning and Childcare in April 2018, after two years leading the work as part of a wider portfolio.

He has been working for the Scottish Government since 2004 in mainly policy roles, including:

- » Deputy Director for Creating Positive Futures, Directorate for Children and Families
- » Acting Director for Fair Work
- » Head of Reducing Reoffending, Directorate for Justice
- » Principal Private Secretary to First Minister

Before his move to Scotland, Joe was a diplomat at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office which included postings to New York and Paris.

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# Why We Need A New Approach To Supporting Childminders

**Brett Wigdortz**, founder of Tiney.co, shares his practical solution to supporting childminders to build a sustainable business.

When I founded Teach First almost two decades ago, the aim was to tackle the terrible shortage of teachers and leaders in the schools whose children needed them most. Today I see a similar urgent need to attract, retain and develop talent in the early years sector.

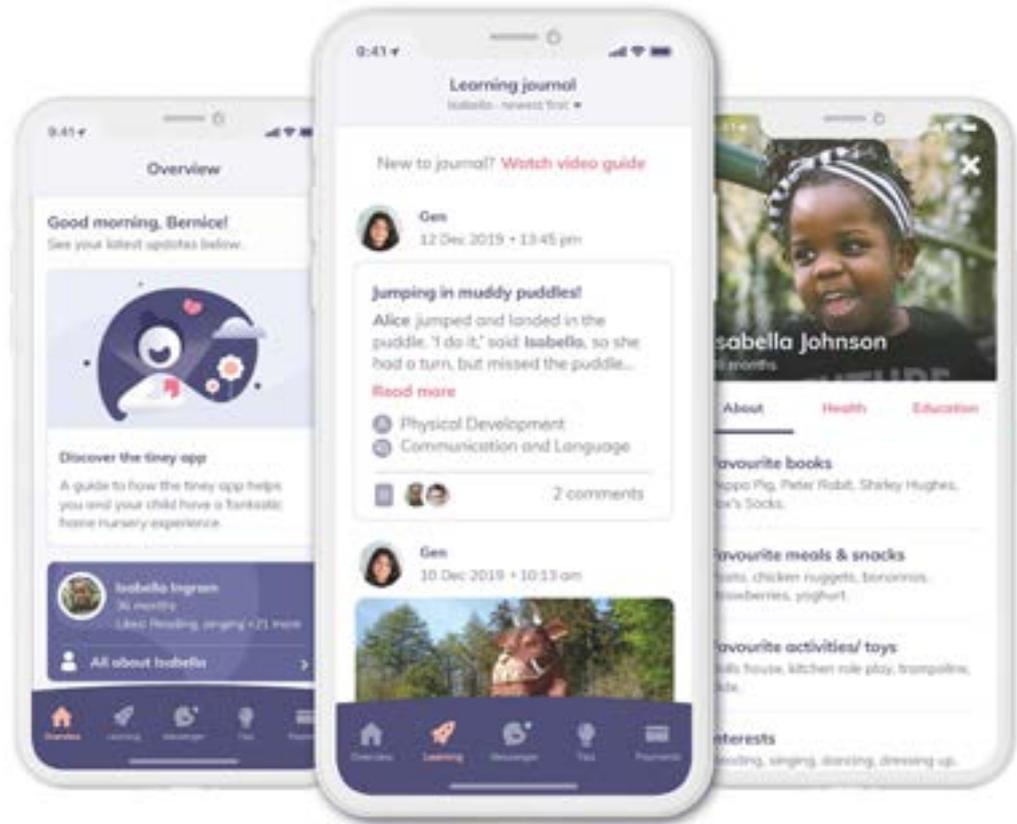
While the teaching shortage hasn't been solved, the charity Teach First has trained more than ten thousand teachers in the last 17 years. It is now the largest recruiter of graduates and the largest teacher educator in the UK, bringing over 1600 great teachers a year into schools serving the most economically disadvantaged communities and helping them improve children's learning and lives. Now a similar solution is needed to tackle a strikingly similar problem which has developed in the early years sector – the long term, continuing decline in the number of childminders. To try and develop that solution, I began working with some of the leading professionals in early years to better

understand the problem and work out how childminding could be better for childcare professionals, parents and most importantly for children.

This is a personal mission. I know how vital the early years are. During the fifteen years I ran Teach First I visited scores of primary schools and reception classes, talked to hundreds of teachers and parents and young people and realised that far too many children are starting school not knowing the basics. Too often they didn't know how to play and talk with others and clearly hadn't had other foundational experiences like having books read to them. There are too many children who haven't benefited from great early years education grounded in the EYFS framework.

At the same time, as a parent of young children myself, I struggled to find good childcare for my three children. I was lucky to find a great childminder in the end and my children had a wonderful experience. Yet, even though demand for

childcare has never been higher, too many parents don't have the resources, time and money to find what they want and what is best for their children. As I investigated the issue further, I discovered that too many childcare professionals aren't happy with their work as childminders. The result, as many in the sector know only too well, has been a huge long-term decline in the number of childminders in the UK from 102,000 in 1996 to only 39,000 in 2019. This startling rate of decline is not slowing down. Last year 1,300 childminders left the sector after working in childminding on average for nine years, resulting in a terrible loss of expertise and experience. As I tried to understand the issues behind these disturbing trends, I interviewed more than a hundred childminders to ask them about their experience. Time and again the same issues came up; the bureaucracy, too much paperwork and form-filling, the financial difficulties, the hidden costs of insurance,



registration, the difficulty collecting payment, the lack of support and training and the loneliness of the role, not feeling part of a community. As I listened to the stories of frustration, I also heard how much childminders loved their real work of caring for and developing children, and I became more and more convinced there must be a solution to this three-sided problem. If we could create a great supportive, professional experience for childminders we could solve the problem for everyone. So, after more research, I

pulled together a group of experts across childcare, early education, technology, business and finance and together over two years we have developed the concept of Tiney. Legally, we are an Ofsted-registered Childminder Agency, but in practice we are much more. We are developing a whole new approach to providing early years childcare that addresses the frustrations of childcare professionals and parents and provides a brilliant early years education for children. We encourage and enable

childcare professionals to start new nurseries or "tiney homes" in their own homes and provide them with very high-quality support and inspirational training. Our "Home Leaders" as we call them don't have to deal with the burden of bureaucracy, paperwork, inspections, insurance and managing finances so that they can concentrate on what they do best and love most which is delivering excellent care to their children. We believe that this can make childminding (continued on p.8)

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both a professionally satisfying and financially sustainable career again.

One of our principles is that if you're not earning you shouldn't be working. I have met far too many childminders who spend far too much of their time billing, filling in EYFS observations, planning events, organising meet ups with other childminders, sorting out insurance, accounting, and trying to find good training and support. With our simple and easy to use online platform we take all that unnecessary work away from them so they can focus on looking after the children. Our app looks after the billing, provides regular updates for parents, helps them find our Tiney Home leaders customers, information and

the training they need at no extra cost, easily connect with other childminders in 'tiney neighbourhood' activities and access all the services and support they need in one place. Although we do have great, easy-to-use technology, we don't see ourselves as just a tech business rather as tech-enabled. The focus is on providing the best possible training and support to childminders and the best service to parents and so naturally these days everyone expects to access this through technology.

We are in the early days of our development and currently around 25 Tiney Home Leaders are signing up every month. We expect to have around 300 Tiney homes in London by the end of this year which will already be 1% of the total number of childminders in the UK. The feedback so far from tiney home leaders and their parents has been

fantastic. If we can show that this model works in London and genuinely helps both childminders and parents navigate the challenges of childcare, then we hope to grow throughout the country in the coming years.

We believe that there are many qualified teachers, key stage workers, teaching assistants and nursery staff with great skills and experience with young children who would be attracted by the prospect of greater control over their lives and improved earning potential which is offered by becoming a Tiney home leader. From my experience, people who work in the early years sector are some of the most inspirational professionals I've ever met. They are shaping the future of our country and my hope is that we at Tiney can play a role in helping them in this most vital mission.



**Brett's** lifelong mission is to help every child access an excellent education. He wrote the original business plan for Teach First and led the organisation for fifteen years, helping to build it into one of the UK's leading movements to tackle education inequality and the largest graduate recruiter in the country. He is co-founder and was Deputy CEO of Teach For All, which has brought the model to over 50 countries around the world. His current focus is as co-founder and CEO of Tiney.co, a digital platform that aims to improve the quality of early years education and as the non-executive chairman of the UK's National Citizen Service. He is also a trustee & co-founder of Teach First Israel and the UK Fair Education Alliance and on the board of Bite Back 2030 aiming to reduce youth obesity. He received an OBE for services to education in 2012.

# Is There A Role For Universities In Developing Early Years Services?

**Sally Pearse**, Strategic Lead for Early Years for South Yorkshire Futures at Sheffield Hallam University, reflects after two years leading the project.

My background as an early years teacher, community development worker and nursery director has been driven by my belief that high quality early years provision and services are a vehicle for social justice and transforming children's outcomes. However, since moving full-time into higher education lecturing at Sheffield Hallam University in 2015, I had felt slightly removed from this purpose, despite my continuing role as chair of trustees for a community nursery.

Sheffield Hallam is one of the largest universities in the UK, with 30,817 students and 4,350 members of staff and it recruits a large proportion of students from South Yorkshire, however the region has one of the lowest rates of participation in higher education in the UK (<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/widening-participation-in-higher-education-2019>). Traditionally the role of universities in relation to Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) has been to train the future workforce from Foundation Degrees to

Postgraduate qualifications and to support research in this area. The regional statistics around educational aspiration and attainment led Sheffield Hallam to launch the ambitious South Yorkshire Futures (SYF) programme in 2017 which proposed working with the early years sector in a very different way. This programme was initially set up to explore if the university could play a key role in working with regional partners to address the inequality that impacted on the educational attainment and social mobility of young people in South Yorkshire. This innovation was also partly in response to two government initiatives around social mobility and a drive for universities to play a more direct role in schools (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills 2015, Department for Education 2016).

SYF has three strands broadly structured around different life stages. These start at Early Years, move through primary and secondary schooling, and also cover transition into Further Education, Higher Education and wider routes

into employment. I am the Strategic Lead for the Early Years strand of SYF and was thrilled that the programme was to start with early years as so often the focus when talking about social mobility concentrates on the later stages of childhood.

At the outset of SYF the small team established to deliver the programme did not know if a university would be welcomed into this space and although we envisioned that we might be able to play a coordinating and facilitating role to develop services across local authority boundaries, we were not sure how this would be received. Now, after two years and with SYF set to continue as part of Sheffield Hallam's core business, I felt it was a time to reflect on what we have achieved together with our partners and the benefits and challenges of a university taking on this role.

The early years strand of SYF started with an intense period of work with regional representatives from across the sector to co-construct

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a regional Vision for Early Years and a regional approach to school readiness. This process cemented existing relationships that the university had with the sector and built new ones with strategic leaders. At the SYF "One Year On" event in September 2018 these vision documents were adopted by the four local authorities in the region: Barnsley, Doncaster, Rotherham and Sheffield.

These shared visions have underpinned the range of work we have subsequently undertaken which has brought in an additional £2.2million for early years services in South Yorkshire since 2017.

The projects include:

- » A partnership with the Family Lives charity which now provides an intensive home visiting service for

140 two-year-olds and their families across the four local authorities.

- » An early outcomes project that has enabled the development of a regional skills framework and training strategy to support young children's speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) and laid the foundation for continued regional collaboration to transform SLCN services.
- » The first stages of development of an Early Excellence Hub through the School Nurseries Capital Fund based on a partnership between a local school, Save the Children UK and Sheffield Hallam University.
- » A course for head teachers and Foundation Stage leaders to support the development of evidence-based practice.

- » A research project through the Shine Educational Trust exploring how Philosophy for Children (P4C) approaches can be used to support young children's language and thinking skills.

The two years we have been in operation have been intense and it would be easy to feel complacent about what we had achieved but I wanted to find out how this had felt for our early years partners and I asked for feedback on the benefits and challenges of working with the university. The response from Family Lives provided an interesting insight to the benefits of partnership with a place-based organisation to a charity that had not previously worked in our region. Family Lives drew on our regional

relationships and contacts to give momentum to their home visiting project:

*Being part of South Yorkshire Futures has brought numerous advantages for Family Lives while we have been setting and delivering the ParentChild+ randomised controlled trial in South Yorkshire.*

*It can often take time to find the right people to meet within local authorities or councils, to mobilise a project, but this was made easy by being invited to a meeting at which the right people were all present; this meant communication and vital meetings with them could start without delay. (Senior Area Manager, Family Lives)*

The size of the university and the range of professional services contained within it also offered much needed capacity for a small organisation such as Family Lives to deliver its programme e.g. the Sheffield Hallam press office issued news releases which helped in early stages of promotion. This relationship also provided benefits to the university through the job opportunities it offered to alumni:

*We are pleased to have recruited some former Sheffield Hallam students into our new staff project team, assisted by Hallam advertising of the posts. Through our connection with Hallam, we were invited to the Festival of Education and the South Yorkshire Futures "One Year On" event and these helped to raise awareness of Family Lives and the ParentChild+ programme, and to build our network of contacts. (Senior*

Area Manager, Family Lives)

The largest project we have undertaken is funded through Early Outcomes to develop regional approaches and strategies to support young children's speech, language and communication needs. SYF was originally approached by Doncaster LA to help to pull together a bid for South Yorkshire as it fitted with the regional vision we had just finished co-constructing and the process of relationship and vision building has created a South Yorkshire approach which in turn has made projects that are regional a natural development for us:

*It was immediately felt that through the strong partnership working with the university and South Yorkshire futures the LAs the best chance of success would be to jointly bid with South Yorkshire Futures. The university was pivotal to the success of the bid and gave each LA support, direction, advice and was able to steer and strengthen the bidding process. After the bid was successful the colleagues from South Yorkshire Futures immediately made arrangements to drive the work forward and have been instrumental to all the success the project has had so far. (Service Leader – Early Years and Childcare Quality, Inclusion and Workforce Development, Rotherham Metropolitan Council)*

During the bid-writing process the LAs approached the university to take on the overall management of the year-long project as they recognised the subject knowledge, project management skills and data

analysis expertise contained within the wider SYF team. The drive to deliver a significant amount of work in the tight 12-month timescale has created tensions but as we approach completion, partners reflected very positively on the role of the university as an 'honest broker' outside of the local authority structures:

*There have been some great advantages to collaborative working across the region with South Yorkshire Futures. The knowledge, skills and expertise within the Sheffield Hallam team has brought with it a new dynamic to the project and enabled progress to be maintained throughout. There has been a real value added to operational meetings and workshops with the University as an impartial body providing a more holistic perspective, a clear focus and a strong steer to meet our intended aims and objectives. (Early Years Inclusion Officer, Doncaster Council)*

SYF is now working with Watercliffe Meadow Primary School, Sheffield City Council and Save the Children UK to create an Early Excellence Hub in a former children's centre nursery adjoining the school which will provide Free Early Learning (FEL) places for two-year-olds alongside a range of support programmes and projects for young families. The innovation for the Hub comes from this partnership and the way in which the university will use this as a research base to test what works in early years and to

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disseminate these findings across the region. Partners have again welcomed the capacity the university brings to develop bids and projects:

*We have worked closely with South Yorkshire Futures over the past 18 months in a project to develop an 'Early Excellence Hub'. This will be a new two-year FEL provision to cater for families from our community. I can honestly say that the project would not have progressed to the stage we're at without the ongoing support and wider expertise that South Yorkshire Futures has brought. The team has been able to draw on experts and learning from a number of departments within Hallam and other networks established through their work across South Yorkshire and beyond. The team are true research-based innovators and it has been a pleasure to work in partnership with them.* (Head Teacher, Watercliffe Meadow Primary School, Sheffield)

There have however been tensions in developing work with partners and while I am very gratified that those who have contributed have focused on the positive it is right that we also reflect on and learn from these challenges. In the mid stages of some of the projects there have been challenges to maintain momentum whilst taking

into account the competing pressures that each partner is under. These challenges come from a university attempting to understand and negotiate the complexity of different local authority structures and from our partners attempting to deliver their services and training in a large organisation like Sheffield Hallam:

*It has sometimes been challenging as an outside organisation to navigate the procedures for booking rooms and the IT systems and equipment, but this is minimal compared with having access to the rooms in the first place.* (Senior Area Manager, Family Lives)

Overall, the last two years has provided strong evidence that universities can play a significant role in supporting the educational health of their area as they bring a set of knowledge, skills, capacity and existing relationships and partnerships that can support smaller organisations or facilitate the development of new initiatives and system change. As these facilitating factors exist across disciplines this is a model that could be replicable in other areas such as health. This potential role for universities has been increasingly recognised in the Civic University agenda which aims to strengthen the connection between

universities and their places. In his foreword to the University Partnerships Programme (UPP) report 'Truly Civic' (2019), Lord Bob Kerslake highlighted that this was mutually beneficial and especially important to all partners in these uncertain times:

*...universities can be (alongside local authorities and the health sector), significant 'anchor institutions', able to make an enormous impact on the success of their places. While universities are vital to their places, they also need the active support of their communities in these turbulent and challenging times. Put simply, they need all the friends that they can get.*

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**Sally** is currently the Early Years strategic lead for the Sheffield Hallam University South Yorkshire Futures Project which aims to improve the educational health of the region through facilitating and coordinating partnership working with local authorities and settings. Prior to this role Sally was the Head of Area for Early Years Initial Teacher Training (0-5 years) in the Sheffield Institute of Education. Sally worked for many years in community early years provision, establishing a Sure Start project in Sheffield and subsequently running a children's centre nursery. Sally is the Chair of the South Yorkshire branch of the charity Early Education and chair of trustees for a community nursery.

# We Need To Keep The Conversation Going: Tackling Loneliness Among Parents of young children

**Hannah Parlett**, from Coram Family and Childcare, examines the problem of loneliness among parents of young children and shares details of a funded research project investigating the impact of that loneliness.

In October 2018, Theresa May announced the launch of the Building Connections Fund; a partnership between Government, The National Lottery Community Fund and the Co-op Foundation to combat loneliness in local communities. This was a response to the seminal report published in December 2017 by the Jo Cox Commission which revealed that millions of people across the UK were experiencing feelings of isolation. Before her death, the MP for Batley and Spen started a crucial conversation: "young or old, loneliness doesn't discriminate."

Coram Family and Childcare were proud to receive support from the National Lottery to understand the impact of loneliness on parents of young children, and find ways to help. The Parent Champions for Community Connections project will support eight groups of local parents to work together to combat loneliness while their children are young. Our first

step was to conduct hear from parents about their personal experiences of isolation.

The general picture is cause for concern. Our findings are based on an opinion poll of 529 parents and five focus groups with parents of young children. Over half of parents (56%) with children under five feel lonely: 21% feel a lack of companionship, and 76% feel left out at least some of the time. Even though anyone can feel lonely, mothers are twice as likely as fathers to say that they often feel left out. Age also plays a role: younger parents (18 to 24) are more likely to report a lack of companionship than parents aged 25 to 34. Parents on the lowest incomes are more likely to feel isolated than those with the highest incomes (33% vs 16%).

Parents told us about a range of barriers in accessing local activities designed to bring parents together. One mother of a child with autism told us that she could no longer

attend a session in a library because it had introduced automatic doors, meaning that her son could potentially run out into the road. Many said that stay and play sessions can feel 'cliquey' and newcomers often feel that they are the odd one out in a crowd of parents who already know each other.

Some of the steps to combat parents' loneliness are easy. Accessibility of libraries and children's centres must be a priority. The enormous impact of friendly gestures such as a simple 'hello' cannot be overestimated. Speaking at the annual Margaret Horn debate in November 2019, Claire Harding (Head of Coram Family and Childcare) reminded attendees that walking into a crowded room of parents and professionals can be an intimidating prospect: "Welcome everyone at the door and remember that people, especially parents, prefer being told what to do. Shoes go there, take a seat on the floor here. Nursery rhymes start in 5 minutes."

These small acts of inclusion are behaviours that everyone can practice, whether it is the group's leader or another parent attending the session; everyone can play a role in addressing parental isolation.

We hope that this research will contribute to the wider discussion about loneliness currently emerging out initiatives across the UK. The research marks the beginning of a longer ongoing project of forging meaningful connections between parents via the Parent Champions programme, our well-established peer-to-peer mentoring model. However, if our initial findings have demonstrated one key message, it is that often the first step in combatting loneliness is simply to start a new conversation.



**Hannah Parlett** has been Membership and Communications Assistant at Coram Family and Childcare since May 2019. She works closely with the National Association of Family Information Services (NAFIS), the only national membership organisation supporting local authorities to deliver high quality information and advice to families. Hannah is also a first-year PhD candidate at the Centre of Film and Screen at the University of Cambridge. Her current research focuses on the depiction of gender and social class by British and American directors since the 1970s through the lens of feminist philosophy and psychoanalysis.

# Why Reducing Parental Conflict Matters To Early Intervention

The Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) is a children's charity and What Works Centre, established to champion and support the use of effective early intervention to improve the lives of children and young people at risk of experiencing poor outcomes. So why the recent focus on conflict between parents and what does this mean for early years leaders? **Ben Lewing**, Assistant Director, Policy & Practice, EIF, explains.

EIF published an [evidence review](#) in 2016 into how conflict between parents affects child outcomes. The review found that how parents communicate and relate to each other is a primary influence on parenting, and on children's mental health and life chances. Although some conflict in relationships is normal, when this conflict is frequent, intense and poorly resolved it can profoundly affect children at any age.

The evidence described in the review showed what really matters to children is not their parents' relationship structure (ie whether they are married, separated or divorced) but the relationship quality. It showed how destructive relationships between parents is associated with a wide range of problems for children and young people, including mental health difficulties, poorer academic outcomes, reduced employment prospects and poor future relationship chances.

None of this will have come as a surprise to those

working directly with families. But nonetheless it was shocking to realise how little attention public policy had paid to the importance of parental relationship quality to child outcomes. EIF described parental conflict as a 'neglected site' for early intervention and subsequent EIF reviews set out how:

- » Longitudinal evidence shows that parents in poverty or under economic pressure are more likely to experience relationship conflict, which can affect outcomes for children. According to data from the Department for Work and Pensions, children living in workless families are three times more likely to have parents in distressed relationships.
- » Economic pressure impacts on parents' mental health, which can cause relationship problems and difficulties with parenting. These difficulties can include reduced parental sensitivity and time spent interacting with their child, and can lead to harsher parenting practices, which are linked to future difficulties for children and

adolescents.

- » A focus on parent-child interaction alone is insufficient, in fact in a context of parental conflict even the best evidenced parenting interventions appear to be less effective.
- » Support for relationships is not easily available within existing family services, and there is a patchwork of largely uncoordinated relationship support provision across the country, which appears to be inconsistent in level and availability.
- » Families who stand to gain the most from relationship support are the least likely to receive it due to a range of barriers including lack of parent's awareness, access or the acceptability of reaching out for help. This is compounded by the fact that many of those working in family services treat relationship conflict as 'a private matter', and lack the confidence, tools, knowledge and time to talk to parents about relationship issues.

All of this is important to those working in the early

years. The risk of conflict between parents is higher at key transition points in family life and many of these fall in the early stages of parenthood – becoming pregnant, having a baby, or a child starting or changing school.

Children of all ages can be affected by destructive parental conflict, but they may be affected in different ways. Children as young as six months show symptoms of distress when exposed to parental conflict, infants up to the age of five display symptoms such as crying or acting out, and children in middle childhood (six to 12 years) and adolescents show emotional and behavioural distress. Children who witness or are aware of conflict between parents, or who blame themselves, are affected to a greater extent. This suggests that child perceptions of parental conflict could be an important focus for interventions.

Yet the presenting behavioural issue can mask the parental conflict cause, particularly for younger children who are less able to understand and articulate their emotions.

They need sensitive and skilled trusted adults to identify conflict issues and offer tailored support or treatment. And crucially, these trusted adults need to be willing to have sometimes difficult conversations with parents to help them to understand how conflict is affecting their children and what they can do about it.

Early years services offer regular opportunities to build trust and relationships with parents, from the booking in appointment with midwifery through the development checks provided by health visitors and the interactions with children's centres and family hubs. These are the moments which can normalise talking about relationship quality, alongside the other important conversations about physical and mental health, parenting, housing and money.

Healthy relationships need to be everyone's business. The evidence is also growing for interventions which

can reduce the impact of parental conflict on children. They appear to have specific components:

- » helping couples to understand the impacts of conflict behaviours, and what they could do differently
- » focusing on stress management, effective coping and problem-solving
- » building skills, through modelling, role play and feedback, to communicate more effectively and avoid conflict
- » for parents in the context of divorce or separation, building motivation to strengthen the quality of parenting and not to undermine the other parent
- » targeting couple relationship communication and conflict management skills at key transition points, as in the case of a child's school transition.

These are very relevant to support in the early years, and many of the interventions

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with the strongest evidence are parenting programmes designed for the early years, such as Triple P, Family Check-up and Family Foundations. More detail about these interventions is available in [EIF's online Guidebook](#).

There are also important messages for early years leaders from EIF's recent evidence review on [Engaging Disadvantaged and Vulnerable Parents](#) which directly relate to the way that services are designed and delivered, including carefully matching interventions with the needs, concerns and lifestyles of the target audience, recruiting practitioners with similar experiences to the target audience and making sure that staff have sufficient time

to build trust and relationships with parents. This relational approach appears to be key to effectiveness in early years services.

Reducing parental conflict is now the focus of a national programme, led by the Department for Work and Pensions, and every local area is considering how they can take action, including through workforce training and targeted interventions. Early years leaders can and should be key champions for this work – it is the opportunity to show how secure foundations make a lifetime of difference. Find out more at the [EIF's Reducing Parental Conflict Hub](#).



**Ben Lewing**, Assistant Director, Policy & Practice leads EIF's work on the early years and parental conflict, and supports local leaders and commissioners on the practical implementation of early intervention with a focus on systems.

He joined EIF in 2015 having spent the previous decade working in local government on children's strategy and partnerships, most recently as a strategic joint commissioner for Solihull Council and Solihull CCG leading on early help in the early years, emotional wellbeing, support for children with disabilities, speech and language therapy and domestic abuse. Ben is social work qualified and started his career working in children's homes in Birmingham, before he specialised in children's rights and participation, working for Save the Children UK and the Children and Young People's Unit.

# Early Years (Speech, Language and Communication) Peer Challenge Programme

**Liz Hodgman** shares news of the Local Government Association (LGA)'s search for experienced, early years experts from a range of backgrounds to support the delivery of the Early Years (Speech, Language and Communication) Peer Challenge programme.

The LGA has been commissioned by the Department for Education (DfE) to deliver this programme of peer challenges as part of their Unlocking Talent, Fulfilling Potential: A plan for improving social mobility through education. The LGA has now completed over 20 Early Years Peer Challenges across England, with more scheduled for the spring and summer terms.

Peer challenge is a proven tool for improvement and involves a small team of officers spending time with a council and its partners to provide challenge and share learning. The peer team will interview leaders and managers, facilitate focus groups of staff and observe practice. The key purpose of the challenge is to stimulate local discussion about how the council and its partners can become more effective in delivering improved outcomes for children.

All members of the peer team are knowledgeable about, and experienced in, the delivery of early years and will include professionals

from a range of backgrounds including: local authority; public health; children's centres; midwives; health visitors; speech and language therapy; childcare; education; and libraries. The peer team will also study documents, strategies, plans, policies, performance information and a self-assessment produced by the local area.

The peer team feed back to the council and their partners, both verbally and then in writing, their observations and formulate recommendations based on the evidence they have seen, heard and read.

Whilst each challenge is different there are some common themes emerging:

- » Some areas have a lack of clarity around school readiness. Different organisations within the early years system have different understandings and expectations. This can create a disjointed system and confuse parents and carers. Some areas have created clear family journeys from conception to starting school with visual pathways to share with parents.

- » Whilst some areas have

an early years strategy in place, many are not multi-agency and do not focus on the whole early years system.

- » Most areas do not have a shared outcomes frameworks and data dashboards across their systems. These ensure that all organisations are accountable and responsible for the outcomes for the areas' families. Establishing a clear governance structure for the early years system is critical.
- » There needs to be a greater use of data to ensure needs-led commissioning is effective.
- » Co-construction with parents and communities needs to be improved across many areas. This will empower parents and enable greater peer support within communities, making interventions and programmes more sustainable. There are some excellent examples of where this is working really well and parents have gone on to deliver and lead on projects within their own

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community.

- » Levels of two-year-old funded childcare take up are low in some areas and this can result in a reduction of early identification of children with speech and language delays.
- » The two-year-old reviews are not always integrated between health visiting and childcare providers. Managers of day nurseries and pre-schools are not always provided with information on the Ages and Stages Questionnaires completed with families. This can impact on early identification of needs and referrals for appropriate support.
- » Services need to be more robustly evaluated. Understanding why services are not effective in some areas will enable more effective future commissioning.
- » Partnership working is still developing in some areas and needs strengthening. There are some excellent co-delivery models across the country with key partners being co-located within children's centres

and working as one team to support families.

- » The importance of the Home Learning Environment is widely acknowledged, however some areas need to plan more support for families to improve parental expectations and understanding of their child's developmental needs.

The LGA has been sharing the learning from the peer challenges through termly learning events. These events provide an opportunity to share good practice and innovative ideas, learn how other councils have overcome barriers to delivering interventions and improved partnership working across their systems. These learning events have also included information about national programmes and policy, for example from the BBC and DfE.

Being part of a peer challenge team is intensive but rewarding. It is a valuable learning experience, enabling a two-way exchange of

good practice and provides an opportunity to reflect on your own locality's performance. It highlights innovative ways of working that can support sustained improvement and offers the chance to work alongside people from across the country who have a passion for children's services. It is also an opportunity to build long lasting professional networks.

We expect peers to have an excellent understanding of services for disadvantaged children and families and the drivers of outcomes at the age of five; to be inquisitive and open minded; and to be able to challenge effectively.

The LGA will be delivering more peer training events at Warwick University. If you are interested in learning more about the training then please do get in touch. We are particularly keen to hear from children's centre leaders and health professionals based in children's centres.

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**Liz Hodgman**, Programme Manager for Early Years, Local Government Association, has worked in the early years sector for over 25 years. Her roles have included delivering and managing childcare provision, NVQ assessor and childminding network coordinator. Liz has managed groups of children's centres in London boroughs and been the Early Years Strategy Manager for a London Council.

# Children's Centre Leader

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