

ELIZABETH TRUSS LETTER

Sent: 15 May 2014: 12:16

To: Jane.Payler

15th May 2014

Dear Jane, Wendy, Elizabeth and Ian,

Thank you for your letter of 11 March, enclosing policy recommendations in connection with early years education.

The guidance you provided was thought provoking. I was pleased to have the chance also to hear some of Jane's thoughts on this at the meeting with other academics on 26 March, which I found very constructive. Since you wrote, I have also seen a copy of TACTYC's letter to Sir Michael Wilshaw about his recent letter to early years inspectors.

Like Sir Michael, I share with BERA and TACTYC the aim of making sure that children from all backgrounds are given the best possible start in life, and that the policies we pursue to support that are based on the strongest evidence, both national and international. You may be aware that I have commissioned the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) to carry out a comparative study of quality in the early years across several of its member countries. I have also commissioned the Study of Early Education and Development (SEED), a major new longitudinal study which will follow 8,000 two-year-olds from across England through to the end of key stage 1. It will explore how childcare and early education can help to give children the best start in life and what is important for high-quality childcare provision.

Again, like BERA and TACTYC, I recognise the impact of the people working with children in the early years, and how important it is that those people have the right training, skills and qualifications to support children in their learning. As you will know, we have improved the specialised training for Early Years Teachers and set them the same rigorous entry requirements as primary teacher training. In addition, the specialist Teachers' Standards we have introduced for this workforce also explicitly set out what we expect from them. They must have a secure knowledge of early childhood development, as well as planning balanced and flexible activities and educational programmes that take into account the stage of development, circumstances and interests of children, and promoting a love of learning and stimulating intellectual curiosity in those children, in partnership with parents and/or carers. Lastly, and in recognition of the points in your briefing about the necessity of developmental play, Early Years Teachers will need to demonstrate their ability to use a variety of teaching approaches to lead group activities appropriate to the age range and ability of children.

Like you, I believe that teaching in the early years needs to be age appropriate, and I recognise the key role that parents have to play as their child's earliest educators, as flagged in your policy recommendations. Sir Michael Wilshaw has rightly highlighted that when parents count the stairs as they carry their child to bed, when they read a toddler stories and sing nursery rhymes, and when they guide them so they can play with other children, it is teaching. I echo that, and I note that that is what happens in high-quality nurseries. Those skilled in working with young children know that we are not advocating starting school work at an early age, but rather about working with parents and/or carers to help children develop the language, communication and social skills to learn.

Your policy recommendations refer to the need to get assessment and transitions right in the early years. Our reforms to the accountability system for primary schools set high expectations so that all

children can reach their potential. We believe that no child should be allowed to fall behind. We are working to make sure that the new assessment arrangements in Reception link effectively with other assessments in the early years, such as the progress check at age two and the Healthy Child Programme Review. We are exploring integrating these assessments, to enable parents and carers to develop as full a picture as possible of a child's progress, and to facilitate effective early intervention where necessary.

You also focus on reforms to taxation and parental leave arrangements that could support parents in terms of childcare. As you know, we have already made changes to flexible parental leave that will enable parents to share this leave and revolutionise their lives at work and home. In the last Budget, we announced measures that mean that tax-free childcare is now worth up to £2,000 per child per year, and that, for working families on lower incomes, up to 85 per cent of childcare costs are to be met under Universal Credit. In addition, we have announced the Early Years Pupil Premium, amounting to £50 million in 2015-16, which will give providers extra money for disadvantaged three- and four-year-olds. This links the two-year-old programme to the school pupil premium, and underlines our commitment to giving parents and providers practical support.

Finally, I would like to stress that we are continuing to cut red tape, making it easier for nurseries to expand, and helping them to operate more efficiently and invest in quality whilst keeping prices in line with what parents can afford. Quality is rising and an immense amount of effort is going in to improving practice by all providers. However, we know that there is more to do, and I am grateful to BERA and TACTYC for their continued contribution to the ongoing programme of research and policy work.

Thank you for writing on this important matter, and I hope my reply is helpful to you.

With best wishes,

Elizabeth Truss MP
Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Education and Childcare