

**TACTYC response to the Labour Party Children and Education Policy Commission**

**Delivering a step change in early intervention and the early years**

TACTYC is an organisation of over 600 members. Our activities include:

* **advocacy and lobbying** - providing a voice for all those engaged with the professional development of practitioners through responding to early years policy initiatives and contributing to the debate on the education and training of the UK early years workforce;
* **informing** – developing the knowledge-base of all those concerned with early years education and care by disseminating research findings through, for example, our international [Early Years Journal](http://www.tactyc.org.uk/EarlyYears.asp), annual conference, website and occasional publications;
* **supporting** – encouraging informed and constructive discussion and debate and supporting practitioner reflection, the use of evidence-based practice and practitioner-research through, for example, our [newsletter](http://www.tactyc.org.uk/newsletter.asp) and website ([www.tactyc.org.uk](http://www.tactyc.org.uk/))

**How can we build on the work that Sure Start children’s centres started to ensure families can access these services?**

There has been a lot of excellent work with Sure Start Children’s Centres (SSCCs) but given the long-term nature of such interventions there has been insufficient time to see the impact of the work. Building policy around short-term objectives hinders strategic planning for services that ultimately promote benefits, so long-term cross-party commitment is needed.

Given the current government’s approach to SSCCs it is difficult to ascertain what the current strategy around them is and how they are being utilised. Nevertheless, it is important for the SSCCs to have opportunities and ways of linking with local schools and early education providers as these provide universal services, but may be unaware of the opportunities for the parents and families they work with.

SSCCs can also act as a hub and focus for all local support services for young children and their families and promote collaborative, joined up working between professionals and practitioners, breaking down the cultural barriers between different work streams such as education health and social care. An important feature of SSCCs has been inclusion of parent and child 'voice' and involvement in strategic decision making, as well as outreach / community involvement work such as getting more dads involved.

TACTYC recommends reopening SSCCs which have been closed, and re-establishing universal offer and entitlement. Given the evidence about the importance of graduate leaders of learning in promoting positive outcomes for children, we also recommend re-establishing Qualified Teacher requirement for each centre.

**What can we learn from examples of partnerships between health services and social workers?**

Cultural barriers are difficult to unpick and inform practices. Imposing common practices causes stress on professionals based within long established cultures. Working to establish common cultures will develop appropriate common practices – this takes time but the result will be longer lasting and richer. Co-locating services as in some SSCCs has been effective in developing joint agendas and language to build partnership. Sharing and discussing data collected by different services creates strong local, common knowledge and foci for all professionals. Interagency training offers opportunities to develop shared understanding, supports closer working practices and enables practitioners to challenge different perspectives. Inter-professional training as well as joint CPD is an effective approach; for example, health visitors, speech and language therapists, and early years practitioners learning together and jointly delivering training as part of the Every Child a Talker programme in some areas.

**How can we improve services for parents and carers of new-born babies? And what are your experiences of the services available in your area?**

The universal services that were offered by SSCCs have been very important in the past, as it offered a non-stigmatised service which was gradually being accessed by a broader range of families. However this seems to have narrowed recently. There are key opportunities for early years providers to work with the children and families with babies, but the workforce receives little training in working with babies and families, and has little time to do this built into their work.

**What can we do to encourage families to seek out these kinds of services, particularly parenting skills programmes?**

Services need to be both universal and targeted so they are not seen as stigmatising. Accessibility can be improved through citing locally, co-locating services, and providing funded high quality crèche facilities.

Family Support Workers (FSWs) based at SSCCs were a key link for parents. While it is important to use evidence-based programmes, it is important to consider what sort of evidence is required. Insistence on evidence from controlled trials of replicable programmes often rules out professional understanding of more complex, individual approaches. Video-based approaches, while costly, seem to hold much promise for infant mental health with the focus on attunement and intersubjectivity; there are examples of this such as video interactive guidance (VIG) in a number of parts of the UK. For example, Barlow et al (2010) report studies that have shown improvements in mothers’ sensitivity in caregiving and improved dyadic interactions between mothers and infants. This work is also used extensively in the Netherlands with pre-term infants, supporting parents, especially mothers to focus on infant-led relationships (Hoffenkamp et al, 2015).

The recent report on the impact of parental conflict on children’s mental health and life chances (Harold et al, 2016) by the Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) and University of Sussex and DWP highlights that interventions which seek to improve parenting skills in the presence of frequent, severe and unresolved inter-parental conflict - without addressing that conflict - are unlikely to be successful in improving child outcomes.

SSCCs have developed in response to a variety of different policy drivers resulting in substantially different offers across the country and no defining model of a children’s centre. A clear overarching perspective would make it easier to clarify the purpose of children’s centres, particularly to those outside the sector (Rallings, 2014).

Many Children’s Centres have developed around maintained nursery schools, which have traditionally been positioned in disadvantaged areas, and have been shown to be highly effective in narrowing the gap in achievement, a government priority. Universal access, rather than the targeted approach which is now necessarily adopted, avoided the danger of stereotyping families in need of help, and informal drop in centres staffed by highly trained and experienced personnel have been very effective in raising parents’ aspirations as well as their understanding. These centres can demonstrate extensive outreach (Haringey report to the APPG on Nursery Schools 17.5.16)

**How can we change the focus of the early years phase to encourage and develop communication skills?**

The EYFS (DfE, 2012) does place an emphasis on Communication and Language as a prime area of learning and development alongside Personal, Social, and Emotional Development (PSED) and Physical Development.

The form of the government’s focus on data, however, means these prime areas quickly become over shadowed within the nursery year by the specific areas of Literacy and Mathematics, with inappropriately narrow and unrealistic levels of expectation in these areas being assessed to identify what is being called a ‘Good Level of Development’ as measured at the end of the Reception year. Pressure on staff is further increased to prepare children for the phonics test in Year 1, while the focus on reading, writing and mathematics within the National Curriculum, and reinforced by OfSTED’s measures of attainment, turn attention away from the prime areas which are the essential foundation for later learning. Outcomes should emphasise the importance of communication and language within early years throughout the EYFS and on into the National Curriculum.

The early years phase should also focus on play and playful approaches which support children’s development as learners, encouraging curiosity, high levels of intrinsic motivation, perseverance, a growth mindset, self-regulation, creativity and critical thinking. Training and awareness of sustained shared thinking approaches where communication supports reflection and learning should be at the heart of early years practice.

**What assessment have you made of the quality of childcare places locally?**

In the past, local authority advisory teams knew all early years settings well, and supported their development over time encouraging all settings to reflect on their own quality and continually improve. This included supporting good settings to become excellent and therefore have greatest impact on children and families. With the current draining of resources to local authorities, however, many early years teams have been made redundant, with a loss of detailed and accurate local knowledge of settings, their quality and path of development, and the relationships that can support improvement. Instead, the government has declared Ofsted to be the sole arbiters of quality, with one-off judgements taking precedence over insights based on long-term relationships. Local authority staff support only the weakest settings.

**How can we improve qualifications and training of the early years workforce, including childminders?**

Implement the recommendations of the NutbrownReview (2012) and give thought to how the disparity between Early Years Teacher Status and Qualified Teacher Status might be addressed.

Funded training pathways are an important element. For self-employed childminders, already on low pay, there is a loss of income while accessing training. Group settings experience expense and staffing difficulties where they are unable to recruit staff to cover in order to release staff to access training away from the setting.

**What practical things can we do to improve the status of the early years so that people recognise its importance?**

Recognise that we have inverted the education funding and training emphasis in Britain (the younger the children, the less money is invested) and look at the Scandinavian models, where the basic requirement for core early childhood practitioners is a degree at Bachelor level, and at Masters level in Iceland.

The Graduate Leader Programme was very helpful in supporting practitioners in early years settings, but it is no longer available. The Nutbrown Review made some excellent recommendations which are yet to be acted upon.

**What more can we do to help vulnerable groups such as children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) in our communities?**

Although the amount on offer for children below statutory school age is relatively low, the Early Years Pupil Premium is a helpful start and can be offered to children who are vulnerable. In order to avoid many children with disadvantage and vulnerabilities being overlooked and missing key provision, however, there needs to be flexibility for local authorities and Early Years Childcare Partnerships to be able to offer 2-year-old funding more widely, and to offer Early Years Pupil Premium on a longer term basis rather than relying purely on the proxy measures of free school meals. It is also important that these children access the highest quality provision, where they can be supported within their families, and parents’ needs can also be met.

School age children with SEND are supported within school by a qualified Special Educational Needs Coordinator (SENCo), but while this is seen as good practice in early years, there is no early years qualification or mandatory training for SENCos in early years settings. The DFE are trying to establish whether this is feasible and how to progress. Funded training on inclusion should be made available.

The Education Endowment Foundation (EEF) does some useful work on evidence-based approaches for early years focusing on children with socio-economic disadvantage, which could be extended to children with SEND and made more accessible to a wider population.

There may be a negative effect from the planned provision of 30-hour funded places in ensuring provision for children with SEND or vulnerabilities, as there may be a reduction in places available and these may be less likely to be accessed by children with SEND or from disadvantaged backgrounds. Fair access to provision through admission policies/waiting lists should be considered.

Maintained nursery schools give priority to children with SEND as well as those from disadvantaged backgrounds and for whom English is not their mother tongue (Early Education 2015). They have expertise in working with children who require focused and individualised provision and are recognised as particularly effective – 97% are judged good or outstanding by Ofsted a standard unmatched in any other sector (Riddell, 2009). Many have become teaching schools, offering high quality training to primary colleagues and staff in the PVI sector as well as to students. This is much needed due to the disappearance of local authority support,

Maintained nursery schools are currently at risk as a result of the imposition of the Single Funding Formula, which does not take account of the costs of employing highly qualified staff, including a specialist headteacher. Nursery schools should be fully recognised as part of the schools estate, and funded accordingly, to enable them to survive and continue to make their vital contribution to raising quality across the sector in addition to their effective provision for children with SEND and their families.

**What can we learn from past effective programmes that support vulnerable children and how can we build on them?**

Portage is an effective scheme – home visiting is empowering for parent and child and improves access to educational provision.

The Peers Early Education Partnership (PEEP), founded in a disadvantaged area of Oxford, has been shown to make a significant difference to children’s communication and language skills through close involvement with parents.

Specialist local knowledge and expertise often resides with voluntary sector partners. For example, the work of HomeStart or Book Trust (in some areas) has been effective in supporting new parents and newborns alongside HVs and children's centre teachers.

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