

Children's Centre Leader

POLICY

20:20 Vision

On the occasion of Hemsall's twentieth birthday, **James Hemsall OBE** reflects on 20 years of change in early years and childcare and looks ahead to what the next twenty might have in store.

A national strategy for childcare

It was 1999 when I decided to work independently, after working for a local authority and in the charitable and voluntary sector. The country's first National Childcare Strategy was less than two years in and the number of new developments in the sector was gathering apace. Local councils were being asked to set up new delivery partnerships, undertake local supply and demand research, develop new plans, and set up infrastructure to drive through the ambitions of the strategy at scale and at pace.

Early years and childcare was used to being a Cinderella service, often ignored or excluded from wider strategies, and funding was almost non-existent. The national strategy was rightly ambitious, but it was an enormous challenge as there were capacity and capability issues everywhere. I was no stranger to childcare development having worked on new initiatives in out of school childcare, children's centres, and new models of playwork and childcare. It soon became apparent that an informed approach to such challenges and a methodical attitude was in high demand.

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Welcome

Welcome to the December 2019 issue of Children's Centre Leader.

In this issue, I reflect on the past 20 years in early years and childcare and shares my vision for the next 20 years, we hear news of PACEY's Together for Twos project (p5), and creativity clubs for children (p8). The theme of creativity is continued on p10 as our editor, Mel Parks offers a glimpse into her mothering research. And Eve Lumb considers the Prevent duty in the context of early years.

As always, let us know what you think by emailing: cclr@hemsalls.com

James Hemsall, OBE
Editor,
Children's Centre
Leader



The business became very busy, very quickly.

Partnership, places and delivery models

During the first 10 years, at Hemsall's, we were working mainly for local authorities (LAs) across England. There was a requirement to support partnership development, working together, research and planning. Then there was a focus on delivery with high targets for creating new childcare places, a changing framework for quality standards moving from a local to a national framework – the Early Years Foundation Stage, and the introduction of Ofsted inspections. New models were also being tested, including the Sure Start local programmes tasked to reach families with children under five-years-old with joined-up local preventative services. That programme morphed into a wide-reaching children's centre programme.

Failures and ambitions leading to new legislation and reform

New legislation in the form of the Children Act (2004) followed the Victoria Climbié Inquiry by Lord Laming. This was a time of identified failures of the system to safeguard children, and a maturing ambition for childcare services to do more and to be connected better to other services. With the Childcare Act (2006), there was also a focus on sufficiency

of childcare making sure it was available for parents in ways they needed it. This was a key driver for changing the way Government funded early years and childcare entitlements and what they expected in return.

This was, and continues to be, a huge challenge. The different ways services are delivered across the country and in a diverse sector is a complex picture. The way in which an individual home-based childminder works is in stark contrast to that of a large chain of nursery providers. Funding arrangements differ from area to area; some funding is universal (available to all three- and four-year-olds), and some is targeted for least advantaged two-year-olds, or the children of working parents (such as 30 hours which started in 2017). Parents and families are different too, and want their entitlements in ways that meet their needs. Providers have very many plates to spin.

Regional Childcare Networks – childcare sufficiency

For the past 10 years, as a business, we have worked much closer with central government and early years and childcare providers. These roles have placed Hemsall's in the middle of some multifaceted challenges. First came the various duties contained in the Childcare Act (2006) around childcare sufficiency and families'

information, amongst others. Our role was to work regionally supporting and challenging local authorities in their discharging of these duties. A role combining an approach of in-depth knowledge, capacity development, scrutiny and challenge, and supporting networking and skill-sharing.

National funding for least advantaged two-year-olds from 2013

These were all requisite skills when DfE contracted Achieving Two Year Olds (A2YO) – a Hemsall's project from 2012-2016 to support the national roll-out of 15 hours of early learning for up to 250,000 least advantaged two-year-olds each week. This targeted programme aimed to support children most at risk of falling behind their peers by the time they started school, to receive more and earlier support.

The programme benefited from A2YO working with all 152 local councils in England and tackling the strategic, operational, attitudinal and systemic changes needed for it to be implemented at scale and on time. This was a project we were perfectly suited to. It combined our subject knowledge and specialism, built upon our existing strong relationships with local authorities, matched our commitment to tackling disadvantage, and made best use of our skill-set of support and challenge.

30 hours for working families

When the government announced plans for funding 30 hours of childcare for three- and four-year-olds of working families, it was clear this extra challenge would not happen without on-the-ground and informed support and challenge, just like we had delivered for A2YO. There was much to be done: new funding arrangements and models, remodelling businesses and delivery, workforce changes, introducing new IT and national information systems, and managing in a testing external environment. A new project, Childcare Works, was created.

Everyone knew this one was going to be a tough ask. And they were right. But we didn't shy away from the challenge. That said, parental demand has been high, and not one week goes by without a parent sharing with me their story of what a huge difference this has made to their family choices. Over 300,000 children use such a place each week. For providers, there were, and continue to be, big decisions and changes to make, and reconciling all the different funded models and fee-paying arrangements is a complicated and often frustrating task. The workforce is also under pressure as terms and conditions need to be of sufficient standard to attract, retain, and develop the very best early years professionals.

Wider work and future change

Alongside these national programmes, we have continued to deliver a wide-range of projects such as business support for providers, up to 1,000 training workshops and events a year, childcare sufficiency assessments and other research, and coordinating TALK Derby - a DfE funded speech, language and communication programme. International work is growing as well, with enquiries from governments across the world keen to explore what lessons have been learned, outcomes achieved, and ideas to inform their ambitious strategies.

Change has been such an enormous part of the past two decades and looking forward to the next 20 years, this is likely to continue as policy-makers have come to realise the many positive outcomes attributed to good quality early years services for children and their families. No longer do we need to hammer home the arguments about early identification of need, early intervention, school readiness, children's brain and physical development, and the impacts on employment and family opportunities. Politicians also know how popular such entitlements are with parents.

What next?

It is unlikely we have reached the limit when it comes to further increments in the hours added to entitlements

– whether they be universal or targeted. However, this shouldn't come cheap, nor at the expense of some parts of the sector less able to manage the many demands and external pressures. Investment is needed, and more of it, for longer. I've always said, the more you fund early years, the more we will deliver in return. The systems need to be simpler for all, for ease of access but also to reduce unnecessary burdens and barriers for providers and parents. The minimisation of risks related to government funding should not be disproportionate to the systems put in place to mitigate them.

I mourn the slow diminishing of the best early identification and intervention services delivered by high quality Sure Start children's centres, and when we lose experienced early years professionals who can no longer remain in their roles for whatever reason. This is because many children need to be reached earlier, their needs identified, and proper and effective multi-agency action taken to protect them, support them, and enable them to succeed physically, emotionally, intellectually, and economically. Laming told us that very clearly in 2003. I have seen growing numbers of children presenting special educational needs and disabilities, and speech and language delay. There is a moral duty to do what

we can to ensure services are responsive, adequate and effective to provide equality of opportunity and tackle disadvantage.

What could the future look like?

If we were to invent early years and childcare now from scratch, would it look like this? I guess not. The 20 years has been a journey with high levels of incremental change sometimes at large scale, sometimes small. Often the change has been heavily influenced by entrenched models of delivery and the play-offs between childcare, early years learning, universal and targeted objectives, and children's and parents' needs. If it was up to me, I would commission a really good literature review of all recent reviews and take the best from them and complete a root-and-branch examination of all things early years for the parts they don't reach.

The passion and commitment in this sector is high as is the willingness to get things

right. And so next, I would start a year-long debate and discussion so a new 20-year plan can be coproduced. The following year could include testing pilots as new policy emerges. The plan must address all the inequalities and anachronisms. But that can only be achieved with a generation-long, high value investment to finally establish the sector and shake off its Cinderella past and create true equality. In it, I would want to see ways in which we achieve level playing fields within the sector, so all parts of it have parity, respect and the ability to deliver differentiated services tailored to families' needs. The workforce would need to be equal with other parts of the education system, properly resourced, and qualified early years practitioners should be no different to qualified teachers. With the changes in the pre-school playgroup sector, the traditional routes for parents entering the sector as volunteers and then staff are hugely diminished. We cannot rely upon the

FE sector alone to generate the future workforce.

Funding should invest in quality at all points and be linked to operational costs fairly across the diverse structure of the sector from individual childminders through to large chains across the whole country. Systems need to be robust to ensure quality and accountability but must not act as a deterrent for parents and children in accessing their entitlements, nor a barrier for the workforce to enter, succeed and remain in the sector.

That way, we will be much closer to the rewards we all want and need from supporting our youngest and most vulnerable children, and their families. Because childcare changes lives.

Reference

The Victoria Climbié Inquiry Report of an Inquiry by Lord Laming. HM Govt., January 2003.



James Hemsall, OBE, chairs the board of trustees at Children's Centre Leader. He is also Director of Hemsall's, an executive coach, and a volunteer counsellor/psychotherapist. James acts as the National Support Director of the DfE's support contract for the implementation of 30 hours childcare across England (Childcare Works). James has worked in the sector for over 25 years. He is a former playworker, children's centre manager, further education lecturer, development worker and projects manager for a national childcare charity. Between 2012–2016 he was the National Support Director of the DfE's support contract for the implementation of 15 hours early learning for least advantaged two-year-olds (Achieving Two Year Olds) for which he was awarded the OBE for services to childcare.

Narrowing The Gap - Overcoming Challenges And Promoting The Two-Year-Old Offer With Together For Twos

Felicity Stephenson shares news of PACEY's Together for Twos project to improve the availability and take up of high quality early years provision for disadvantaged children with childminders.

Good early years education is the cornerstone of social mobility as children with strong foundations will start school in a position to progress. However, The Department for Education's social mobility plan outlines that there is a significant 'disadvantage gap' for the country's most vulnerable children. For example, by age three, disadvantaged children are – on average – almost a full year and a half behind their more affluent peers in their early language development.¹ This delay can have a lasting detrimental impact on early language development, making access to high quality education essential.

Part of the government's initiative to support this is the offer of 15 hours of funded childcare per week for disadvantaged two-year-olds as research suggests that the use of formal childcare leads to better outcomes for disadvantaged children.² However, not only is there significant variation in take up across the country, over 30% of disadvantaged families are not taking up this offer. There is a serious lack of knowledge about the offer with many families simply

not aware they are entitled to it. Another barrier to take up is the fact that many parents believe pre-schoolers should stay at home, they are not well informed about childcare options and most likely have concerns about quality.³

Childminders are particularly underrepresented in delivering the two-year-old offer despite evidence that they are beneficial for disadvantaged families.⁴ Disadvantaged families do not know they can take up the offer with childminders and some have perceptions that childminders as less desirable than group-based providers. This has left Government with a challenge to raise the take up of the two-year-old offer by both practitioners and families, overcoming barriers and supporting parents to make their own, informed, decision about their funding entitlements and childcare options available.

Tackling these challenges with PACEY's Together for Twos (TfT) project

The Department for Education awarded PACEY a grant to improve the availability and take up of high quality early years provision for

disadvantaged children with childminders which we are achieving through our Together for Twos project.

The project is taking place in seven local authorities (Greenwich, Bexley, Harrow, Hillingdon, Southend, Waltham Forest and Enfield) where the take up of two-year-old places was less than 65% at the start of the project. Here, childminder development workers are working with the local authority, a range of professionals including childminders, job centre plus, health visitors, social workers, children's centres, libraries and other community groups.

This has led to a number of initiatives. For example, with the support of health clinics and Family Information Services they have been delivering a number of "taster" sessions whereby parents can meet with local childminders to get a better idea of what they can offer. As well as this, they have been attending family events across the country to promote the offer and childminding as an option. This project has also been combatting waiting list challenges. Some

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local authority areas are experiencing eligible two-year-olds missing out on a funded place because they are on waiting lists. So we are actively encouraging these settings to signpost to others, such as local childminders.

Using social media we have also launched two different campaigns. Firstly, we have supported the Department for Education's Hungry Little Minds initiative through the creation of a series of #smallthings short videos to support parents with home learning. And secondly, PACEY's #notababysitter campaign was launched to tackle a common misconception amongst parents that childminders are babysitters. It includes a set of downloadable graphics and media pack which promotes key facts about childminders who can 'offer government-funded places', provide a 'unique learning space' and are 'experts in child development'. Alongside being shared on social media these images have been printed and given to children centres, libraries and GP surgeries.

Nationally the project has also been working with Job Centre Plus (JCP) to ensure that all job centres in England have up to date information about all the childcare options, and childcare careers. This information is stored on JCP's knowledge hub. In addition, there are a number of District Childcare Champions who are responsible for cascading information locally.



Childminders are not babysitters

Did you know, childminders are regulated, trained and experienced?

A great option for your child.



#notababysitter
pacey.org.uk/NAB

We are already seeing the benefits of the Together for Twos team and their on the ground work with families and providers. For example at a Waltham Forest Job Centre event, one attendee commented:

"I don't want to be on benefits for the rest of my life, it's important that my children see me doing something. I'm always saying to them, 'work hard at school and you'll be able to get a good job'. I want to show them that's true. And that all starts with finding some confidence. When I went to the work club event at my children's centre, I thought, I can either sit at the back quietly and let other people talk, or I can speak up.

I decided to ask the questions I needed to know the answers to and that's when I found out I was eligible for the two-year-old funding from PACEY."

We are so pleased with the progress this project has made, our latest data which will be published soon shows early indications that there has been an increase in the take up of funded two-year-old places in the seven areas and an increase in those parents choosing childminders.

Find out more about the project here – www.pacey.org.uk/TogetherForTwos

Endnotes

¹ Department for Education (2017) **Unlocking Talent, Fulfilling Potential. A plan for improving social mobility through education** <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/667690/Social_Mobility_Action_Plan_-_for_printing.pdf>

² Melhuish, E., Gardiner, J., and Morris, S. (2017) **Study of Early Education and Development (SEED): Impact Study on Early Education Use and Child Outcomes up to Age Three**, Department for Education

³ Department for Education (2010) **Towards Universal Early Years Provision: Analysis of Take-up by Disadvantaged Families From Recent Annual Childcare Surveys**. <<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/towards-universal-early-years-provision-analysis-of-take-up-bydisadvantaged-families-from-recent-annual-childcare-surveys>>

⁴ Melhuish, E., Gardiner, J., and Morris, S. (2017) **Study of Early Education and Development (SEED): Impact Study on Early Education Use and Child Outcomes up to Age Three**, Department for Education



Felicity Stephenson started her career as a speech and language therapist and now as the Professional Association of Childcare and Early Year's (PACEY)'s Policy and Communications Officer, she works to research and communicate all recent policy developments in the Early Years sector. This supports members to understand all the policy and regulations which are key to their amazing work.

Making An Art Of Early Years

Training artists to work with under fives deepened their knowledge and helped them deliver Arts Council funded Creativity Clubs for children and families, **Kate Haythornthwaite** explains.

Inspire is a Culture, Learning and Libraries charitable community benefit society delivering cultural and learning services across Nottinghamshire. With the aid of national Arts Council funding they designed a project with the aim of enhancing an existing library programme; stimulating creativity; encouraging development of fine motor skills and providing parent/carers with tools to engage with under-fives in art activities and reading.



Six visual artists were recruited to the project, to engage with preschool children and gain further experience by running Creativity Clubs, eventually leaving a legacy of new library loan items in the form of 'How To' resources and activity cards.

Hempsall's was commissioned in April 2018 to deliver and support training in early years approaches for the artists, who would then go on to create and deliver a programme of visual arts activity in libraries for children and families: Creativity Clubs. This included:

- » Developing understanding of children in the early years
- » Raising awareness of early learning and educational development
- » Informing artists about appropriate practice and project design.

The trainer allocated to the project has extensive experience of working with under-fives, delivering training to early years practitioners and is also a family learning tutor. Using the combined skills and knowledge she was able to provide theoretical and practical learning in a context of a family learning environment, something the artist had not previously undertaken.

Following an initial scoping meeting, our first task was to provide the artists with a good introduction to early years; the majority of the artists had not previously worked with under-fives. This gave them an opportunity to explore the early years curriculum, the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) framework, become

familiar with it and how they could use it to influence their project. It also enabled the group to pose questions and influence what further development was required.

Training sessions supported artist understanding of child development, the characteristics of effective learning, schemas, supporting positive behaviour choices and risk assessments.

Reflection after each training session, establishing key learning points, provided the artists with the foundations for working with under-fives and practical strategies to support their work with children.

The artists acknowledged their lack of experience of working with under-fives which was impacting on their confidence. To increase

their confidence, each artist showcased an activity, to other members of the group, with the purpose of linking a practical activity to the theoretical approaches learned during training and children's individual needs, focusing on process rather than end product; a concept which some of the artists found new and challenging. The sessions gave the artists a clear understanding of how they would develop their activities. It provided a deeper reflective opportunity for the group of how one simple activity could be developed and differentiated to meet the learning needs of individual children. Building on prior learning and scaffolding learning to provide opportunities for children to be challenged, supporting them to solve problems and carry out tasks just beyond their ability. It also allowed



the process of linking theory to practice independently with continuous input and guidance from the trainer.

To further develop their understanding of working with under-fives the artists observed practice in an early years setting linking their learning to life in an early years setting. This progressed to the artist delivering seven arts-based sessions in an

early years setting. Each artist was observed and provided with feedback and support.

Feedback from Inspire was positive: "the training has enabled the artists to design their individual workshops suitable for this specific audience, and the feedback they are now receiving for Little Creatives art workshops in libraries is excellent."



Kate Haythornthwaite is the Training Manager at Hemsall's. She is the project lead for the organisation's training function delivering approx. 600 events each year. Leading a team of 30 trainers, she is responsible for learning outcomes, quality and safeguarding. She is an ex-childminder for least advantaged. Kate holds a Cert Ed. in post compulsory education (2008), level 5 Chartered Management Institute in Business Support (2018); CACHE level 3 certificate in childminding practice. Kate delivers all our training subjects and specialises in governor training, safeguarding/child protection/safer recruitment, and all EYFS practice.

Storying The Self As A Writer-Mother

Mel Parks, freelance writer and editor of Children's Centre Leader, offers a glimpse into her doctorate research proposal which challenges personal, cultural and archetypal narratives of what being a creative mother is all about. It includes a series of creative writing workshops for mothers in children's centres.

I spent the summer delving into the stories that have shaped my relationship with creativity as a mother for my MA in Creative Writing dissertation. The research took me back to Wales, where I grew up. I walked with my mother to a site of mythological significance; Llyn Y Fan Fach and we talked about my 'motherline' (Lowinsky, 1992) of hardworking, resourceful, resilient, creative women. I rewrote the story of the Lady of Llyn Y Fan Fach (Breverton, 2012) to explore patriarchal societal constructs of where the expectations of motherhood came from. And I explored the idea of a matricentric feminism, where mothering is work that is important and valuable but does not have to be the sole responsibility and duty of mothers.

Matricentric feminism 'contests, challenges, and counters the patriarchal oppressive institution of motherhood and seeks to imagine and implement a maternal identity and practice that is empowering to mothers' (O'Reilly, 2016). It

also 'commits to social change and social justice, and regards mothering as a socially engaged enterprise and a site of power, wherein mothers can and do create social change through childrearing and activism' (O'Reilly, 2016). Seizing creativity and sharing stories of our experiences in a personal, particular way is part of this activism.

Although I have been a professional writer for 20 years and writing creatively alongside being a mother for most of those years, I felt as if I had not achieved enough. My anxiety was caused by my inner critic who was strong and shouty, silencing into submission my attempts at finishing creative work, at sending it out into the world. I realised that the guilt I was feeling about stealing time away from my children was buying into the idea of being a 'good mother'; one that did not spend time writing for her own enjoyment or self-expression. Andrea O'Reilly, in her book, *Mother Outlaws*, outlines societal rules of being a good mother:

Rule 3 - 'the mother must always put children's

needs before their own'

Rule 5 - 'the mother must be fully satisfied, fulfilled, completed and composed in motherhood'

Rule 6 - 'mothers must lavish excessive amounts of time, energy and money in the rearing of their children' (O'Reilly, 2004).

There are other rules, but I have chosen to highlight these as rules which creative mothers or writer-mother will most often break if they follow their creative urges or a creative pathway. In the anthology, *Fruits of Labour*, a book of essays on mothering and creative pursuits, Mary Lowe says, 'To be creative or artistic requires a certain freedom of thought, an ability to notice, to listen, to play' (Sumner, 2001) which is tough when you have a child tugging at your apron strings. In 1936, Cyril Connolly famously said 'there is no more sombre enemy of great art than the pram in the hall' (Connolly, 1961). Ironically, he was referring to male writers as he did not acknowledge that women could be writers. But the sentiment rings true.

Artist, Barbara Hepworth was determined to do some art every day when she became a mother of four children, an older son and triplet babies, but she ended up putting her triplets into a residential nursery for three years as the only way she could continue to work (Artsnight, 2015). More recently, Brigid Schulte, in a Guardian article about the lack of time a woman has to create, discussed female artists whose creative lives were limited by 'the expectations and duties of home and care' while male artists could move 'through life as if unfettered time to themselves were a birthright' (Schulte, 2019). For writer/artist-mothers, there is a constant pull between societal and personal expectations of child and home care, the need to earn money as well as the demands of creativity.

I am purposely using the word 'mother' rather than 'parent' to acknowledge the important job that they do but I also acknowledge that mothering takes many forms and mothers don't necessarily need to be biological. A mother is anyone who identifies as such and makes mothering practice a focal point of their life. Motherhood matters and so does creativity and every mother has the right to claim creativity and there is a need for it too. Reclaiming our mother stories and our creative lives is a way of positioning ourselves in motherhood; it's a way of affirming and not denying that part of ourselves. A feminist theory for mothers

needs to include creativity so that it is not reducing a woman's self to motherhood, which is what women were breaking away from in the 70s, but more that motherhood 'is central and integral to understanding mother women's oppression in patriarchy and their resistance to it' (Schulte, 2019). One way to understand our role as mothers is to write about it.

I met a mother recently who told me she had started attending creative writing workshops at a children's centre when her children (now 7 and 9) were little. She has just finished a part-time MA in Creative Writing and has published a series of self-help books for children. The children's centre stopped running workshops when their funding was cut. When I heard this, I felt a new surge of determination to apply for research council PhD funding for my proposed project which includes running a series of writing workshops in children's centres as a creative methods lab.

My PhD research will continue to interweave personal and mythological mothering stories with, as Marilyn Metta says, 'the cultural, the historical, the political, the embodied, and the imaginary' (Metta, 2013). It will have a wellbeing focus as I will also align my research with Metta's declaration that 'the meanings we create out of stories are contested, re-invented, revised and continually re-written to align

and re-align with emerging life scripts of our selves and our place in the world' (Metta, 2013). I am excited to involve other mothers in children's centres in my process and to find out how they are able to (re)story themselves post-maternity with my creative writing workshop techniques.

Since one in five mothers experience anxiety and/or depression during pregnancy or in the first year after childbirth (APPG, 2017) and creative activities, including writing are shown to be therapeutic (Hunt, 2000; Pennebaker, 2014), creativity should be an essential, rather than an add-on, first-to-be-cut service in children's centres.

If you are interested in setting up a writing group in your children's centre, [Maternal Journal](#) has some excellent resources to help you get started.

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Mel Parks, editor of Children's Centre Leader, has been writing about childcare and early years for 20 years, both in a freelance capacity and employed by national organisations. She recently completed an MA in Creative Writing (with distinction) at the University of Brighton and she develops and delivers creative writing workshops for children and adults in Sussex: www.honeyleafwriting.com. Thank you to Children's Centre Leader and Tunbridge Wells group of children's centres for agreeing to be partners on my proposed PhD journey.

Do We Have A Shared Vision On Prevent and Fundamental British Values?

Eve Lumb, senior lecturer at the University of Brighton, considers the Prevent duty in the context of early years.

It could be argued that terms such as 'terrorism' and 'extremism' are not naturally synonymous with early years provision. However, since 2015, all registered early years providers have had a legal duty placed upon them to ensure that they meet the requirements of the government's Prevent strategy (Her Majesty's Government, 2011a; Her Majesty's Government, 2015) and promote fundamental British values: democracy; rule of law; individual liberty; and mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs.

The introduction of this requirement has met with mixed responses, from passive acceptance to genuine concern over the potential to create division within communities and foster a culture of mistrust (Awan, 2012; Sian, 2015). Prevent, and its role within the wider Counter Terrorism strategy, CONTEST, (Her Majesty's

Government, 2011b) has attracted criticism, with some raising concerns about the 'securitization of education' (Durodie, 2016) and others querying the notion of a set of values which may be perceived as exclusively 'British' (Tomlinson, 2015; Poole, 2016; Struthers, 2017; Granger; 2019). Yet, whilst policies can be imperfect and result in a mismatch between intent and social outcome, there, nonetheless, remains the statutory obligation for us to follow the Prevent duty requirements, regardless of personal qualms or organisational disquiet. Indeed, for those working in, or managing early years settings, the ways in which we ensure children develop their understanding of fundamental British values and our practical implementation of the Prevent strategy form part of the updated inspection grading descriptors (Ofsted, 2019). A failure to meet these

criteria can result in a dreaded 'inadequate' judgement.

Although there is a focus on children's understanding of 'British' values, perhaps we should turn our attention to our staff. Do our staff teams have a collective expectation and shared understanding of what democracy and tolerance look like? Do we agree on boundaries and are they consistent, regardless of staffing changes throughout the week? What does individual liberty really look like for the children in our care? Is this the same whether we are working with pre-school aged children or those aged 0-3 years?

In a climate of funding challenges, there is an uneven patchwork of training opportunities available to staff, varying in quality and

(continued on p14)

accessibility. Coupled with high staff turnover rates and the need to ensure that all have access to some form of instruction, there can be a reliance on online learning platforms to deliver the necessary Prevent and British values training. Whilst some training packages may challenge staff to consider their understanding of 'extremism', others could be deemed a simpler process, yet both result in the much sought after certificate of evidence for Ofsted, proving that training on this key element of practice has been undertaken.

Where more perfunctory 'click and collect' training is used to tick the box of compliance, perhaps we should consider where we truly gain our understanding of 'extremism' from. Furthermore, how do we formulate our understanding of those who may be vulnerable to radicalisation or acts of terrorism? If we do not take time to discuss this as a staff team, how can we be sure that we have a collective understanding? Without critical discussion and a shared grasp of the complexities of Prevent we are in danger of relying on media headlines and stereotypes to inform our judgements and safeguarding practices.

Research shows (Revell and Bryan, 2016) that educators do not have a shared understanding of what constitutes 'vocal or active

opposition to fundamental British values' and this could help to explain why some referrals to the Channel process have been made inadvertently (Khaleeli, 2015; Barratt, 2016; Fox, 2016). With increasingly divided opinions over current and pertinent issues such as Brexit, Extinction Rebellion, and the teaching of LGBTQ+ within schools, we have seen an increase in political activism and what could be considered, by some, as 'extreme' views. At what point then do these voices and actions constitute 'extremism'? Thresholds vary with one person's hero being another person's terrorist. Without genuine discussion in our staff teams, levels of 'tolerance' within our settings will naturally vary and thresholds for referral could be in danger of relying on personal standpoints and philosophy, rather than considered and agreed markers. It is important for us to collectively decide the point at which behaviour opposes fundamental values, be they considered 'British' or otherwise.

Similarly, we must also consider how to respond when children's play does not reflect the values we are legally obliged to promote. As children learn to make sense of the world around them, we can expect to see political voices emerging in their play. Exposed to a background diet of television, radio and social

media, it is inevitable that some children will be aware of acts of violence, terrorism, protests or social tension; what do we do then when a child acts out a terrorist event in their play? Would all of us respond in the same way?

Whilst much of this article raises more questions than answers, perhaps in an increasingly turbulent and divided world our response to the Prevent duty requirements and British values warrants further consideration. If we cannot, hand on heart, say that as a staff team we have a shared vision on aspects such as extremism, democracy, individual liberty, boundaries and tolerance, then maybe it's time to talk.

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Eve Lumb is a senior lecturer at the University of Brighton. She is the programme leader for Early Years Initial Teacher Training and teaches across a range of early years degree courses. She has extensive experience working within the early years sector and has previously worked as a local authority advisor, freelance inspector and nursery manager. Correspondence: e.lumb@brighton.ac.uk

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