

June 2019

# Children's Centre Leader

POLICY

## To Crèche Or Not To Crèche

**James Hemsall** calls for a fresh look at crèche services to support all our aims and desired outcomes. As an ex crèche worker himself, he believes this 'Cinderella' service needs a Renaissance.

We're all familiar with the financial conditions children's centres and wider services have been operating within for the past 10 years. If I had a pound for every time someone tells me crèches are expensive or not value for money, I'd have enough money to fund a whole load of them. Seriously, I don't need reminding funds are tight and services are under pressure to demonstrate the difference they are making. But I think a lot of us are missing a trick unless we look at crèche services through a different lens.

The main problem is they are seen as a supporting offer, linked to other services and offering children a quality childcare environment whilst their parents are engaged in other activities. Often that can be criticised as a parent-is-priority activity. This is a great shame.

Crèches offer so much more. They provide children with often their first quality childcare experience, being apart from their parent(s) outside of their extended families, with qualified

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## Welcome

Welcome to the June issue of Children's Centre Leader.

James Hemsall calls for a fresh look at crèche services (cover) and Dr Campbell-Barr and Dr Georgeson discuss what it means to be child-centred in a group setting (p3). We also hear about new family-centred campaigns (p6), the value of learning journeys (p8), and Helen Moylett goes back to basics on p10.

As always, let us know what you think by emailing:

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James Hemsall, OBE  
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childcare workers, and socialising with a small group of other children. All useful experiences for children if we are thinking ahead to a time when they may be accessing their early years entitlements at two-, three-, or four-years-old, for 15 or 30 hours, or more a week. They are starting their own childcare and early learning journeys right here, right now.

And for early identifier roles, crèches offer new opportunities to work with children and families should there be a need that could be better met earlier and more efficiently. And in doing so open the doors to local services and support on offer.

They're not always linked very well to other services. The biggest barrier, and it is wholly understandable, is that parents should remain on site. That said, it does restrict what parents can do when their children are in the crèche. It doesn't help a parent who needs to visit another agency for whatever reason for the benefit of themselves, their families or their child or their

younger or older siblings, or attend a job interview, short-distance travel such as to another children's centre to access different services or meet other parents, or training related to their goals.

Parent groups, support and training do need to cluster together so crèches can be more sustainable and places filled. And places should be prioritised. One such priority must be that places are available for parents on pathways to employment, and prepares them and their children take full benefit from their early years entitlements.

Indeed, crèches should be also viewed as a key parental empowerment offer. Especially, but not exclusively, for women. In the same way as for their children, crèches provide first time experiences of being apart, building trust in other professionals, and starting new relationships and role models for them. This early relationship between parent and professional can open up a whole world of opportunity for parenting support, and their own

learning and employment.

Crèches fill a gap that often the local childcare market cannot fill. Childcare providers are under a great deal of new pressures and cannot readily offer short-term, temporary or highly flexible childcare in these ways. They would if they could. But the barriers that prevent this need to be examined; what can be done to alleviate these blocks?

I remember the time when crèches were justified because of a total lack of local and suitable childcare. The childcare market has continued to mature over the past two decades, and offers a range of funded and paid-for services. However, there remains a gap that crèches should and could address for the greatest benefit of children and parents alike, while meeting all of our statutory duties. But it needs a fresh pair of eyes, a new confidence, recognition of the outcomes achieved, and a joining up of resources. Crèches are and should be considered to be a vital service in their own right.



**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.

# Child-Centredness In Practice

**Dr. Verity Campbell-Barr and Dr. Jan Georgeson**, from Plymouth Institute of Education, University of Plymouth discuss what being child-centred really means in a group setting and introduce their free online courses to complete with colleagues.

Child-centred is a term that is often used as a shorthand for high quality pedagogical interactions within an early education environment. The term is deeply embedded in understandings of early childhood education and care pedagogy, with a history that stems from the work of Froebel. However, in our own encounters with early childhood pedagogical practice, we began to notice how, despite the strong advocacy for child-centredness, it was a term that could be variably interpreted. This resulted in the development of the *Child-Centred Diversity in Quality Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC)\** project. Encompassing researchers and educators from Croatia, Denmark, Italy, Ireland, Spain and the UK, the project has been exploring meanings of child-centredness, both theoretically and practically, in order to inform a series of free online training courses.

The literature around child-centredness also demonstrates that it is a term that can be interpreted in different ways from romantic, developmental

and democratic perspectives (Bogatić et al., 2018). At first glance this could suggest that educators are expected to learn about many different ideas in support of child-centred practice. Within these three broad constructs, however, we find familiar ideas of children learning through play, the importance of recognising their uniqueness, their learning strategies, their needs and interests and children being active participants in the learning environment. Rather than being separate constructs of child-centredness, our observations of pedagogical practice in the six participating countries demonstrated how the different interpretations overlap with one another and how educators were central to the way in which child-centredness can be enacted within the pedagogic environment.

The observations demonstrated that, in the course of a session, adults might take on different roles within the learning environment to support and facilitate child-centredness.

We had wondered whether adults leading activities and being directly involved might run counter to centring the child. Often 'adult directed' is positioned as being in opposition to 'child-centred', but our observations highlighted that the subtle responses of the adult to the child's interests illustrate how even an adult-led activity can hold the child at the centre. Although the term 'child-centred' implies that it is the child who is at the centre of the activity (as leader of their own learning), observations from different countries revealed the careful ways in which adults adjusted the pacing and sequencing of activities to respond to the children that they worked with. This results in different opportunities for children to engage in the learning environment.

We were able to see in these observations how adults play different roles to influence the ways in which the child is 'centred'. This went beyond the familiar dichotomy of child-centred and adult-led to reveal a continuum of play-

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based learning, echoing that developed by Angela Pyle and Erica Danniels (2016). Pyle and colleagues are researching guided play, an approach which combines opportunities for choice, initiative and imagination with directed learning towards curricular goals. A guided play approach can appeal to educators who understand the value of play but also feel the need to offer explicit support to children towards particular learning outcomes. Tensions between play-based principles and accountability for children's learning are a world-wide phenomenon, and by sharing examples from beyond our own contexts, we can perhaps learn how to resolve these tensions.

In the practice described in our observations, educators structured the learning environment to offer children choices in the activities that they undertook. Craft tables, reading corners, wooden blocks and trainsets were set out for the children to engage with as they chose; the resources offered signals to the children that there were choices to be made. At times, staff became directly involved in the activities, offering clear guidance on the task in hand. On other occasions, educators moved alongside activities, on hand to offer support but not directly involved in the play or offering overt direction. In other instances, staff would allow children to play freely.

For example, in an observation

from Spain, children who were creating storybooks were tasked with numbering the pages of their books. For one girl, this was not something that she wanted to do and she responded with tears and frustration. The educator in the observation remained calm at all times, taking the child onto her lap and gently comforting her. While this was happening, however, the educator continued to offer direction and encouragement to the other children to complete the task.

The observation, for us, highlights two things. The first is the careful ways in which educators adopt the child's perspective. Throughout the observations, educators mirrored children's perspectives, often in response to the child's emotions – not just tears and frustration, as we had many examples of the playful ways that educators responded to children's joy and enthusiasm. The mirroring of the child's emotions illustrated a careful responsiveness by educators to children's needs. However, what the example from Spain also illustrates is that educators are doing this not just for one child, but for groups of children. Thus, they are responding to the needs of maybe 30 children at any one time – and continuing to support them towards particular curricular goals. When educators are working with groups of children like this, 'child'-centred is perhaps something

of a misnomer and instead we should be referring to 'children'-centred. Educators in our observations could be taking on multiple roles at any one time – a game of chase combined with helping out in the mud kitchen, whilst also playing catch.

Based upon our analysis of the observations collected from the different countries during the project, the team has developed three online courses:

- » Doing child-centredness from an embodied perspective
- » Child-centred documentation for quality early childhood education and care
- » The power of stories for child-centred practice in early childhood education and care.

The online courses can be accessed by visiting <https://open.plymouth.ac.uk/> and registering for an account.

Participants should then search for 'child-centred'. All courses are free to access and offer a range of learning materials to engage with. We recommend completing the courses with colleagues in order to share and reflect on the content.



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## References

Bogatić, K., Visnjic Jevtic, A., Campbell-Barr, V. & Georgeson, J. (2018) *Initial Literature Review – Interpreting Child-centredness to Support Quality and Diversity in Early Childhood Education and Care*. University of Plymouth, Plymouth, Available at: <https://www.plymouth.ac.uk/research/child-centred-diversity-in-quality-early-childhood-education-and-care>

Pyle, A. & Danniels, E. (2016) A continuum of play-based learning: The role of the teacher in a play-based pedagogy and the fear of hijacking play, *Early Education & Development*, 28:3, 274-289 <https://doi.org/10.1080/10409289.2016.1220771>.



**Dr Verity Campbell-Barr** is an Associate Professor in Early Childhood Studies and Associate Director for Research at Plymouth Institute of Education, University of Plymouth. Verity has over 15 years of experience researching early childhood education and care services. Her research interests centre on the quality of early childhood services, particularly the role of the early childhood workforce in supporting the quality of services.



**Dr Jan Georgeson** is Senior Research Fellow at University of Plymouth. She has a professional background as teacher of young children with special educational needs and conducts research into professional development and support for families. Jan is currently engaged in research capturing the sensitivity and skill of practitioners in 'micro-moments' of interaction with young children in early years settings.

# Home Is Where The Start Is

**Kate Freeman** outlines new campaigns programmes to develop positive parent and child relationships in the first crucial 1001 days.

The first 1001 days movement has delivered a strong awareness that the earliest days are crucial in developing positive parent child relationships...and that these enable quality learning experiences and provide opportunities to build early neural networks.

When combined with sound research dating back to the EPPE study in 2003<sup>1</sup> where Edward Melhuish and his colleagues identified that the family has the most impact on children's outcomes, who wouldn't want to focus on developing a strong home learning environment? In 2012, Sue Roulstone and researchers at the University of the West of England took Melhuish's findings a stage further<sup>2</sup> - they identified that what parents **have** (in terms of access to toys, books etc), as well as what parents **feel** and **do** with their children significantly impacts on their child's early language development.

With an understanding that late or poor early language development (often known as the 'word gap') has profound impacts on children's educational, social, mental health and employment outcomes, there is good reason to embrace the renewed focus on the home learning environment. The Government's 2017 social mobility strategy 'Unlocking talent, fulfilling potential'<sup>3</sup>

identified its primary ambition was to reduce the word gap, with reducing the attainment gap being a close second. As a result, a range of programmes has been newly announced:

Chat, Play, Read is a campaign that brings together businesses, voluntary and community sector organisations and early years settings and experts through a Government partnership with the National Literacy Trust and members of the Communication Consortium (of which Children's Centre Leader is a member). The campaign is part of a behaviour change approach which informs parents (and those working closely with them) of the benefit to children of communication and interaction through talking, playing and sharing books together.

The campaign which is being officially launched in the spring, will include broadcasting, social media marketing and branding that support three actionable themes:

**Chat:** encourages talking but crucially, reciprocal communication (where the adult talks to the child based on what they are interested in, looking at, or has just communicated);

**Play:** letting parents know that language thrives when children interact and explore in a playful

and creative manner;

**Read:** sharing books, parents and children talking together.

All of these aspects contribute to parents' knowledge about how to create their own positive home learning environment. The messages are simple and easy to communicate through a range of channels and by a range of people – practitioners, educators, businesses and communities alike.

Meanwhile, the NSPCC launched their own campaign in February 2019, encouraging parents to 'look, say, sing and play' with their children. The organisation's own research identifies that almost two thirds of parents are unaware that back and forth interaction with their child from birth is good for their babies' social, emotional and cognitive development. They also found that 62% of parents in their survey were unaware that the interactions they have with their new baby in moments such as playing, singing or story time can be brain building ones.

The campaign has so far included videos that have been widely shared on Facebook and activity ideas available on the NSPCC website (all backed up by scientific research). Parents are also encouraged to sign up to tips on what they can do every

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day with their child at home or when they are out and about. These activities are tailored to the child's age and are sent directly to parents' smartphones weekly.

The national children's communication charity, I CAN, has also received funding for their own home learning environment programme. The 'Change the Conversation about Language' project is located in three English regions, working with local stakeholders and community practitioners to engage with disadvantaged parents.

The aim is to enhance parent and child interaction and the work with parents includes access to the EasyPeasy app, developing parent champions to share key messages about early language development and a new intervention programme which was co-produced with parents - Tots Talking.

The Institute of Wellbeing is working with black and

minority ethnic groups on a culturally tailored approach to improve the home learning environment for disadvantaged parents. Activities include peer-to-peer and parent-facing digital support to empower parents to improve the home learning environment.

A final string to the home learning bow is the national move to engage health visitors in a more structured programme of support. Recognising that parents are the experts in their child's health and wellbeing, health visitors work with parents to promote children's development, assessing needs and identifying problems or issues at the earliest opportunity. Public Health England's Chief Nurse, Viv Bennett described 'an ambitious programme of work to equip 1000 health visitors with further skills to help them identify speech, language and communication needs early on. This will support improved signposting and referrals to speech and

language therapists, to help children get the right support when they need it'. Through this programme, a new speech and language assessment tool is being developed for health visitors, to ensure that the children who need additional help with their speech and language are picked up as early as possible.

This incredible combination of programmes and priorities certainly signifies a renewed understanding that what goes on at home makes a difference in all areas of a child's development and ultimately on their future lives. We look forward to positive results from these programmes, to sharing the learning and to changing the culture so that everyone understands the important role that parents have to play in their child's development. Moreover, we look forward to ensuring that parents are enabled to achieve what all parents want for their children – the best start in life.

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## Endnotes

- 1 Sylva K., Melhuish E., Simmons P., Siraj-Blathford I., Taggart B and Elliot K (2003) Effective Provision of Pre-School Education DfES
- 2 Roulstone, S., Law, J., Rush, R., Clegg, J. and Peters, T (June 2011) Investigating the role of language in children's early educational outcomes, University of the West of England, Bristol.
- 3 DfE (Secretary of State for Education and Minister for Women and Equalities) (2017) Unlocking Talent, Fulfilling Potential A plan for improving social mobility



**Kate Freeman** is a Director of Regional Development for the children's communication charity, I CAN. She specialises in early years speech and language development (from birth to five) and work with parents. She's a qualified speech and language therapist with 25 years experience. She has written books and magazine articles, provided expert guidance to create a number of I CAN programmes and activities and runs training course for teachers, SENCOs, speech and language therapists and other professionals.

# The Value Of Learning Journeys

**Rachel Sharman** celebrates the impact of the work of the children's centre programme by sharing a story of a young mother who valued her learning journey so much she used it in court.

As we are all too aware the impact of the work of the children's centre programme is often disregarded or not taken seriously enough. Managers inevitably become too removed from frontline practice to experience first-hand the difference that is made in the lives of families accessing services. It isn't until we sit in supervisions/ meetings that we are honoured with stories of the strength and determination of families. When I hear how the smallest thing makes such a huge impact, I experience 'motherly' pride. I heard recently of a young mother who valued her learning journey so much she used it in court. Here is her story:

At the time of engagement with this family, baby was on a child protection plan. Mum and baby were placed in foster care following discharge from the hospital after birth. Mum has a diagnosis of autism, depression, an unstable personality disorder and due to historical issues there is no contact between parents.

The referral was sent in by the health visitor (to a weekly targeted group) for support for mum's parenting

skills and confidence building. Mum and baby were to be accompanied by their social worker.

Unsurprisingly, to begin with the mother found it difficult engaging in a group environment. Baby's development was monitored regularly against the EYFS guidelines and recorded through her learning journey. The worker was concerned that baby would be removed and placed for adoption, which as we are acutely aware is a crippling cost to the public purse and doesn't really support the notion that families who can build resilience and aspirations can actually get it right time and time again.

*"Mum loved her little girl but didn't appear to fully engage with her, giving a false impression to someone who didn't know her. Mum said she felt that she was constantly under observation and everything she did was being judged in a negative way."*

After a while and thanks to the tenacity of the worker, the mother's confidence in her grew, she settled into the group. The health visitor reported that she was

pleased to see that mum was evidencing promise of her ability to look after her baby independently. The children's centre worker modelled effective communication and interaction for weeks and mum's confidence grew as the social worker withdrew from the sessions and the foster carer joined mum. From this point in time there was a marked improvement in mum's engagement. As mum prepared for court she told the worker she might not be back at the group again as she thought they would take her baby off her. She asked if she could take their learning journey with her to show their progress during their engagement and to share photos of mum's interaction with baby. It included baby's development tracking sheets.

The following week mum returned with baby! She had won her case and although she would have to go to a residential placement for further assessment, she knew this was a positive step as she would have much more freedom.

Mum told us, *"Everyone has made me so welcome even though they know I'm in foster care they haven't*



*treated me any different. I don't like going to groups but this one is different."*

*"Going to miss you guys, I'm finally settled and learned so much. Can I come back to the group if we get back to the area..."*

No professional is under the illusion that the learning journey has much weight in the decision-making process, but the important detail to note is the value placed on her learning journey. This was her diary that captured her much valued interaction with her baby and regardless of the outcome of court, that learning journey is a record of positive change for the both of them at that particular point

in time. All of this wouldn't have been necessary without the skill of the worker.

If you are managing teams who are working in the 'family support' arena or in 'education' based settings and are seeking to improve service delivery or refine processes please take a moment to visit our website: [www.hartmanassociates.co.uk](http://www.hartmanassociates.co.uk)



**Rachel Sharman** has been working for children's centres since 2000. She has over 30 years experience teaching and working in the early years/early intervention arena. Investment in the team is equally as important to her as investment in families. Reducing inequalities and raising aspirations drives her focus.

# Back to Basics in Early Childhood

**Helen Moylett** reminds early years workers to keep fighting for the well-evidenced benefits of play in early years as well as holistic development and learning.

I have been involved in early years for a long time and worked with many changes and shifts in policy direction. Some things have changed for the better, but we are still struggling with some political misconceptions about the nature of childhood. The biggest and most important one is around the fact that early years is still not seen as an important stage in its own right.

This misconception leads to government policy that sees young children primarily as dependents of their parents, in need of 'childcare' to enable their parents to work, and the crucial early years as some sort of waiting room for school when 'children' become 'pupils' and where they are not welcome if they are not 'school ready'. It also opens the door to underfunding and cutting of services and the top down pressure on reception classes to become more like key stage 1 and 2 that we have recently seen expressed in the Teaching Schools Council report, *Bold Beginnings*, the revised EYFS early learning goals and the draft Ofsted inspection framework.

All of this is unacceptable and leads to what seems like a constant battle for the rights of all young children to quality early education

based on sound principles. The principles on which the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) and other UK and international early years frameworks are based are not new. They are the result of much practice, research and theory going back centuries.

One shared principle is the holistic nature of early years learning that occurs through the senses. Comenius was talking about this in the seventeenth century! The need for children to play has been observed across cultures and not just by educationalists. All mammals play and the more they have to develop and learn, the longer they spend playing. So, herbivores play for a shorter time than carnivores, who in turn play for a shorter time than primates and, as the most sophisticated primates, human beings play for longer than any other species on the planet. It's this connection between play and learning that we forget at our peril. Adults of other species do not stop their youngsters playing - they know that is where important life skills are learned!

Many famous learning theorists such as Froebel, Dewey, the MacMillans, Susan Isaacs, Montessori, Piaget and Vygotsky talked about the need for children to be active

learners, playing, exploring and finding out for themselves as well as interacting with adults. Their theories have become mainstream and are widely taught on early years training courses. They, and others such as Freud and Bowlby, recognised the fundamental influence of our early relationships and experiences on our lifelong social and academic wellbeing and achievement.

In this history, and in more recent practice and research in neuro-science and child development, we have a rich cultural resource which deserves to be cited and called on when we are up against those who think that making young children engage in formal learning earlier and earlier will somehow make them better learners rather than disenfranchise them from their own learning power and the world of ideas and creativity.

The DfE and Ofsted have consistently badged all recent early years reports and initiatives as seeking to narrow the achievement gap or promote early language. However, behind the rhetoric there lies a desire to formalise early education as well as a refusal to listen to practitioners and parents. Baseline testing is being imposed despite the



research evidence and huge opposition from practitioners and parents, the new Early Learning Goals are the result of a primary consultation in which nobody asked for a complete re-write and there is mounting pressure on reception teachers to get children ready for the National Curriculum. In the current climate of austerity parents are being told they are failing even though the services, such as children's centres, they might have accessed for support have gone. The new Ofsted Inspection Framework fails to highlight the principles of the EYFS or the Characteristics of Effective Learning going instead for knowledge and a dubious version of 'cultural capital'; which risks entrenching deficit models of children and families.

The EYFS grew out of Birth to Three Matters and the Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage themselves

both principled and well researched documents. It was developed over years and was the result of expert advice and collaboration with government and extensive consultation with the whole sector. To try and dismantle or change it radically without going through a similar process is ill-advised. Let's take the revised early learning goals (ELGs) and educational programme for Communication and Language (CL) as an example.

Significantly (but unsurprisingly given governmental lack of understanding about how CL underpins literacy) the revised ELGs increase the number of Literacy ELGs, at the expense of Communication and Language. The existing ELG for "Listening and attention" has lost all reference to attention, and the ELG for Understanding has disappeared altogether. These are vital components

to children's development of language, and to practitioners' understanding of how best to support language development.

There is significant evidence that the strongest support for development of language is serve-and-return conversation, following the child's lead and interest. Reading to children which is heavily emphasised, although important, is less useful. There is also a dangerous stress on vocabulary.

Vocabulary is a strong marker of language development and plays a central role in helping children to be specific in their thoughts. But it is also an indicator of even more important aspects - the purposes to which children put their ability to communicate and use language. Researchers count the size of children's vocabulary, but practitioners

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cannot – and what is a “new word” for one child may not be for others. In forming the current EYFS strand of Communication and Language, expert Speech and Language Therapists and the Royal College of SLT advised that it is more useful to describe the way children use language. The strength of vocabulary will be there if more complex use is growing, without the need to list or count words. Too much emphasis on “new words” could lead to very narrow planning of teaching discrete vocabulary lists, to the detriment of the well-tuned interactions and conversations which

are the bedrock of strong language learning.

There are many more examples in the revised statutory framework and ELGs and across other policy documents of this ignoring of early years expertise. It is unacceptable and we have to fight back or the rights of all those unique children who can be confident, resilient and self-assured will continue to be undermined.

The true basics in early years are not literacy and mathematics but play and holistic development and learning. We must not be afraid to defend early childhood from those who do not understand its importance and want to make it ‘tidier’ and more like key stage 1 and 2.

Early years organisations are all pushing back and trying to help civil servants get it right. Twelve organisations have formed a [new coalition](#) in response to concerns that early years experts were insufficiently involved in drafting revised ELGs. The coalition has launched a survey to better understand the sector’s opinion of and attitude towards the EYFS ahead of a government consultation later this year.

If you are not a member of an early years organisation, now is the time to join. Please get involved – together we are strong!

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## Further Information

### Early Years Coalition

[New early years coalition launches EYFS attitudes survey](#)

### Ofsted

[New 2019 education inspection framework](#)

[Nursery World article on new inspection handbooks](#)

### Early Learning Goals

[The EYFS Profile Pilot](#)

[Early Education response to Early Learning Goals](#)

### Baseline

[Four-year-olds don't need exams petition](#)



**Helen Moylett** is an independent early years consultant and writer. She was head teacher of an early years centre as well as working in schools and as a university lecturer. From 2004-2011 she worked for the National Strategies and was centrally involved in developing the EYFS and other national guidance. Helen was national lead for the Every Child a Talker programme. She co-authored ‘Development Matters’ with Nancy Stewart and has written and edited several early years books. She is a Vice President of Early Education and tutors at CREC in Birmingham.



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