

March 2019

# Children's Centre Leader

POLICY

## Hope and resilience in testing times

**Nathan Archer** considers stories of activism by early years professionals in response to political decisions.

### Policy neglect

Much recent news in our sector has focussed on the challenges facing children's centres and wider early childhood services as lack of investment means programmes are stretched and, in some cases, closing (Action for Children, 2019). Difficulties in delivering services for children and families stem from apparent policy neglect over children's centres to a freeze on 30 hour funding and a vacuum in workforce policy. Despite these extraordinary challenges there are powerful stories of hope and resilience; stories in which children and families remain at the forefront of our work.

My recent research has explored how early educators are positioned in early childhood policy, how they feel about that and what they do about it. Interviewing practitioners from all corners of the country and across the sector has provided rich insights into practice and policies.

### Many demands

What comes through powerfully from policy analysis of workforce reform over the last ten years is that those involved in early childhood services are positioned in multiple, often conflicting ways. Workforce policies and

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## Welcome

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

Nathan Archer considers stories of activism by early years professionals (cover) and Andrew Russo uncovers America's best-kept secret (p13). We also hear about an early years summit in Tower Hamlets (p5), Christmas opening hours in Camden (p16), an intergenerational project in Bristol (p10) and how to deal with stress (p8).

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

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external accountability demand that practitioners 'face' different directions at the same time, notably as:

- » enablers of school readiness
- » facilitators of social mobility
- » carers to enable parental employment
- » reducers of health inequalities and many others.

Additionally, these constructions of the workforce are perceived as changing with political impulses and priorities. Language of 'narrowing the gap', 'diminishing the difference', 'agent of change' and much more illustrates shifting emphases and ideologies

which seek to shape identities.

But, importantly, professional identities are not formed by policy alone and practitioners demonstrate their agency in responding to (and despite) such formations, forging their own identities.

### **Courageous Leadership**

Based on professional life story interviews with a diverse range of early childhood professionals I sought to gather and document the perspectives of individuals working with children and families in testing times.

Whilst participants faced different challenges dependent on their roles and local context, a common factor was the tension

between their personal beliefs and policy expectations. In the majority of cases practitioners were navigating, negotiating and mediating external expectations with strongly held values and beliefs. Courageous leadership (Long et al 2016) was evident.

Equally apparent in the research were the principles and passion of those in our sector and their bravery to advocate and be activist, both with and on behalf of families. Such advocacy and activism took many forms including lobbying, social media activity, petitions, engagement with policy makers and informing others. However, examples also included what might be called 'micro-resistances' when practitioners took

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## **Case Studies**

One practitioner opposed the forthcoming baseline assessment policy by speaking to politicians at a party conference against the proposals.

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Another nursery practitioner 'qualified' what she saw as a limited approach to the two year old progress check in the setting she worked in. She discussed the check with parents in terms of the valid but partial information about their child, stating 'this is not your child but a narrow way of assessing who your child is'.

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Inspired by colleagues across the country, one teacher dispensed with 'subject exercise books' in a Reception Class and prioritised outdoor play and loose parts play in a school culture which discouraged this.

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One childminder recalls concerted lobbying of politicians over proposed changes to staffing ratios in 2012, engaging in social media activism and petitions.

a stand or advocated at a service level in the interests of children and families.

Whilst the examples on p2 (Case Studies) might not be perceived as activism in the sense of street marches, these forms of resistance have shared features. Whether the resistance was individual or collective, loud and public or small scale and quiet, a disposition to challenge the status quo unites these stories.



(Sumison, 2006)

## Critical Literacy

A key to this strength of the practitioners in the study, and, I believe, a pre-requisite for activism, appears to be their critical awareness, or critical 'literacy' about policy developments. Through engagement in consultations, sector discussions, online forums and network meetings, practitioners demonstrated a form of literacy in analysing and critiquing emerging policy.

Critical literacy can be described in terms of recognising the power of dominant narratives and how these shape policy

trajectories. Sumsion (2006) developed a model (see above) in which she sees such literacy informing critical imagination (of alternatives) and, in turn, critical action or 'manoeuvring strategically' (p.6). This takes the form of acting on community concerns, forging new allegiances, strategic representation with policy makers and critical engagement with government agendas.

However, not everyone involved in the study was comfortable with the term activism, nor did they see themselves as an activist. Some participants in the

research were cautious about the implications of being labelled as such or, as one participant saw it, in terms of being 'a trouble maker'. Whilst not wanting to diminish this view, I would argue that activism does not necessarily mean marching with placards (although why not?). It might also be considered resistance, often on a smaller and quieter scale where practitioners speak truth to power or manoeuvre strategically. By framing these actions as everyday activism, might this affect

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how resistance and activism are viewed? By taking heart that our actions might be seen as advocacy and activism, does this empower us further? Is it always the best course of action or are multiple responses required depending on the situation? I would be keen to hear your view on this.

## Shared Commitments – Hope and Resilience

Many practitioners in the study used the power entrusted in them to challenge policies and practices, working innovatively, strategically and based on their convictions. Whilst representing diverse roles

in the sectors and a range of locations across the country, they shared a number of commitments:

- » They serve as advocates for children and families with authenticity and conviction
- » They continue to develop critical literacy or critical awareness to consider, evaluate and respond to policy developments
- » They listen to colleagues, children and families using these insights to disrupt misperceptions and injustices.
- » They connect with other professionals, building solidarity and collective action

- » They challenge or negotiate creatively (where possible) unreasonable policy expectations.

In times when there is much work to do in reclaiming, rebuilding, and revitalising early childhood services, these are stories of hope and resilience which should give us heart.

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Sumsion, J. (2006). From Whitlam to economic rationalism and beyond: A conceptual framework for political activism in children's services. *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*, 31(1), pp.1-9.



**Nathan Archer** has worked in early childhood education for twenty years across the public, private and voluntary sectors both in and with schools and settings, for a local authority, and with two national early years organisations. He is an associate tutor at the University of Sheffield and is currently studying for a doctorate.

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# Tower Hamlets Early Years Summit

**Pauline Hoare** shares news and outcomes of an early years summit for parents to listen to their views and inform future policy.

In a bold move to revolutionise early learning, childcare and employment support across Tower Hamlets, the Mayor John Biggs called an Early Years Summit for parents so their views will form future policy. He is putting families at the heart of his vision. The Summit took place on November 18 2018 at the Professional Development Centre in Bethnal Green Road, and was attended by almost 200 delegates.

The main speakers were parents, sharing their positive experiences of Early Help, support from children's centres and from health visitors. They also outlined their journey into rewarding employment supported by Early Help and children's centres, and by WorkPath and Job Centre Plus.

John Biggs, Mayor of Tower Hamlets said: "The summit was a way to explore how we can further improve our borough's early years' offer. The science is clear - adversity in a child's early years dramatically affects health and education outcomes for life. Our task is to disrupt those adverse childhood experiences, encourage learning from an early age and give our

children and their families the best possible start in life."

Councillor Danny Hassell, Cabinet Member for Children, Schools and Young People said: "The summit has been an opportunity to look at building employment opportunities and developing early education to support all parents to get the best outcomes for their children. Ninety seven per cent of the borough's early childhood education and care places are graded 'good' or 'outstanding' by Ofsted. We need to build on this early education offer and also make sure everyone can access universal services in children's centres."

Parents at the summit made it very clear that they want the existing high quality children's centre services from conception to age five and beyond to be reinforced by a stronger health and social care offer from those service areas. Parents told the council that while they value the wide health offer from children's centres, they want more, for example more maternity services in every children's centre. Parents said they valued the improved availability of health checks, integrated reviews and the support

from specialist training and employment advisers, services which are now available through children's centres since the restructure.

Parents asked the council to ensure all organisations attending the summit provide more meaningful information, presented in ways parents can access more easily – using smart phones as a platform, and focusing on specific apps, for example, around the availability of childcare places. Many parents asked the council to develop a stronger focus on early language development. They requested that health services make speech and language therapy available through children's centres for our youngest children. Parents also want health colleagues to provide more pre-natal and maternity services run by hospitals through children's centres and they want the council to create more support for childcare for children with additional needs.

Danny Hassell said that many diverse challenges face local families. We must break the link between disadvantage and low outcomes by

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focussing on the universal and preventative offers to families locally through children's centres working with Early Help. The need to address significant inequalities in opportunity, beginning in the earliest years of life, is both a fundamental and moral responsibility and is a critical investment in Tower Hamlets' social and economic future. Policy initiatives that promote supportive relationships and rich learning opportunities for young children create a strong foundation for school achievement after the child leaves the EYFS, followed by greater productivity in the workplace and solid citizenship in the community. When parents, informal community programmes, and professionally staffed early childhood services pay attention to young

children's emotional and social needs, as well as to their mastery of literacy and cognitive skills, they have maximum impact on the development of sturdy brain architecture and preparation for success in school.

What is it that makes life so difficult for some families? International research has identified adverse childhood experiences as a big part of the problem. It also indicates that these seriously affect health and life expectancy. Somen Bannerjee the Director of Public Health explained that adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are traumatic events that affect children while growing up, such as suffering child maltreatment or living in a household affected by domestic violence, substance misuse or mental illness.

They can impact on physical health issues such as heart conditions, mortality rates, diabetes and on social issues such as exclusions from school, family violence, and addiction. All our services within and beyond the council who offer early years services have to work together better to reduce the impact of ACEs.

James Hemsall, OBE, reminded delegates about how councils can use the 30 hours to increase social mobility. This is the approach championed by the Mayor through improving pathways to work, particularly for families distant from employment.

Dr Kitty Stewart Associate Professor of Social Policy and Associate Director of the Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion reviewed



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20 years of policy change, assessing the strengths and limitations of where we are today, and identifying priority areas and key next steps for policy attention.

She referred to three types of early years' policy: parental leave and parenting; early education and childcare; and financial support to households with young children. She spoke about the

need to narrow the gaps at school by intervening earlier. This is essential to breaking the cycle of disadvantage and making progress on social mobility. Dr. Stewart provided detail on how the poorest and most vulnerable families are increasingly disadvantaged. Locally, the focus will continue to be on early language acquisition because of the impact on wellbeing and later good mental health

as identified by the Early Intervention Foundation.

The Mayor's Early Years' Summit demonstrated that parents, families, specialist professionals and the research base are all in agreement about the next steps locally: stronger early years services with a focus on early identification, prevention, intervention and early help.



**Pauline Hoare** leads the IEYS in Tower Hamlets. Her responsibilities are to ensure that children's outcomes are as high as possible by the age of five at the end of the EYFS. Her teams work with schools, private, voluntary and independent settings – including childminders – and in children's centres.

# Dealing with Stress

**Deborah Lawson**, General Secretary for Voice: The Union for Education Professionals, offers suggestions for recognising and tackling stress in the workplace.

Positive pressure can energise and help you reach your peak performance. Too much pressure, however, can leave you feeling stressed or anxious, and continued stress can impact on health.

Stress is a daily part of life and professionals working in the early years are no different. We enjoy working with, educating and caring for young children, and even though it is hard work and financial rewards are limited, job satisfaction levels are high.

Our passion to educate and do the best for children and future generations is what brought us into the profession and often what keeps us here. It is certainly the advantage of working with young children. The drawback is all the other work that goes with it.

At Voice, we know from our annual stress survey that it is the other demands placed on staff, rather than their role working with children, that is the issue and the biggest cause of stress in the profession.

This is further corroborated by the volume and nature of the calls we receive from our early years members, informing us of the demands made of them, and generally having to do more in less time with fewer resources, increasing the amount of unpaid work outside the

workplace. These demands are out of their control and often, but not always, driven by external factors, such as policy changes from government or Ofsted.

Voice is not alone in recognising the rise in stress-related issues. The Pre-school Learning Alliance report last year, *Minds Matter*, reported that 74 percent of those surveyed described themselves as stressed as a result of their job.

Similar statistics are reported by the Education Support Partnership. The Health and Safety Executive report on workplace stress, depression and anxiety found that workload, too much pressure or responsibility, was the biggest stress factor cited by most respondents. It is alarming to note that education and health/social care professionals also report higher levels of stress than other professions and occupations. This all seems to paint a rather gloomy picture, but it is possible to change the narrative by taking a proactive approach.

## Proactive approach

From a health and safety perspective, employers have a legal duty to protect employees from stress at work. But tackling stress, minimising or preventing it, not only demonstrates

good employment practice, it has business benefits too.

Being proactive in tackling stress makes for a healthier, happier, more engaged staff team, reduces sickness absence and workplace disputes, and improves retention levels and recruitment – all of which contributes to the early education and care provided by you and your team.

So, prevention is better than cure, and there are a few simple but effective steps you can take – but first some clarification.

First, stress is not a mental health condition, but it can exacerbate any existing mental health condition or cause problems in future if not addressed. It is important, therefore, to be able to spot when staff may be experiencing stress.

Secondly, early years professionals are well known for putting the needs of children first, relegating their own needs to 'when I have time'. The profession needs to take the oxygen mask approach. Remember, in case of emergency, fit your own oxygen mask before, and in order to help, others. This is not a selfish approach, because it enables you to take control, something that is important especially if, because of a



stressful situation, you feel out of control and unable to do your best. The oxygen mask approach empowers and is an important step in managing stress.

Thirdly, employers and managers do have a duty of care and need to be equipped to recognise the early signs of stress – but so do employees. As with all health and safety matters, it is the duty of everyone in the workplace, but the legal responsibility to undertake a risk assessment is the employer's. When stress is recognised and tackled as a workplace issue, it can lead to collective solutions. So, employer and employees have responsibilities and the best way to fulfil them is together.

## Steps

The first step is to carry out a risk assessment to identify problems and what triggers them. Identification leads

to an action plan and the need for solutions. Collective solutions help ensure that all staff engage in the process, have ownership of the solutions and can be supportive of one another.

A whole team approach requires everyone to understand and recognise, in themselves and others, the symptoms of stress. These include low energy, headaches, dry mouth, apathy, upset stomach and nausea, aches, pains and tense muscles, tearfulness, chest pain and rapid heartbeat, insomnia, frequent colds and infections, and loss of sexual desire or ability.

Stress can affect us physically and often we only realise that we are stressed after feeling the physical signs like tiredness, headaches or an upset stomach.

Whilst there may be things in

life, in and outside of work, that cannot be controlled, there are ways to manage day-to-day feelings of stress.

By helping employees or colleagues to identify their triggers, consideration can be given to what can be changed to manage them.

A simple step can be effective. If you are overwhelmed by paperwork, take time to organise and plan the work, taking small steps to achieve long-term success. Finding time, even ten minutes, in a day for yourself can be hard, but consider it your oxygen mask and find time.

Support at work is important and several organisations have resources that can help. No one size fits all. What is important is to have a policy and mechanism to manage and prevent stress in your workplace.

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## Useful Links

[The Education Support Partnership](#) provides support and advice for all staff working in schools, colleges and universities. Free helpline 08000 562 561.

[ACAS: Dealing with stress in the workplace.](#)

[Voice stress support](#): to access information about stress, managing stress and links to further tools and useful information.

The toolkits can be found on the latest [HSE stress bulletin](#).



After gaining her NNEB in 1977, **Deborah Lawson** worked with children with special needs and disabilities, as a Registration and Inspection Officer (daycare), as an Ofsted nursery education inspector, and as External Funding and Business Manager and Childcare Commissioning Manager in Gloucestershire. A member of Voice (previously PAT and PANN) since 1987, Deborah became a Council member in 1989 and, in 2006-2007, the first non-teacher National Chairman. She was elected General Secretary in 2012 and re-elected unopposed in 2017.

# Intergenerational Project in Bristol

**Tim Clark** shares details about the BS3 Community intergenerational project at The Chessel Centre in Bristol with an aim of helping to reduce loneliness and isolation among older people.

## Background

BS3 Community is a charity focussed on improving the quality of life of people living in the BS3 postcode area of Bristol. Over the past 28 years the charity has delivered early education groups alongside social care provision for older people, however traditionally these have been delivered as distinct, separate services. The 2017 television programme 'The Old People's Home for Four Year Old's', which included both BS3 Community and Bristol City Council as partners, was successful in further provoking an emerging conversation about the benefits of intergenerational interaction for children and older people in this community, and the city as a whole.

The BS3 area is home to over 3,000 people aged 65 years+ and Age UK's loneliness 'heat map' (Age UK 2016) places parts of the area in the top 3% for risk of loneliness and isolation amongst older people in England. Bristol's 2018 population report (Bristol City Council 2018) indicates that the number of people in this age group continues to increase, yet we know locally

that funding constraints mean that many traditional social groups and lunch clubs face challenges. At the same time, the BS3 area has a rapidly increasing number of young families and a growing birth rate, which has seen significant demand for local services including early education and drop-in groups. Again funding constraints are introducing challenges, particularly for children's centres, who previously delivered the majority of open access groups locally.

As part of the development of a wider programme of intergenerational activities, consultation by BS3 Community highlighted that many grandparents in the area have childcare responsibilities for their grandchildren. Despite this, the number of grandparents attending the current drop-in community family groups is low. In response the organisation set an objective to trial a play-based group specifically targeted at grandparents and under 5s. As the development of intergenerational projects is a key strand of Bristol's Strategic Plan for Early Years and Childcare, we approached Bristol City Council who agreed to act as a partner.

We were then introduced to Children's Centre Leader, who agreed to support us in evaluating the project, and sharing our learning, and we made a joint application to the John James Bristol Foundation, who awarded funding for a 12-week pilot. The most significant work involved in starting the project was establishing connections, and learning from others, to ensure that we had the resources and understanding to carry out a meaningful pilot. This included visits with partners to similar groups in London and the Netherlands, and dialogue with local universities.

## The Project

The Grandparents Play Group will operate in our community room, which is used by a variety of local groups and classes. Locating intergenerational activities in a neutral space is consistently regarded as key to successful intergenerational projects (Drury et al 2017), this stance was echoed in the study visit I made to a range of projects in the Netherlands last year. The group will be primarily targeted at grandparents, but will also provide opportunities for older people who are

interested in volunteering, and the potential for children attending our nursery to have some involvement.

The group will be led by a qualified early years teacher, with experience of facilitating drop-in community activities for families and an interest in the creative arts. Her remit is to facilitate activities which encourage cooperation and interaction, as well as to use her understanding of early education to ensure that there is a sound pedagogical basis for the activities children are engaging in. Alongside the teacher, there will also be some engagement from the community development team, who have a strong understanding of supporting older people, and the ability to signpost and talk to them about other opportunities and services if appropriate. Our objective is for the group to promote community engagement and links for all attendees, as well as being a productive and purposeful experience in its own right.

Each session will include a more informal period where grandparents and children can access activity stations together in the space, a group activity focussed on working together, and a circle time with singing and stories. Reflecting on our previous intergenerational projects, including a partnership with a local retirement home, we've begun to develop an understanding of activities which better encourage interaction. Often these include very simple activities, for example one of our teachers highlights how



beneficial balloon games have been in the retirement home, because they provide some physical challenge and need for teamwork for both groups whilst also provoking interaction through fun and humour.

As a community organisation we are well placed to promote the project, and hope that this will result in good levels of attendance. Alongside wider local communications, for example leaflets and social media, we will also be able to introduce the project more directly via community groups and groups of parents.

In particular, working with local partners and publications, such as our local LinkAge network will support this. We have previously found this approach to be positive as through this some community members act as informal advocates, encouraging others to get involved.

### **Benefits & Evaluation**

A key part of the project, and our partnerships, is to capture and share learning about the process, and the benefits, of this work. Our specific objectives for the project are:

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1. To reduce loneliness and isolation through generating interactions, connections and relationships between children and older people.

2. To increase school readiness through developing a pattern of singing and storytelling with young children

In order to assess this we will be collecting evaluation responses from the grandparents who attend, firstly during their initial contact with us, and then again later in the programme. In addition to this, we will record participant numbers through the course of the project, and the teacher will keep a reflective log, as well as photographs and



observations of the children's engagement during the sessions. We are also aware that intergenerational activity is a topic of interest for two of our local universities, and we have been discussing the potential of their involvement

in a more detailed assessment. At the end of the programme we intend to report on our findings, and if the project is successful, this will also form the basis for efforts to secure further funding.

## References

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**Dr Tim Clark** is the Executive Head of Early Education for BS3 Community Development, a charity and community business in South Bristol. He has worked in the early years sector in Bristol for 19 years and alongside his role he completed an [Ed.D with the University in Reading](#) in 2017. Tim sits on Bristol City Council's 'Strategic Early Years Partnership Board' and is also employed as a Guest Lecturer by the University of the West of England. He has an interest in narrative research methodologies, and community business models.

# Uncovering America's Best-Kept Secret

**Andrew Russo** shares the history of the family support and strengthening networks in the United States and the development of standards for the field.

## History

The history of the Family Support and Strengthening field in the United States goes back more than 100 years to the establishment of settlement houses in the late 1800s in major metropolitan areas. These settlement houses provided the large number of immigrants entering the country at that time with support, job training, English classes, and social advocacy as a means to assist them in understanding, adapting to, and succeeding in American society.

Family Support as a term first emerged in the late 1970s to describe welcoming local programs designed to support parents with young children through a variety of resources and services. As the modern version of settlement houses, these programs were voluntary and available for all families, many on a "drop-in" basis where parents did not need to sign up or pay for the opportunity to participate.

## Family Resource Centers

Family Support and Strengthening programs work with families in a multi-generational, strengths-based, family-centered approach to enhance parenting skills, foster the healthy development and

wellbeing of children, youth, and families, prevent child abuse and neglect, increase school readiness, connect families to resources, develop parent and community leadership, engage males and fathers, support healthy marital and couples relationships, and promote family economic success.

Family Support and Strengthening programs may include parenting classes and support groups, life skills training, family activities, leadership development, links to community resources, family counseling, crisis intervention, and concrete supports such as food banks and clothing exchanges.

Family Resource Centers (FRCs) are the most typical kind of Family Support and Strengthening programs. They are known by many different names across the country, including Family Centers, Family Success Centers, Family Support Centers, and Parent Child Centers. They serve as welcoming hubs of community services and opportunities designed to strengthen families. Their activities and programs are developed to reflect the specific needs, cultures, and interests of the families served.

These centers do not receive dedicated federal funding, and

yet there are more than 3,000 of them nationwide as cities, counties, and states across the political spectrum have chosen to invest in them. They serve more than 2 million people each year in 28 states and the District of Columbia, and are often referred to as "America's best kept secret" because their valuable work to support families to be healthy, strong, and successful is still largely under the radar.

Recent research has demonstrated the efficacy of these programs:

- » A 2015 Social Return on Investment Study conducted by Community Services Analysis for the Alabama Network of Family Resource Centers determined that for every \$1 invested in FRCs, the State of Alabama received \$4.93 in immediate and long-term consequential financial benefits.
- » A 2018 evaluation report conducted for the Allegheny County Department of Human Services (Pennsylvania) by the University of Chicago's Chapin Hall Center for Children on the impact of their 25 Family Support Centers determined that neighborhoods with Family Support Centers had significantly lower rates of child abuse and neglect investigations than similar neighborhoods without

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them (30.5 investigations per 1,000 children versus 41.5 per 1,000 children).

- » San Francisco's investment in 25 FRCs has led to a 15% drop in both the number of children involved in the child welfare system in the last 15 years. Re-entry into the system has been more than halved from 23% to 11%.

## Family Support and Strengthening Networks

As the complex social, economic, and health issues faced by families today cannot be addressed by any one organization, Family Support and Strengthening Networks, comprised of two or more Family Strengthening organizations, have emerged across the United States at the city, county, and state levels. They are funded in a variety of ways, and some are wholly volunteer efforts.

Networks create opportunities for service providers to meet formally and informally, exchange information, make connections, develop relationships, and address challenges that no one organization could on its own. Networks efficiently ensure that important information is disseminated quickly and accurately to a large numbers of organizations, individual service providers, and families. Networks often develop formalized arrangements involving joint funding applications, memoranda of understanding coordinating service delivery, development of professional standards, co-location, and

cross-training agreements. Through enhanced coordination, networks promote the development and sustainability of a well-organized system of support for families.

Research conducted by the OMNI Institute in 2015 indicated that Family Support and Strengthening Networks yielded a wide range of positive impacts for families and communities, including strengthened parenting and the factors that protect against child abuse and neglect, improved high school graduation rates for teen parents and reduced teen pregnancies, increased family access to health coverage and health care, increased economic self-sufficiency, and increased access to resources.

## National Family Support Network

Founded in 2011, the National Family Support Network (NFSN) is a membership-based organization comprised of statewide Family Support and Strengthening Networks. The NFSN currently has 29 Member Networks, representing the great geographical and demographic diversity of the nation.

The mission of the NFSN is to promote positive outcomes for all children, families, and communities by leveraging the collective impact of state networks and championing quality family support and strengthening practices and policies. The vision of the NFSN is a nation in which every family is thriving and every state has a strong and

effective Family Support and Strengthening Network.

The NFSN focuses on three main areas of impact:

- » Connecting and convening member networks to enhance their effectiveness - Increasing connectedness amongst members for peer learning and mutual support through annual national convenings, webinars, regular meetings, networking, and website content sharing.
- » Promoting Family Support best practice and evaluation
- » Raising the visibility of the value and impact of Family Support and Strengthening Networks.

## Standards of Quality for Family Strengthening & Support

Issued by the California Network of Family Strengthening Networks (CNFSN) in 2012 and adopted by the NFSN in 2013, the Standards of Quality for Family Strengthening & Support benefit children and families by enhancing the quality of the programs that support them. They are the first and only standards to integrate and operationalize the Principles of Family Support Practice with the Strengthening Families Approach and its research-based evidence-informed 5 Protective Factors. As part of an 18-month development process, the Standards were refined and vetted with nearly 1,000 diverse organizations serving rural and urban populations across California.

Although the field of Family

Support and Strengthening has more than 100 years of history, until now it lacked standards to demonstrate the quality of programs working in it. The development of standards is a significant advancement for the field as a whole, putting it in the same league as education, healthcare, childcare and other areas of practice that have long had standards.

The Standards are organized into five sections with 17 standards, each with minimum and high quality indicators and implementation examples. The five sections are the core area of practice of Family Centeredness, Family Strengthening, Embracing Diversity, Community Building, and Evaluation. The Standards and the accompanying implementation tools are free and accessible to all through the NFSN website.

The Standards are designed to be used by all stakeholders – public departments, foundations, community-based organizations, and parents – as a tool for planning, providing, and assessing quality practice.



Parent child group at a Family Resource Center in Massachusetts

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The Standards create common language and expectations in the Family Support and Strengthening field across different kinds of programs, such as Family Resource Centers, home visiting programs, and child development programs.

Training is a fundamental strategy for implementing the Standards effectively. The NFSN develops the capacity of Member Networks to be able to conduct a full-day Standards certification training designed for all management and

direct service staff, as well as for funders.

Since the Standards were first issued in May 2012, more than 5,500 people have completed the certification training nationally. Certification on the Standards is becoming increasingly recognized as a basic competency expectation for anyone working with families.

For more information: <https://www.nationalfamilysupportnetwork.org>



**Andrew Russo** is the Co-Founder & Director of the National Family Support Network. He has worked and volunteered in the nonprofit social service sector at the direct service, management, and network levels for more than 20 years in Washington DC, Boston, New York, Chicago, the San Francisco Bay Area, and Taiwan.

He earned his B.A. from Columbia University and his M.A. from Loyola University Chicago.

# Christmas Opening in Camden

**Debbie Adams**, Head of the Integrated Early Years Service at London Borough of Camden explores the decision to keep Camden children's centres open during the Christmas period.

Christmas is a time that many of us look forward to, a time to relax with family and friends and take some time away from the usual frenetic pace of life. However, the subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, expectations of a perfect family life that appear everywhere throughout December create significant additional pressures for families who are often struggling with bills, relationships, ill health, loneliness and more. Images of expensive toys and tables laden with festive food are everywhere and the usual array of celebrity chefs will send us to our 'store cupboard' for ingredients that we have never even heard of. It is not surprising then that for many Christmas is a very difficult time.

Families that don't celebrate Christmas will, against a back drop of twinkly lights and myriad images of Santa

Claus, need to support their children to understand the different festivals that are maybe not celebrated in their own culture. Parents may be bringing up children alone without the support of family and friends and many families living in poverty won't be able to afford special food or presents to share. Some will not even have a secure home in which to spend Christmas.

The grim statistics about poverty and domestic abuse bear testimony to the increased stresses and strains on family life at this time of year.

As if to reinforce the isolation that some families experience many of the regular routines that structure family life are disrupted. Schools close, many nurseries, clubs and activities either close or have a reduced programme. It's cold, dark and often wet outside. Families have little or no choice but to spend much of the time alone

at home, wherever that is.

As a service whose mission it is to support children to have the best possible start in life it is imperative that we acknowledge the particular challenges that many families will face over the Christmas period and continue to offer the warm welcome, supportive environment and fun and games that they are used to at the children's centre. We can provide the continuity and support that can make a real difference.

Camden children's centres came together to discuss and consider how best to continue to support families during this unique time of year. Some felt that families wouldn't want to attend children's centre services at Christmas or that staff would not want to work. However, a range of options were considered and explored and eventually a collective decision was made to run as near normal



a service as possible. It was felt that to provide continuity at a time when everything else seems different would be the most welcome approach. Acknowledging the need to be sensitive to the needs of our staff, many of whom wished to spend time with their own families, a reduced programme was planned that enabled some centres to be open between Christmas and New Year with daily drop-in sessions and a family support duty service. It was a familiar service running in a familiar building with the same smiling welcome that families enjoy at any other time of the year. Children were able to play with the toys, with each other and their

parents in a warm and friendly environment. For parents this was an opportunity to feel part of their community, to feel connected and to share.

The numbers of families attending the centre between Christmas and New Year was not huge and we have reflected that some of our communication might have been more effective and reached more families. Some parents told us that they only found out the Centre was open through 'word of mouth'. Next year, having had positive feedback from staff and families, we will communicate our plans more extensively using a variety of media and ask our team of parents champions to 'spread the

word' in their communities and at the school gate.

Those that came along this year really enjoyed the opportunity to get together with other parents and for their children to 'get out for a while'. One Dad brought his children along to every session. He is usually at work and so hadn't had a chance to see the centre that his children attend and enjoy so much. He was surprised and very grateful that the centre was open. The members of staff who chose to work at the centres enabling services to be open felt that they had made a really valuable contribution. Thank you to all of them for being such stars!



**Debbie Adams** is currently working at the London Borough of Camden as Head of the Integrated Early Years Service. She has been involved with children's centres since their inception and has worked in a number of different local authorities developing services and ensuring that resources are used to give all children the best possible start.

# Children's Centre Leader

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Children's Centre Leader Registered Charity Number: 1167972

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