

Focus on foundations

It's time to rethink early learning, according to educationist and campaigner *Wendy Ellyatt*. Words by *Charlotte Tamvakis*

Late last year, plans to lower the school starting age from seven to six in Poland resulted in a million parents coming out in protest. "There is a long tradition of highly creative, immersive pre-school environments in Poland," Wendy Ellyatt, co-founder and CEO of the UK's Save Childhood Movement, explains. "They didn't believe the change would benefit children and this issue nearly took the government down."

In England, Wales and Scotland children start formal schooling in the academic year they turn five; in Northern Ireland the statutory starting age is four. The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) covers the welfare and development of children up to five in England, and it includes an extensive set of learning and development goals childcare providers must adhere to.

These goals, along with "an assumption by the last two governments that the purpose of early years is getting children ready for school", are the focus of the Save Childhood Movement's 'Too much, too soon' campaign, which is calling for an end to the early introduction to formal learning as part of a play-focused and developmentally appropriate foundation stage.

Wendy says: "Early childhood needs to be seen as a unique stage in its own right, rather than preparation for school. The single most vibrant and dynamic phase of life is the period

from birth to seven. How dare we undermine this by saying the learning process is only valued when it goes into formal, measurable attainment?"

"We are looking at childhood well-being, at the vital importance of the early years, at children's rights and freedoms, and at what compromises children's natural creativity and self-expression. In 90% of countries, the school starting age is six or seven, and there is no evidence to show that starting formal learning early produces better long-term results — in fact the reverse is the case."

After an initial career as a strategic management consultant, Wendy had her daughter 25 years ago and became fascinated with early learning, first training as a Montessori teacher and going on to study early years approaches across the world.

She went on to help set up a day-care centre where she witnessed for herself the impact of formalised learning on four-year-olds. "I started to see that something was going on with the children who were going into reception class, in the way they reacted with the environment," she says.

During a Masters in Early Years and Primary Studies at the University of Roehampton, Wendy researched children's understanding of work and play. Within six months of starting reception class, she found children's perception of work and play changed dramatically. "Prior to reception, when you asked what's work and what's play, they would say 'Daddy goes to work at the office and I go to work at school', and everything they did they saw as work, and there wasn't any separation between the two in their minds," she says.

"When the same questions were asked of children in reception classes, we found they saw work as something to do, it was pencil-and-paper-related, and play was something that had less value and that you did when you'd finished your work: your work was acceptable, so you were allowed to play.

"I found that deeply shocking. That's when I

really started to look at creativity and the processes of learning and what could compromise that. Children should be immersed in the most creative, expressive environment possible. In England, the word 'play' is not conveying to people the extraordinary levels of learning that go on in enriched learning environments with our youngest children."

She adds: "Human playfulness supports healthy brain development and key developmental understanding and abilities. It is also the process that has underpinned the highest scientific and cultural achievements."

After returning to consultancy, specialising in creativity and the early years, and also writing on the subject, Wendy started campaigning on early years issues, initially becoming a core member of OpenEYE, a campaign for open early years education; in 2010 she established www.uniquechildnetwork.com.

The Save Childhood Movement was launched in the spring of 2013, and in September, marking the launch of its 'Too much, too soon' campaign, 127 influential voices in education, including ATL general secretary Mary Bousted, added their names to a letter from the movement published in *The Telegraph*, calling for a reassessment of early years education. Despite the influential list of signatories, the Secretary of State for Education dismissed its demands as "bogus pop-psychology" and "an excuse for not teaching poor children how to add up".

Wendy believes many developments in early years can be traced back to the Education Reform Act. She believes the previous Labour administration's focus on early years was a double-edged sword and, despite initial optimism about the coalition, feels negative change has accelerated under the current government. "There was some fantastic investment in early years under Labour, which has raised quality but has come at the significant cost of extremely bureaucratic measurability and accountability systems," she says.

She describes how, since 2010, the coalition government has shifted education priorities from





Wendy Ellyatt of the Save Childhood Movement

well-being to achievement: the Department for Children, Schools and Families became the Department for Education; the outcomes outlined in Every Child Matters were replaced with 'help children achieve more'.

"We're creating systems that are measurable rather than measuring what matters. You do need to justify investment, but the layers of bureaucracy that have been introduced in early years are astounding. Early years are far too important to be at the mercy of some kind of political agenda rather than being underpinned by global evidence."

She continues: "Now Ofsted is starting to become involved, and the best interests of the child seem to have been marginalised. Why is Michael Wilshaw making statements on what should happen in the education system?"

The impact of testing and inspections on early years needs more research, she says. "The moment you give the adult an external objective [such as fulfilling EYFS] the dynamic of the interaction with the child will change. The adult is no longer going to empathise with the child and go with the flow; the adult needs to manipulate that situation to achieve a result."

"The child will pick that up; you've changed the environment for both the adult and the child from an open-ended, flowing immersive environment to one where there's a specific objective sought. The stress the adult is under to achieve their targets will also have an impact."

The campaign wants the government to scrap its plans for reception-year baseline testing. "You've got children at such vastly varying early experiences and ages. You can have a child that's 20% older than another child, how can that possibly be statistically valid? The danger

of things like baseline testing is you're starting to label children at very early stages. Children are very sensitive to both verbal and non-verbal messages and will pick up that they're somehow failing. What we need is more monitoring, support and guidance, and less measuring."

The obsession with measurable results and accountability also means developmentally unsuitable learning is forced on young children at the expense of the "wonderful learning processes" around play, she says. "You can force children to learn things

before they are developmentally ready, but it's often at the expense of the disposition to want to do it. You can have them learning at four and five to read, but when they're 11 and 12 they don't want to read, because the joy of the process has been interfered with.

"Child psychologists are worried because we're measuring children too early, defining them as failing, and on top of this we're running the risk of misdiagnosing children as special educational needs, which is carried through life," she adds. "We need far more research on this. This is an appalling risk to take with our youngest children."

While there are similar concerns about early years in the US, Wendy says many other

countries follow a different model. In Iceland, where children start school at six, Wendy is impressed by the "level of learning that's going on in those high quality and play-based pre-school environments".

She adds: "While other people in the world are cultivating human beings who are very confident and erudite, who are invited to think outside of the box, here we're cultivating more of the same, we are maintaining a culture where the danger is we're made to feel foolish or stupid when we go beyond the known, and that's a dangerous place for us as a society."

Why does the government champion these development goals, testing policies and inspections? "I think we have governments treating children almost like commodities now. Put money in this end and we're going to get a

more effective workforce out the other. There is an economic argument, but it's not the only argument."

She warns: "We can't replicate the systems that are happening in other countries without looking very carefully at their cultural systems and the kind of society we have here at the moment. We need to look at scientific understanding and global evidence, but we also need to look at the values and principles that underpin best practice."

Does the campaign want a change in the school starting age to six, bringing it in line with the majority of European countries? "What we would really like to see is the principles of the EYFS carried forward to key stage 1, because the problem would then self-adjust. The most disadvantaged and youngest children would have more time to develop, to mature their biology and neurology, in order to be ready for higher-level learning. Our argument isn't about school, it's about providing developmentally appropriate environments."

However, Wendy does include the caveat that there is a danger children are put into a reception class environment where stressed teachers feel the downward pressure of the schooling system to achieve results, or schools simply may not have physical space for so many children. The impact on young children going from small-scale home, childminder or nursery environments to larger schools where there could be 600 children also needs consideration.

"Children naturally want to learn. There is no more important period than the early years in terms of helping to develop happy, confident, healthy people. We need to look at how we maximise this," she says. "Education should really

be apolitical with governments guided by expert advice.

"We're not saying that we have all the answers, we're saying that we cannot afford to get this wrong and that we as a country need to know the government is making decisions based on the best available evidence. We have some of this evidence but we need more, especially balancing the neurological and psycho-social aspects of child development and well-being with later outcomes. Give us the evidence that backs up your arguments and let's go into dialogue that has the best interests of the child at heart." ■

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