

Citizens with developmental rights

The Save Childhood Movement is calling for early years policy making to be put in the hands of a non-political and multi-disciplinary council that will act as an evidence-based guidance body to government.



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AT THE end of March, the Save Childhood Movement published its own *Early Years Manifesto* that laid out the three core elements and 11 policy points that it believes should be included in any political policies. In this, it called for: An integrated, holistic and appropriately financed system built upon... an evidence-based understanding of the child as... a citizen with developmental rights and freedoms.

It is the last point that I would like to explore in more detail, at a time when the rights and freedoms of young children in England, as powerful natural theory-builders and meaning-makers, are being significantly compromised.

Any democratic society should be worried when those in power ignore expert advice and opinion, and dismiss large bodies of evidence. Particularly, when this evidence relates to the health and wellbeing of young children, because we know that the first years of life lay the foundation for how we relate to others, respond to challenge in the environment, and perceive failure and success. It is the most critical period of human development that sets the developmental foundation for all that is to come.

In the last few weeks we have seen four major announcements that need to be examined. The first, despite widespread expert opposition to the idea, was the introduction of baseline testing and the announcement that the *Early Years Profile* will no longer be compulsory.

The second, despite widespread sector approval of the idea, was government confirmation that they will not go ahead with recommendations made by Professor Cathy Nutbrown to move towards a minimum Level 3 qualification for all early years practitioners counted in staff:child ratios. Professor Nutbrown had called for a minimum of 50 percent of staff at Level 3, from September 2013, 70 percent at Level 3 from September 2015, and for all staff counted in ratios to be qualified to Level 3 by 2022. Her own response to this decision was to state that it 'threatens the future status of the profession, limits career progression and denies some of the most vulnerable children the best that we can offer.'

The third was Sir Michael Wilshaw's recent letter to early years inspectors calling for increased focus on teacher-led instruction and suggesting that the early years is primarily a preparation for school readiness. The fourth announcement was the Ofsted report that denounced the existing quality of early provision, which stated that school would be the best place for

disadvantaged two-year-olds. Any opposition to the idea was to be seen as 'middle-class prejudice against the disadvantaged'.

In 2005, the United Nations published *General Comment 7* pertaining to the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*. In this, it stated that: 'For the exercise of their rights, young children have particular requirements for physical nurturance, emotional care and sensitive guidance, as well as for time and space for social play, exploration and learning.'

Throughout the document, there is a special emphasis on the need for parties to agree that the education of the child shall be directed to 'the development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential', and that this must be achieved in ways that are 'child-centred, child-friendly and reflect the rights and inherent dignity of the child'. It reflects an asset-based approach to understanding early childhood as a time of extraordinary learning and enormous developmental importance in its own right.

It is startling, therefore, to see the language used in those recent statements, from the DfE and Ofsted, convey such a contrasting and deficit-based approach to childhood, where young children are still perceived as in need of instruction and testing, and where the greatest measure of success is whether they are made appropriately 'ready' for school.

The sector is now uniting in its desire to counter such poorly evidenced statements and to see early years policy making, instead, prioritise the developmental rights and freedoms of children. In its manifesto, the Save Childhood Movement suggests the establishment of a new, a-political and multi-disciplinary National Council on Human Learning and Development that will then act as an evidence-based guidance body to all future governments.

In this way, policy making would be in the hands of people who could focus on global best practice and evidence and who could help further public and governmental understanding of the true power and potential of early childhood development. It seems that such a body is currently urgently needed. eye

Useful resources

- The Save Childhood Movement's *Early Years Manifesto – Putting Children First* can be viewed here: www.savechildhood.net/putting-children-first.html