

International Festival of Childhood

Wendy Ellyatt explains why we need to reassess the type of world and values our children will inherit, and outlines a new four-day conference that will bring together leading thinkers from around the world.

A remarkable gathering of leading thinkers, authors, and early years specialists are coming together to share their thoughts, concerns and ideas about modern childhood at the first four-day International Festival of Childhood (IFC2017) that will take place in Bath at the end of June 2017. Why does this matter? Because, over the last few decades, there have been massive changes in the lives of young children and the evidence suggests that this may be having a very damaging effect, not only to their current health and wellbeing, but also to whether they grow up to be happy, healthy adults.

There is now widespread acknowledgement that getting things right in the early years of life (pre-birth to eight-years-old) is vitally important if we want to reduce later health and social inequalities. The most basic principle of child development is that it is relational. The evidence clearly shows that early experience and development creates the foundations for wellbeing, which then last into later childhood and on into adulthood. It also shows that stable home lives and healthy parent-child interactions are the most influential aspect on later outcomes. Family lives are embedded in local communities, so supporting the healthy values and belief systems of communities really matters too – as does promoting social policies that nurture more caring and empathic societies.

The current statistics on child wellbeing in the modern world are deeply worrying. Many thousands of children and young people are increasingly isolated and unhappy, have eating disorders and self-harm; some, tragically, take their own lives. Many are growing up in dysfunctional families, and are left to cope with psychological problems, illness, drugs and/or alcohol issues – not necessarily their own – and feel constantly judged, labelled and criticised by others.

It is a strange and worrying thing that on a factory floor a 10 percent failure rate would have all the alarm bells ringing, with the senior management hauled in and the whole system put under review – and yet, in civilised countries, such as the UK, we seem remarkably unconcerned about statistics revealing that 1-in-10 children currently have a diagnosable mental health disorder and 1-in-12 adolescents self-harm.

Numerous reports show that investment in the early years is the single most important thing that any country can do to ensure the health, happiness, and vitality, of its population. Those countries that invest in family life and high quality childcare provision see a very effective return on investment – but this is not only measured in economic terms, but in other definitions of wealth that include caring and empathic societies where people feel safe and cared for – and have a sense of personal meaning and contribution.

Nelson Mandela said: ‘There can be no keener revelation of a society’s soul than the way in which it treats its children.’ If we look at the kind of ‘soul’ messages we are currently seeing in the UK, they might look like this:

- Family life is less important than economic activity.
- Money is what matters most to families (rather than time and work/life balance).
- Getting mothers back to work is more important than ensuring good quality childcare.
- The youngest children are the least important in terms of rights and citizenship.
- It is fine to have early years practitioners receive the lowest pay and status.
- Personal achievement is more important than social connection and contribution.
- Success is all about passing tests and exams, rather than the development of resilience and empathy.
- Money and things, rather than meaning and community, make you happy.

The festival, therefore, is an attempt to start a global conversation about the kind of values we want to see in our societies – and, more importantly, the kind of people we want our children and grandchildren be. Children have to live in the worlds that adults have created and we all have a responsibility to ensure that these worlds are fit for purpose. In fact our future depends upon it. **eye**

Useful resources

- Early bird festival tickets are now available. Come and be part of the solution
- www.festivalofchildhood.com #INTFC2017

The festival is an attempt to start a global conversation about the kind of values we want to see in our societies – and, more importantly, the kind of people we want our children and grandchildren be.