

March 2018

# Children's Centre Leader



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## POLICY

# Reviewing research gives hope

Professor Eva Lloyd OBE reviews children's centre research to date to see how it can help us move forward.

When European research colleagues mention the influence of the British children's centre model on the shape of similar developments in their own countries, I am always filled with a warm glow. This happened most recently when I spent four months as a visiting professor at the University of Muenster in Germany. At the same time, though, I have to hide my concern at what has been happening to children's centres over recent years: [multiple consultations and reports on their future](#)

[whose findings often failed to have impact](#), as well as repeated reformatting of their core purpose and [massive and damaging cuts to their core funding](#).

Well before the establishment of the [Sure Start Centre initiative in 1998](#), children's centres and the different forms of family support they offered featured in my research and had become close to my heart. For this piece, I therefore decided to revisit some of the conclusions I came to over the years to explore whether

# Welcome

Welcome to the March 2018 issue of Children's Centre Leader.

Professor Eva Lloyd looks back on children's centre research to see what lessons we can take forward, while Janet King from CACHE considers what resilience really means (p4). Jacqui Burke explores what children's centre leaders can do to manage change (p6) and I Can share their place-based strategy to support communication skills in disadvantaged children.

As always, let us know what you think by emailing: [cclr@hempalls.com](mailto:cclr@hempalls.com)

James Hempalls,  
Editor, Children's  
Centre Leader



I still consider them relevant in today's debate about the future of children's centres.

While working for Save the Children (SCF) in the nineties, I wrote a chapter on 'the role of the centre in family support' for [Social Action with Children and Families – A community development approach to child and family welfare](#), edited by two University of Sussex researchers, Crescy Cannan and Chris Warren, and published by Routledge in 1997.

Then - as now - policy makers were questioning whether it was necessary to use a physical centre-base to deliver wide-ranging family support services. Using data from my review of fifteen multi-functional and multi-professional centres SCF ran in deprived communities across the UK, coupled with findings from the (inter) national research literature, I argued (1997, p. 154) that the evidence supported my conclusion that the sum of centre-based family support provision was greater than its parts. By this I meant that the centres lent strengths and acted as a resource to other family support activities within the community and that their positive impact derived to a considerable extent from this particular method of service delivery.

The needs and wishes expressed by users of these SCF centres suggested that one centre catering for children of different ages as well as for adults could

be preferable to different services for different age groups located in various places, particularly for families including very young children. Again, today's discussions around [family hubs](#) and initiatives such as [United for All Ages](#) are moving this discussion on. The SCF centre model's characteristic that most clearly distinguished it from other types of family

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centres was its offer of open access to service users and its intensive outreach to engage with socially excluded communities, rooted in a children's rights-based approach. Although in practice priority admissions policies were needed in the light of resource limitations.

Fifteen years later, I explored in greater depth the history and typology of UK children's centres, or family centres as they used to be called, in another book chapter. 'Centre-based services in the early years' appeared in [Children's Services – Working Together](#), a book edited by a team of academics and senior local authority officers,

Malcolm Hill, George head, Andrew Lockyer, Barbara Reid and Raymond Taylor and published by Pearson Education in 2012.

By now evidence of the impact of centre-based family support was more readily available. Nevertheless, the divide between universal and separate social-welfare oriented – read targeted – early years provision stubbornly persisted, I concluded. Moreover, early childhood education and care were predominantly delivered outside children's centres. Except in the education-led multi-purpose children's centres into which many state nursery schools had been transformed.

Children's centres did not yet reflect the model a range of early childhood and social welfare specialists had argued for over many years. That was a comprehensive and universal early childhood education and care system in which more targeted social welfare services would be fully integrated. An approach referred to as 'progressive universalism' in [the 2010 Marmot Review of health inequalities](#). Despite major policy and practice developments in centre-based provision, such a system transformation had not yet materialised within the children's centre model.

The National Evaluation of Sure Start was one of the first major studies to provide robust evidence for the effectiveness of

interprofessional working and parent-professional partnerships within centre-based early childhood provision with [a special focus on children growing up with disadvantage](#). [The 2014 evaluation of children's centres in England](#) added to this body of evidence. As disadvantage and poverty now affect growing numbers of children and the children's

centre model is at risk of vanishing altogether, highlighting such key impacts of children's centres becomes ever more important.

Looking back over the accumulating body of research evidence on the role children's centres can play, unequivocally confirms their potential as a nexus within communities for enriching the lives of families with

children struggling with disadvantage. While research on its own has never yet been shown to change policy or politics, this should give leaders of centres under siege confidence, strong arguments and some hope.

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**Eva Lloyd OBE** is professor of Early Childhood in the University of East London's Cass School of Education and Communities and co-founder and Director of its International Centre for the Study of the Mixed Economy of Childcare (ICMEC). Her research and academic publications focus on (inter)national early education and childcare policies, particularly for disadvantaged children.

# Considering Resilience

Janet King, Senior Subject Specialist at CACHE considers what building resilience really means when it comes to the care of children and young people.

Resilience is a term typically used in the context of emotional wellbeing when considering the emotional needs and mental health of children and young people.

It may be interesting to reflect and consider just how often those involved in the care and education of children and young people think about what this actually means for them in the context of their day-to-day practice, including work with colleagues, parents/carers and other professionals. In this brief introductory article, I argue that perhaps we do not do this as often as we should to truly appreciate the characteristics of resilience.

## HOLISTIC DEVELOPMENT

The term resilience is commonly referred to when describing children and young people; mostly by adults who may have little understanding of its real significance to holistic development over time. There will be more about what is inferred by resilience 'over time' later in this article

with examples to support it.

Comments often heard when in the company of practitioners can include those such as 'children are resilient' and 'resilience building' in such ways that raise an expectation that children are naturally resilient and are able to

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**"At its most powerful, resilience may be seen through ambition, motivation and adaptation."**

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protect themselves from the burdens of adult life that all too often become engrained in their lives. There is, it could be argued, an insincere misconception around this discourse of resilience and an inclination to lean towards children's natural ability to 'get over it'. This may of

course be nothing more than an adult strategy or coping mechanism triggered when their own resilience is tested and their ability to cope when overburdening situations exist. Such terms as 'resilience building' are all too often shuffled around children and young people's services in an effort to develop activities and experiences that raise self-esteem, confidence and potentially achieve a protective armour of resilience. It is certainly true that those employed in the early years workforce will be actively encouraged to demonstrate how they build resilience in the setting and how they can evidence this through 'risky play'.

Developing an approach in early years, childcare and young people's services that values and is ambitious for resilience must surely contribute to an effective environment but simply developing strategies alone will certainly not be enough to enable children to

demonstrate resilience. It is important to unpick resilience and the characteristics involved or associated with it if we are going to be able to consider and measure resilience in individuals.

This article suggests that resilience is not just a physical skill that can be achieved once and be there forever such as the skill of buttoning a coat or riding a bike, but is rather a transient conceptual state that children, and indeed adults may have in certain situations and lose in others. For example, risky play with apparatus outdoors is typically found in early years settings and used to evidence a strategy for developing resilience and yet the same children jumping across the gaps may not show resilience in other situations. In just the same way adults can show degrees of resilience in diverse experience. Resilient children do not always grow up to be resilient adults and vice-versa. Resilience may be described as a complicated, conceptual state in need

of regular and frequent 'recharge' to potentially allow for adaptation overtime as different circumstances and challenges emerge and are imposed on individuals.

## CONNECTION

Resilience can be described as simple, straightforward competencies found incidentally in aspects of typical daily life, all of which result in making some sort of connection. For example, it is the direct smile, the courage in asking a question, the bold challenge, the active contribution and the confident participation. At its most powerful, resilience may be seen through ambition, motivation and adaptation.

## COMMUNICATION

Communication is a common thread running through each of these competencies and serves as a critical factor, a germ for the concept of resilience to form and develop in respect of this perspective. It is through communication that

humans make connections. These connections may determine friendships, cut across social classes, bridge divide and support inclusive collaboration. This is when we can begin to consider how play can provide for connections and therefore contribute to resilience.

Play is a natural medium for children to explore communication: through expression, feeling and exercising imagination, to think, to share, to question, to engage, to contribute and to connect.

It is the ability to connect that fosters resilience.

How practitioners provide for play is critical in laying the foundations for resilience. Wouldn't it be great if, as practitioners, we could spend a minimum of just ten minutes each day with each child or young person in engaging communication that values them and ignites a connection? I think it would be more than great!



Janet is the Senior Subject Specialist at CACHE and plays a part in developing their qualifications. Previous work has involved management in both further and higher education across care provision and within social services and education.

# 10 Steps to Develop Change-ability

**Jacqui Burke** explores what children's centres leaders need to do to change with the times.

Charles Darwin once said: "It's not the strongest of the species that survives, but the one most responsive to change".

For children's centre leaders, "change-ability", as I call it, should perhaps be considered our most essential business competence. For an organisation, "change-ability" could also be described as business resilience. Developing "change-ability" therefore involves things like strategic planning, contingency planning (looking at the 'what ifs'), future-proofing by building in flexibility, and risk management.

Here are 10 steps to help you develop "change-ability" in your children's centre:

» **1. Understand the context** - The first step is about understanding your context. The past couple of years have seen significant change in the political and economic landscape with referendums, general elections, continued shrinkage of the public sector. For the early years sector specifically, the 30 hours policy has meant providers having to review every aspect of their delivery model – from opening hours to ratios, charging strategies to

marketing. The degree of complexity involved in making changes to so many interlinked aspects at once means those who lack "change-ability" often feel overwhelmed. It's essential to regularly review the external factors that might cause you to need to make changes. Summarise this in a [PESTLE Analysis](#) and keep it up to date.

- » **2. Undertake well-informed business planning** - Business planning is a bit like programming a sat-nav – it needs to know where you want to get to, where you're starting from and which roads are available. State clearly where you want your organisation to be in 2-3 years' time. Compare this with the current situation. Then use your understanding of your context to help plot the best route to take you there. Focus on parents. Conduct research, then design your service offer based on a thorough understanding of what they want and need. This might mean changing existing delivery models to meet parents' changing needs.
- » **3. Let go of the past** - People say things like "when things get back

to normal..." or "when we have a change of government...". Wishful thinking holds us back. It creates a false impression that if we can just hang on for long enough, things will return to how they once were. Letting go of the past can be scary but it's essential. Fear stifles creative thinking and innovation – key components of "change-ability". We need to be courageous in order to move forward.

- » **4. Keep an open mind** – An unsettled business environment creates opportunities for newcomers. Consider how newcomers have transformed other sectors (e.g. Uber, Spotify, AirBnB). Recently I've spoken with a care home operator, a multi-academy trust and a group from China who are actively eyeing up the UK Early Years sector looking for opportunities to step in. This means that we are likely to see more structural change in the sector involving new entrants, as well as mergers and acquisitions, with larger chains becoming more dominant. In order to survive we need to keep an open mind, imagine future possibilities, brainstorm options and be prepared to consider things that might

have previously been unthinkable.

- » **5. Develop your skills** – “Change-ability” is a crucial competence for key decision-makers and those who will lead and manage the implementation of change, so invest in change management training for governors, managers and other leaders within your organisation. Being able to break change down into bite-sized chunks can make it easier to manage. But this involves considerable skill.
- » **6. Encourage your staff** – Your team will be a key component in the implementation of change; either as an enabler or a barrier. At an individual level, “change-ability” is made up of willingness to pro-actively seek out change, ability to view change positively, flexibility, and personal resilience. Help your team to become more “change-able”, recognising that some may need support to help them become more resilient. Make sure you understand how each staff member feels about the changes you need them to make. Ensure you

know how to best support them. Make “change-ability” something that is encouraged, recognised and rewarded in your organisation.

- » **7. Collaborate** – Many providers are considering partnership delivery in response to the 30 hours policy. There’s lots of good practice out there that we can learn from. In particular I’d like to signpost the [Mixed Model Partnership Toolkit](#) created by the Family and Childcare Trust and the City of York who established their [Shared Foundation Partnership model](#) several years ago. Their website contains lots of useful tools. Seek to collaborate with others who share your vision for the future and may be able to help you along the way.
- » **8. Communicate** – The biggest complaint I hear about change is that people feel they aren’t kept fully informed - so communicate, communicate and then communicate some more. The evaluation of the Early Implementer Pilot recognised that language can cause confusion. This report highlights

just how important it is to get the messages about change right. So test your messages before you communicate with parents or staff.

- » **9. Trial and error** – Darwin found that species survived in changing environments by making adaptations to their DNA, not all of which worked. Adapting to change requires an element of trial and error. This means having a go at something different, maybe by running a pilot for a trial period. Accept that you may not get it quite right straight away. Don’t be afraid to adjust your plans as you go along. Regular monitoring will enable you to check progress and take swift corrective action if things aren’t going to plan.
- » **10. Celebrate success** – When change has been implemented successfully, acknowledge the effort that may have gone into it, reward the contribution made by everyone, communicate your success widely, share your learning with others.

Do the Darwinian thing and respond, adapt, evolve – in order to survive and thrive!



**Jacqui Burke** specialises in providing business management skills training for the early years sector working with all types of providers. She delivers training on Developing Change-Ability and has written about this in her book *Building Your Early Years Business* – for more information visit [www.flourishingpeople.co.uk](http://www.flourishingpeople.co.uk) or contact [jacqui@flourishingpeople.co.uk](mailto:jacqui@flourishingpeople.co.uk)

# Supporting communication skills

**Kate Freeman** shares I CAN's place-based strategy for improving speech, language and communication in young children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

In their recent social mobility plans, the Government acknowledged the 'word gap' that exists between disadvantaged children and their more advantaged peers. This is based on an [original piece of research by Hart and Risley](#), where it was identified that children in more disadvantaged families hear around 30 million fewer words than their more advantaged peers by the age of four.

We know that children's language development very much depends on how much they are spoken to and the type of language that they hear around them. So the variation in numbers of words heard might explain some of the identified development difference between these two groups – a significant 17.4 months difference in language development by the time a child reaches the age of three.

Many children's centre leaders and early years practitioners have day-to-day experience of working with children who

better support for children's speaking and listening skills can impact on their outcomes.

However, it's not only disadvantaged children who struggle with learning to talk. The latest figures from the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage identified that 15% of children are not at the expected level for Communication and Language (that's five in every classroom). Included in this group of children are those who have delayed language development and those who have longer-term, more complex issues with learning to talk i.e. those with Developmental Language Disorder (DLD). New research has identified that 7.6% of the population have DLD.

In each of the 'Place' locations, I CAN is offering the support of a Regional Manager who has a background in speech and language therapy work with education. The Regional Manager spends time getting to know the location and

struggle with talking. For these children, their difficulty in developing communication and language skills is holding them back in other areas of learning: Communication is the fundamental life skill and it impacts on being able to get on in school, understand the rules of the classroom, make friends, read and write and to later succeed in exams and find a job.

It is for all these reasons that I CAN, the children's communication charity, started its 'Place' Strategy – working with specific geographical locations to develop support for vital communication skills. All of the 'Place' locations (currently Barking and Dagenham, Derby City, Knowsley and West Somerset) have among the poorest outcomes for disadvantaged children and are struggling to make good progress with results in the early years foundation stage at school and in GCSE grades. I CAN is working with these areas to look at how



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shining a light on what is already happening to support communication and language development. They can also share ideas from different locations and input specialist knowledge into how to support children and young people who struggle.

## KEY THEMES

Since starting 'Place' in April 2017, key themes have started to emerge across all four locations. All of the locations are working closely to support parents and carers, develop staff skills and knowledge, introduce targeted interventions and bring systems together to make sure that children with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) are identified early and supported well.

To date, there has been work in identifying appropriate support for vulnerable children and young people, for example those who are looked after by the local authority: In one location, this includes encouraging staff to consider whether a child or young person's skills might indicate some underlying SLCN in addition to any social emotional and mental health issues. In another, consideration is being given to commissioned support specifically for all the looked after children in the locality and in particular screening of children on entry to care or when joining the reception year. In yet another, there is an appetite to share information about best practice in other areas so that looked after children

can be supported in the most appropriate way possible.

Unsurprisingly, early years are a strong focus across all the Place locations: In Knowsley and West Somerset, work is ongoing to develop parent workshops focusing on the importance of very early speech, language and communication skills. This includes sharing research information with disadvantaged parents of two year olds and demonstrating what this looks like practically. The project, known as 'Tots Talking' will enable support to be specifically targeted at 'contingent talk' which is

(continued on page 10)

known to best enable good language development.

In Derby and West Somerset, I CAN sits on the focus groups for the Opportunity Area workstream around early years. This has led to initiatives such as provision of training for staff, as well as Early Talk Boost interventions being provided for all early years settings to close the gap in language development that is already clear in the early years. Evaluation of this intervention identifies that 3 – 4 years olds make six months progress in their language development after a nine week intervention. This helps them to catch up with other children their age. The evidence is that practitioners who are skilled in delivering interventions can make a difference to children struggling to develop these essential skills needed for learning and life.

I CAN's Regional Managers are able to work across service boundaries and have so far been instrumental in pulling together people who share a work target. This happened recently in Derby with speech and language therapists being invited to join the early years strategy group which is focusing on delivering support for communication and language across the city. In other locations, I CAN has been able to highlight where service provision is patchy and encourage some of the gaps to be filled.

I CAN's overall aim is to develop projects that can be scaled up across different regions in the UK. This way, we can work towards I CAN's goal of doubling the number of children with speech, language and communication needs who get the support they so desperately need.

You can read more about I CAN's Place strategy on <https://tinyurl.com/y7989zpr>, or visit [ican.org.uk](http://ican.org.uk) We would love to hear your thoughts on what you think can make the most difference to developing communication and language in the early years and how children, families and staff benefit from projects in your area.

Contact [ican@ican.org.uk](mailto:ican@ican.org.uk) or visit [www.ican.org.uk](http://www.ican.org.uk) for more information.



**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 courses for teachers, SENCOs, speech and language therapists and other professionals.

# Children's Centre Leader



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**Editorial team:**

Managing Editor: James Hempalls, OBE

Editor: Mel Parks

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