Guide for Early Years Educators

Little Minds Matter:

Promoting Social and Emotional Wellbeing in the Early Years

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Introduction

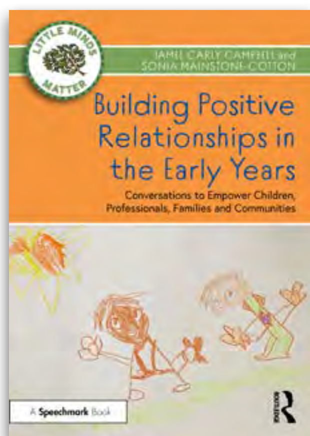
This is the second toolkit in the Little Minds Matter series, which is growing to include a wide and varied range of vital subjects. The books in our series are written by early years practitioners and educators who have a wealth of experience and knowledge to share. The important underpinning theme of the whole series is children's wellbeing.

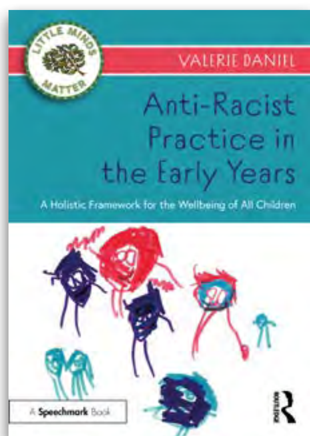
This toolkit brings you five chapters from the next five books in our series. These books cover the diverse topics of building positive relationships with children; safeguarding; neuroscience in practice; how creativity can support wellbeing; and the power of anti-racist practice and professional love. In all of these chapters there are opportunities to stop and reflect on your practice, offering moments and questions to pause and think. The whole series encourages us to reflect on how we work, to consider our practice and question why we do what we do.

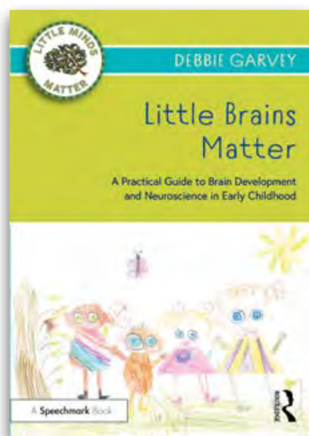
The aim of this toolkit is to give you a taste of the breadth of the books in this series. We hope that it will inspire you, offer some ideas and insights, but also to encourage you. I believe working with young children is the best job (I recognise I am biased!), but it can also be incredibly challenging. I hope this series of books can offer some encouragement and some inspiration. I have learnt so much from our writers and I am very proud to be involved in this series.

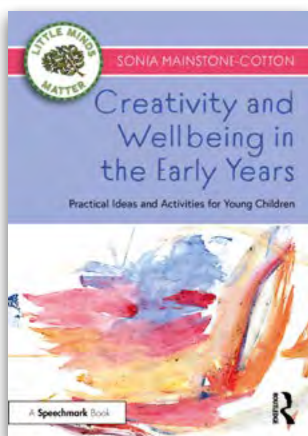
Sonia Mainstone-Cotton
Series Advisor

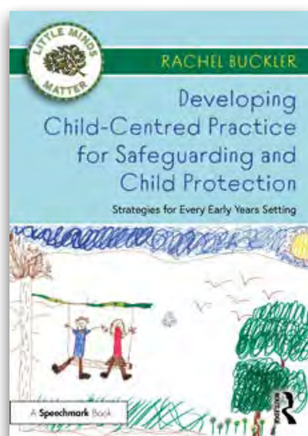
Read the full series











The *Little Minds Matter* series brings together leading early years practitioners to write on the vital subject of children's wellbeing. Each book is full of practical ideas and suggestions which you can use immediately in your daily practice.

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Building positive relationships with children in your care

In this chapter, Sonia and Jamel will be discussing:

- The central importance of interactions, connections and forming positive relationships
- Belonging, trust, and feeling safe and secure
- Representation and inclusion
- Supporting children with SEMH and the value of the practitioner–child relationship
- How to encourage children to have positive relationships with each other
- How to create a setting that represents the wider community
- Building bonds and an understanding that the class is a community, whether neurodiverse or neurotypical

Building positive relationships with children

Jamel Building positive relationships with children in your care. So how do we go about doing so?

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Sonia The key is building trust with a child and keeping that in mind at the beginning of any relationship. We want the child to know that we're an adult who really believes in them. Thinking about that moment when a child walks in the door, or you walk in a door, and how you present yourself, how you look at them, how you smile. When I arrive in a school, I want a child to clock me and go, Yes, it's Sonia. She thinks I'm great.

Jamel Yeah, when you walk into a room and you see a child just elated, elated like, "wow, this person looks like someone I want to talk to, their body language, their aura, their vibe". It's interesting and amazing how children are so receptive of your vibe and of your aura, and straightaway they're interested in who you are, where you come from, and your interests.

Sonia Definitely, but in the same way, I've observed children seeing certain people and totally ignoring them. The message the child is giving is "I'm not talking to you" because they know the person isn't really interested in them. The contrast is when they know the person likes them and wants to spend time with them. I've got a little boy that I work with at the moment, as I walk into the classroom as soon as he sees me, it doesn't matter what they're doing, he will shriek with delight, shouting "Sonia's here". He darts across the classroom, flings himself at me and says, "I missed you so much". It's just delightful, it's just wonderful. Such a great way to be welcomed – he feels loved by me and I feel loved by him.

Jamel It's important for us to understand that not all children are going to react to us like that and it's about giving them time. There was a little boy in one of my groups that I've worked with that was very wary of me, and when I spoke he would shudder because my voice is so deep. I just gave him time, I didn't force the interaction. I would say hello to encourage him. Then, one day, he just walked up to me and gave me a car. Then one day I had a dinosaur, and I gave him the dinosaur. The next time I was there, I gave him another toy, and then he spoke to me and then asked me about my gold tooth. When I saw his parents, I'd say hello to demonstrate that I'm a cool dude, it's okay to talk to me, and we have taken steps to build up that relationship. It has to be authentic – organic and not forced.

Sonia Totally. Children know when it isn't authentic, they can see through it. It's important that we know and respect our different children. I've got another little boy who, at the beginning of the school year, was selected mute and we just couldn't get anything from him. And that was fine, that was okay. So actually, I think for about two months, my sessions with him involved no words from him, and that was absolutely fine. There was no pressure. Whereas now, he will chat, which is amazing, but it was about giving him space and for him to know that's okay – if you don't want to talk, that's fine.

Jamel Yeah. And through that process, you're then forming a connection. You're building a connection with that child so they can look at you and say, "Sonia understands me, Jamel understands me, the practitioner

understands me". And I've seen it where there's been a child that is selective mute or even preverbal, and just taking time and leaving them to interact with you on their own basis and in their own way. And sometimes that interaction could come from an activity, that interaction can come from you doing something random like singing a song or role playing, or just taking an interest in what that child likes. I always stress the fact that the child-centred approach is paramount to practice, understanding that each child is unique and understanding their uniqueness, understanding who they are, helps that interaction and helps to build up that level of trust.

Sonia Absolutely, and I think it's going that extra mile to really find out what it is that works for them, what it is that they're interested in. I'm always saying this to staff – find out what that child's interest is, then you can use that to really connect with them, and they feel so great when that's been recognised in them. When you suddenly start talking about the dinosaurs, when they're fascinated with dinosaurs, My Little Pony, or whatever it is, it doesn't matter. When you connect in that way, they feel like they've been heard, they have that sense of, somebody's noticed me and values me for who I am right now. Yeah, I think that's so powerful. We know that as adults don't we. When you asked me, how's your swimming going Sonia, I felt like, yeah, he's remembered that, he's valued how that's really important. And it's exactly the same with children. That connection is so important.

Jamel Most definitely. Those key features of who they are, what makes them *them*. And it gives you a level of joint interest. For instance, when I'm with my groups, I would always watch the children's cartoons and get into it, be it Paw Patrol or Octonauts, all these different programmes. And the children, they will look at me in amazement because I watched their programmes and know about the different characters and so on, and they will hold conversations about different things they have seen, and there's a fluid, organic exchange based on the effort that you've made to find out what their interests are. It's not about just knowing the name of the programme. Do you know the characters and features? Because characters are really important to our children because they connect the characters to themselves.

Sonia It shows you've just gone that extra mile and made extra effort to go and find out. I had one little boy, he was wary for a while, and I was really struggling to figure out what his interests were and what made him click, and then I discovered it was wild animals and owls. Owls, particularly, and birds of prey, he just adored them. So, with that information I knew what I was going to do: I found out about birds of prey, and I did a little bit of research and was then able to have those conversations with him, and he suddenly just blossomed, you could see the light and the glint in his eyes. And that's what I love – when you can see a glint in a child's eye that illustrates you've connected in some way, you've got somewhere with them, which

is powerful. It's that sense of, I belong here. Somebody really knows something about me and what I like. I think that links with a sense of belonging, the question of what does it mean to belong in a place. I think it's an interesting question and one we often ask in our work – how do we know when a child feels like they belong? It's an interesting question to ask staff – what does that look like for our children?

Jamel And you've heard me speak about this before, about the fact that children need to feel connected to the setting, there needs to be a range of things for them to do that they like and enjoy, and like always. I'm just one of those people where, when I'm in a setting, I would look at a child whose interest could be puzzles and I will make sure that that child has access to at least five or six puzzles, and even, even when the child is coming into the setting, the initial drop off, I'll be like, "oh guess what we've got out today, we're going to take out puzzles, if you want you can select what puzzles you want"; empowering them and showing them that what they like is available for them. And then, when the child goes home and has conversations with their family members or whoever, they'll say, "guess what I did today!?", they will talk about how we have big puzzles, small puzzles, and hold a positive conversation about their interest, connecting their interest to the setting. This helps the child to associate the setting with fun and freedom. The child will see the setting as a place where they can do what they enjoy. A child may like art – it's for us to then elaborate on that, maybe taking children out to different trips, putting things in the

environment that they enjoy, like drawing, free mark making, access to paints, free access to whatever they like so they can really explore that and extend their learning experience. I love it because then you see the child thrive, you see that interest develop – they start off on a stage of just making marks, then it's recognisable marks, then they begin describing the marks and telling us what they're drawing and explaining what these different objects are, "these are circles", "these are squares" and "these lines, zigzags, are lightning" and so on. The children develop a feeling, a sense of pride when these marks are then presented or displayed within the environment, that sense of achievement.

Building positive relationships with families

Sonia I think that's interesting. We have that relationship with the children and, in some ways, that's the easy bit because we're with them regularly. But then how do you build that relationship with the child's family, with their carers? I don't know about you but there are certainly some families that I work with, actually quite a lot of families that I work with, where they are so wary of professionals. They may not have had a great experience of school themselves; they might be quite anxious and have poor mental health. They may be worried about their child starting school; they might be wary and untrusting. Some of the children I work with can be quite violent, the parents are often really worried that they're going to be excluded. That is a

lot for parents to be thinking about. I work hard at the beginning of the year, with parents, to help them know that I'm here to love their child, I'm here to advocate for their child, to really get to know them. One of the things I say to parents is, "tell me something about your child that just brings you joy". And that's just such a lovely way of helping parents to go, oh she really does want to know something good about my child, she doesn't just want to know that he bites and kicks and runs off and these are his triggers. That question can help to break down some of the barriers. A question to ask ourselves is, "how do we help parents to know they can trust us?"

Jamel I think that sometimes with some parents there is that "us versus them" kind of way of seeing things, and they constantly think that they're under the microscope – that practitioners are judging their parenting, when really we're here to support, and the parent partnership is what helps that consistency in their child's development. And I tell a lot of the practitioners and professionals that I work with that. It's important to build up those bonds, it's important to reassure our parents, and it's important to understand that parents aren't always going to understand us and where we're coming from, and they don't understand our jargon as well. That's another thing. So, we need to make ourselves available for them and hold those conversations with parents in a way that they can digest, be it a pedagogical conversation or be it just a general conversation about how their day is going: "How are you today, Mum?", "how

are you today, Dad?", "how are you today, Carer?" It's important that we ask these things and check in on them so they know that we actually care.

Sonia Yeah, definitely. And I think, also, when we're able to say something really positive, you can see that recognition of "oh you've really noticed". Similar to the way a child feels like they've been noticed, it's also helpful for parents to know you have noticed their child. I was able to say to a dad recently how his boys had been able to name all the bugs when we went on a bug hunt, I told him that other children I had worked with didn't have the bug names. I told him how thrilled I was to hear his boys naming the bugs and recognised that he must have taught them. He was just beaming. He was so happy to hear that and to have that positive feedback on his children, it was just a small thing but it really boosted him, which was great.

Jamel And, in turn, parents would then hold dialogue with their children about what they've done in nursery or their setting that further helps to build the child's perspective of who the practitioner is and helps to build up that level of trust. So if, therefore, if they can see a good relationship between parent and practitioner, then that helps them to build up their perception and the trust with us. And another thing it makes me think about is transitions and how good parent and practitioner relationships help children with the transition, because that initial phase is like coming from a home environment to being in a setting. It is such a big

difference, from the food, even the smells, and aesthetically it is different.

Sonia Absolutely, that's why I'm such an advocate of home visits. It's been interesting this year as none of the children I work with had a home visit before they started school. Because of COVID the schools decided they couldn't do it. Lots of staff have recognised we need to get back to doing them. They enable us to see the child in a different environment. The home environment is so different to school or nursery. Home visits also enable you, in a much more informal way, to have conversations with parents. There's also something good about you as a professional, not being in your environment. When you do a home visit and a family lets you into their home, that's a massive privilege, it really is, the whole being offered a cup of tea or a drink and all of those sorts of things. I think we can sometimes take it for granted but it's a massive privilege. Sitting in somebody's home, and they've allowed you in it, it's different to you having them come into your classroom. Also being able to see the child in their own home, when you later see them in your setting you can ask them if they remember when they showed you their cat or when you played with their Lego together, the children love that. Yeah, home visits, I think, are really powerful.

Jamel Most definitely. Children act differently at home to the way they will act in a setting as well. And it gives you a deeper understanding of who the child is when you see them around their toys, their sofa, their room, their

family and so on. And you can see it even with eating and things like that. Some parents will say "Oh, he or she doesn't eat this at home", but then in the setting they will. Or they don't climb at home, but in the setting they do, and so on, so you have this mash-up of behaviours. And it's good to have that information to reference when you're in the setting. Also, I think with home visits, you definitely can understand the structure of a family from a cultural perspective, even from an economic and financial perspective as well. And then you're able to give support. What I used to do with some of my parents who couldn't afford mark making tools, Crayons, paper, paint brushes, I used to give it to them because, a lot of the time, we've got these budgets in schools and a lot of our resources at the end of the year were getting thrown away. So, I would be like, "Here, take this". And that sense of helping also helps to form a relationship, like "this teacher, this practitioner, really cares". And from that, you're then further helping the child to develop and have consistency. I found through this pandemic, and through the lockdown, the importance of understanding home dynamics has come to light and to the centre of everything we've been doing, especially with these zoom sessions and people having to turn their home environment into a learning environment.

Sonia I think as early years practitioners we often need to have a very good emotional antenna. In past jobs I have worked in family support work. There would be times when I would walk into a home and it would

feel like a loving and safe environment. But the counter is also true. At other times I have walked into a home and thought there's an atmosphere here right now, I can't put my finger on it, but something isn't right. Recognising and noticing these things can be so important – when the child is in your setting and they're a bit edgy, you can wonder if everything is okay in the home and remember the feeling you had. From this you might have further conversations with your colleagues and the family, maybe also with other professionals.

Jamel Yeah. And, from that perspective, you then understand the importance of the class as its own little community, as its own little place, its own sanctum, if we call it that, because sometimes, for a lot of children, school is an escape from the turbulence of the household. Some children, they really look forward to coming into school and having Zoom sessions. While home schooling you see some of the children will request to see other children and really get upset if they don't see their friends. And when school opened again, they would hug each other and play. They were so glad to see each other. I remember a child saw me from the windows, J, waving at me and so excited and he just felt that sense of belonging and that sense of love. You feel a little twinkle in your heart. So yeah, having that sense of community and a sense of connection is so important. And having the teacher as a go-to and your friends as a go-to, as well.

Taking action to safeguard and protect children

Taking action is a crucial element that defines effective safeguarding practice. The incentive to act should a child require help or protection must always be motivated by the child's needs. The processes that follow actions taken can often steer practitioners in other directions leading them away from the child. For example, a parent who avoids being questioned about a situation or who offers excuses for unacceptable behaviours or personal conduct has the potential to delay or prevent action from being taken. The national review (2022) into the death of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes, the six-year-old who was abused and murdered by his father and his partner, makes this point concluding that 'Arthur's voice was often mediated by his father'. It found that assessments made by professionals very much 'relied on the fathers' perspectives and not Arthur's'. Sometimes when colleagues and multi-agency partners don't share the same concerns or sense of urgency, this has the potential to discourage practitioners from pursuing a course of action. Early years practitioners should stand firm and not be deterred from their decision to act if they believe this to be in the best interests of the child.

Considering the components mentioned previously, this chapter features mostly ***Help, Protect*** and ***Report.*** We will look at these to differentiate between the levels of needs for children and therefore the different actions or responses that should follow once the child's needs have been established.

What is meant by safeguarding and child protection?

I have intentionally referred to safeguarding and child protection separately because they have different characteristics. Being able to distinguish between both is important. The National Society for the Prevention

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of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) have a helpful definition. It describes safeguarding as 'the action that is taken to promote the welfare of children and protect them from harm'.

Safeguarding therefore refers to:

- protecting children from abuse and maltreatment.
- preventing harm to children's health or development.
- ensuring children grow up with the provision of safe and effective care.
- taking action to enable all children and young people to have the best outcomes.

The definition recognises ***child protection*** as 'part of the safeguarding process', focussing on 'protecting individual children identified as suffering or likely to suffer significant harm'. When considering child protection this also includes 'procedures which detail how to respond to concerns about a child'.

What does it mean to take safeguarding or child protection action?

Taking actions that safeguard and protect children cover a wide range of things from responding to children's prompts or cues both subtle and obvious. Effective safeguarding practitioners will constantly take actions to promote children's welfare and ensure that they are always safe and well.

TIME TO REFLECT

Think about the safeguarding or child protection processes that involve taking action within the *context of your role*. What do they include?

TEAM TALK

Think about one typical day in your setting, writing down all the things that are done that involve taking action to safeguard or protect children.

When children are introduced to a new early years setting or when practitioners begin to work with them, lots of information is gathered and documented. This involves initial actions that amongst other things will also feature preventative measures to safeguard children. Questions will be asked about the following:

- What are the child's health needs and how do we meet them?
- Who has parental responsibility?
- Who are relevant and significant adults in the life of the child and what is their relationship to the child?
- Are there other agencies working with the child and/or family?
- Has an early help assessment been done for the child (are they receiving early intervention support)? If so, what is stated in the agreed plan for them? Is this plan still active?
- Is the child known to social care, either considered as being a child in need or on a child protection plan (or equivalent, outside of England)? If so, what are the reasons for this and how will early years practitioners working with the child support and engage in the subsequent processes involved?

Other activities that require all practitioners to act:

- Inquisitive actions that look further into a situation or circumstance, requiring practitioners to be professionally curious.
- Validation, checking out facts.
- Investigation, seeking further information or details from parents or other professionals about a child or family.
- Substantiation of information or details shared that ensure accurate knowledge is the basis upon which we determine our response.

Understanding levels of need

Reference to the extent of need or level of need for a child is crucial to acknowledge appropriate responses and actions that should be taken.

In England, Local Safeguarding Partners (LSPs) provide guidance using thresholds or a continuum of need. These are determined by each local authority LSP and are used to recognise and respond to need in keeping with local expectations. I am aware that not all UK countries use thresholds but for those who do, they are an essential tool that guides practitioners especially those with lead safeguarding responsibilities to apply and use in practice.

Each local authority has its unique threshold and much to the frustration of those who work across more than one area they all vary. Some threshold diagrams and approaches are known as windscreen wiper models, symbolising the fluidity or movement of a child's needs which can increase or decrease. Others may present as a pyramid or diagram that demonstrates a continuous movement should a child's needs escalate to that of a higher level or de-escalate to a lower level. Thresholds will emphasise levels where children can be supported by single agencies, through multi-agency involvement and where statutory agencies are required by law to act, intervene and support. Levels vary between 1 and 4 or 1 and 5 depending on each local authority. Behind the colourful summary or diagram will be a more detailed text explaining each level and what examples of need these levels refer to.

Some examples

Level 1 – Universal

A child whose needs are recognised as being at Level 1, often universal level, will be determined as such in that they can and will most likely achieve outcomes with support from universal services. Universal services represent health care, education such as school or early years, leisure services or various services delivered by private, voluntary and independent sectors. To access such services children do not require assessment or referral.

Level 2 – Early help – additional needs

At this lower level of early help (early intervention) the additional identified needs of a child may be met by one single agency such as through early years provision. The child may receive some direct support from practitioners focussing on things such as speech and language, behavioural challenges, family bereavement, difficulties due to changes in economic status or support that takes into consideration emotional and physical disruptions because of homelessness or eviction. Children's needs can be adequately met by single agency support and relevant interventions such as those delivered by early years practitioners. Early help assessments may take place at this level of intervention depending upon the local authority directive.

Level 3 – Early help – complex needs

This higher level of early help will reflect children's needs as being more complex. It often includes multiple needs that will require the coming together of more than one agency that can support the child's needs. A coordinated and targeted approach to meeting the needs of the child will be necessary and determined by the process of early help assessment, which will involve multi-agency input and engagement. A lead professional will be appointed to assist in the coordination of the early help process. A plan will be determined, agreed by the child's parents and others working with the child. Sometimes these processes that take place in England are termed as 'team around the family' or 'team around the child'. As early help is NOT a statutory requirement, consent from the child's parents is necessary for the process to take place.

Level 4 – Child in need (CIN)

Children who are referred to as a 'child in need' will sometimes be represented at Level 4 in thresholds. The term child in need which is defined in section 17 of the Children Act 1989 refers to 'a child who is unlikely to achieve a satisfactory level of health or development, or their health and development will be significantly impaired, without the provision of services; or a child who is

disabled'. Specialist support is required at this level of threshold and social care will be part of the child in need process.

Level 5 – Child at risk of significant harm

The highest level of threshold will always refer to children who need protection due to risk of 'significant harm'. Reference to section 47 of the Children Act 1989 is central to this highest level of need. Children's needs therefore reflect that they may be at risk of harm or likely to suffer harm. Statutory interventions are required to take place to protect a child. This includes contacting the police if the child is in immediate danger or social care; it can involve making a referral which if successful will begin processes to protect a child. Assessment at this level of need is undertaken by a social worker, which may in turn lead to the child becoming subject to a child protection plan. Other countries in the UK sometimes refer to this outcome as being on a 'child protection register'.

TIME TO REFLECT

If you work in England, what does your threshold or continuum of need tell you about levels of need for children in your local authority? How many levels are there, and can you identify how they differentiate and determine levels of need for children who need early help and those who need protection?

If you don't work as a practitioner in England, what does your local authority use to determine levels of need for children? How do you use this to inform decisions that lead to taking action for a child?

Help
Early intervention – early help

Background and context

In 2010, child protection expert Professor Eileen Munro was commissioned by the UK Government to produce an independent review into child protection

systems in England. The purpose of the review (2011) was to make recommendations and reform child protection systems, shifting the main emphasis from that of compliance to a system that 'keeps a focus on children, checking whether they are being effectively helped, and adapting when problems are identified'. The report concentrated on several themes mostly setting out clear principles that contribute to effective child protection systems, how they feature in practice and most importantly how they impact positively upon children. A whole chapter in the Munro report was dedicated to early help, drawing attention to the need for shared responsibilities for the provision of early help and how this could best be achieved. The report led to lots of discussions and debate about early intervention in general. Whilst the concept was not new, it was fast becoming recognised that targeted efforts and dedicated resources prioritised to deliver early help services for children was both a significant and progressive development. At the time that the report was published, I had been invited to join a new and exciting early intervention service operating in a Greater Manchester local authority. This developing service incorporated the city's children's centres, including local authority day nursery provision, family support teams working with pre-birth to school age children and developed a wide range of services that championed the efforts of intervening early in the lives of children and their families. Both international and national research into the successes and huge advancements that early intervention had made in children's lives is conclusive – it works! Most importantly, research highlights the appropriate ethical approach as its main priority and focus, this being its aim to improve lifelong outcomes for children. Early help also makes economic sense, contributing to reducing costs for struggling local authorities. As a child's needs increase the costs associated with statutory engagement and processes also rise. Addressing needs sooner is a cost-effective model as well as an ethical approach that centres on the child.

There was a call at one time for the Government to make early help a statutory requirement or duty for local authorities, aligning it with that of child in need or child protection status, however this didn't happen. In fact, sadly a significantly de-prioritised emphasis from Government has led to less investment and a reduction in efforts directed at services such as children's centres and targeted youth services over time. The impact of significantly reduced early intervention services for children is evident and most concerning. Action for Children (2022) in their 2022 report concluded data analysed from 2015–2016 to 2019–2020, showing an estimated '1.26 million occasions where a closed assessment (to social care) did not lead to an early help referral' when it should

have. In 25% of these cases, the child in question was re-referred to social care within 12 months, suggesting 'early help support might have helped them in the interim'. The overarching headlines in the report showed that '60,000 opportunities to offer early help' occur each year every year. That for 'every two children receiving early help 'there are already three children in social care' and that nine out of ten local authorities cut early intervention spending between 2015–2016 and 2019–2020. This being the period leading up to the COVID-19 pandemic where of course early help services were most needed.

What is early intervention – early help?

The Early Intervention Foundation has a helpful explanation that simplifies the meaning of early intervention.

> Early intervention means identifying and providing early support to children and young people who are at risk of poor outcomes, such as mental health problems, poor academic attainment, or involvement in crime or antisocial behaviour. Effective early intervention works to prevent problems occurring, or to tackle them head-on before they get worse.
>
> (2018).

When we consider the importance of intervening in the lives of our youngest of children, **early help** and the **early years** are intrinsically linked. It is vital therefore that early years safeguarding practices include child-centred strategies that offer early help outcomes for all young children.

Government guidance in England (2018) draws attention to the overarching aims of early help, noting its effectiveness in 'promoting the welfare of children' rather than 'reacting later'. It urges practitioners to provide early help 'as soon as the problem emerges at any time in the life of a child'. It recognises that early help can 'prevent further problems from arising'.

The guidance lists some reasons as to why practitioners should 'be alert to the potential need' for early help if a child or young person;

- Is disabled and has specific additional needs.
- Has special educational needs (whether or not they have a statutory education, health and care plan).

- Is a young carer.
- Is showing signs of engaging in anti-social or criminal behaviour, including gang involvement and association with organised crime groups.
- Is frequently missing/goes missing from care or from home.
- Is misusing drugs or alcohol themselves.
- Is in a family circumstance presenting challenges for the child, such as substance misuse, adult mental health problems and domestic abuse.
- Has returned home to their family from care.
- Is showing early signs of abuse and/or neglect.
- Is at risk of being radicalised.
- Is privately fostered.
- Has a parent/carer in custody.

Taking action to help a child

Once a child's needs have been identified, they require analysis and consideration. As previously stated, children whose needs can be met through early intervention may receive support from one single agency and formal assessment will not be required. If the child's needs are complex or in order to meet their needs a number of professionals are required to support targeted interventions, an ***early help assessment*** will be done. This includes sharing and drawing upon information as part of a wider group of multi-agency professionals who are working with the child. Representation from this group will vary depending on the reason for the interventions, but often young children will receive multi-agency support from professionals such as health visitors, general practitioners, speech and language specialists or local authority family support workers. A coordinated response and approach to assessment followed by devising an ***early help plan*** to achieve agreed outcomes for the child is the next essential step. A ***lead professional*** will be appointed to enable effective and coordinated delivery of the plan that is inclusive of all those involved and very much involving parents' input and contributions. The lead professional and others will manage and monitor progress made. Lack of engagement from parents may become a key feature that requires challenge and, if necessary, scrutiny. When a parent does not engage with early help processes and this becomes detrimental to the child, consideration as to whether the child's needs have or will escalate to a higher level is taken by professionals.

Further considerations

- Early help is not a statutory requirement. This means that local authorities do not have a legal duty to support a child with early help services as they do with children who are child in need or at risk of significant harm as defined in the Children Act 1989.
- Early help assessment requires consent from the child's parent or legal guardian.
- Information sharing plays a vital role in effective early help practice.
- Early help processes often provide clarity when things are not yet clear or uncertain for a child.
- Effective early help assessment and interventions require good partnership working with others including professionals who are experts in their field such as health/medical professionals, schools and early years practitioners.
- A child who has previously been subject to a child protection plan or a child in need and whose levels of needs are de-escalating should receive and benefit from early help support.

Early help in early years

Children in the early years who are supported through early help or interventions and services may be identified as follows.

- A child requiring extra support as identified through summative assessment such as the Progress check age two (Early Years Foundation Stage – England).
- A child with an education, health and care plan (England).
- A child identified as needing early intervention support by their 'named person' (Getting it right for every child – Scotland).

Protect
Significant harm – what is significant harm?

When considering the need to protect a child we refer to a child at risk of significant harm. A reminder that significant harm is the level of threshold by

which statutory services have a legal duty to intervene. Physical, sexual, emotional abuse and neglect featured in chapter four define the categories that can amount to significant harm. The Children Act (1989) (Section 31, Children Act 1989; Article 2, Children (Northern Ireland) Order 1995; defines harm as the ill treatment or impairment of health and development. Impairment is also determined in relation to a child witnessing the ill treatment of another for instance in the context of domestic violence.

Moving towards a new concept of Family Help

Recommendations made in The Independent Review of Children's Social Care (2022) include a new and transformative approach in providing services for children and families. The proposal is to introduce 'one category of "Family Help" to replace "targeted early help" and the "child in need" work, providing families with much higher levels of meaningful support'. This perceived revolution will 'be available to any family facing significant challenges that could pose a threat to providing their child with a loving, stable, safe family life'. Family Help services will be delivered by a range of multi-disciplined professionals supporting children who are 'receiving targeted early help' or who are on a child in need or child protection plan. The wider implications of this development stand to address the growing complex needs for children and families and the overwhelming challenges within social care.

Acting in response to abuse and neglect Responding to a child's disclosure

Understanding why children don't always speak out.

Before considering how children disclose abuse or neglect and our responses should they do so, it is important to first understand why children don't always tell others about their adverse experiences.

- Younger children are of course unable to communicate verbally and for some limited language development will mean that they cannot yet articulate emotions or put into words what they want to tell us. This is where

practitioners need to be super tuned in to the children they know well in order to pick up on cues that suggest something might be wrong or troubling them.

- Children may be fearful, anxious or embarrassed about the abuse they are experiencing.
- Children may not understand that abuse or neglect is wrong or harmful and that they should tell anyone about it.
- Children are emotionally attached to their abusers and feel that they are betraying them if they disclose.
- Sometimes children know that the consequence of disclosure may result in a change of circumstance or situation that they don't want to take place even when the abuse is harmful.
- Children are sometimes told to keep secrets or threatened by an abuser if they speak out.
- Finding a trusted adult or someone a child considers to be safe to talk to may take time or indeed not happen at all until a child is older or becomes an adult.
- Some children may not speak out because they believe that nothing will change should they do so.
- Children with English as an additional language may find it more difficult to communicate and therefore do not attempt to disclose abuse or neglect.

Children and young people who lived in households where domestic abuse, parental substance abuse and mental health issues were key themes to their abusive experiences were asked what had stopped them from speaking out. The Children's Commissioner for England (2018) reported that 'children often become experts at hiding what is happening at home'. Some older children who had suffered abuse over long periods of time and were therefore able to articulate their experiences commented on the reasons for non-disclosure. One 11-year-old girl didn't speak out initially because she was told by her parent, 'don't be telling anyone, whatever happens in the house stays in the house'. Another explained that she didn't speak out because she was fearful stating, 'I don't know what will happen with the words that I say and where it will go so it takes me a long time to trust someone'. There are lots of reasons as to why children will not speak out and early years practitioners should be mindful of the obstacles and circumstances that may lead to non-disclosure with the children they work.

TIME TO REFLECT

Think about the children in your setting. What might prevent them from being unable to communicate with you should they be experiencing abuse. How might you compensate for this and provide ways for them to express their feelings and communicate?

What is disclosure?

Disclosure is referenced in the Early Years Foundation Stage as 'children's comments which give cause for concern'.(DfE 2021). Children might say something briefly using few words or engage in full conversation if they disclose. When I speak to early years practitioners about their own experiences of disclosure, many recognise that younger children often use a sentence or two with brief moments of disclosure and then off they go to continue in play or return to the activity that they are engaged in. Sometimes children will open a conversation and not necessarily finish it. Older children may want to tell a trusted adult lots of information that involves holding a conversation over a longer period.

It is helpful to break down the process of disclosure for practitioners to consider how to respond and act because of a child's disclosure. This process includes, *responding*, *recording* and *reporting*.

Being in the moment

It can feel quite daunting for a practitioner when they realise that a child is telling them something as important as a disclosure of abuse or neglect. An out of school manager once described the feeling to me as 'being like a swan', outwardly calm and gliding over the water mindful not to react or panic in front of the child whilst staying calm and collected. Inwardly she said she was 'paddling like mad under the water' with her mind racing towards what she realised was happening and what she needed to do and how she should respond in order to achieve the right outcome for the child.

Being in the moment places the child at the centre of disclosure and involves the following.

- Listening carefully.

It might be difficult given where or when a child decides to disclose. It is always important to listen and take time to hear what the child is saying or communicating. Try not to react, appear shocked or give the impression that what the child is saying is unthinkable or unbelievable.

Responding in the moment

- Always give a child time and attention.

Think about your body language, does it demonstrate openness and encouragement from the adult's perspective that makes the child feel safe and listened to?

- Allow the child to give a spontaneous account.

Make sure that you don't jump in too quickly by trying to make sense of what is happening or trying to clarify what the child is saying to you before they have finished speaking. Disclosure may happen incrementally and not necessary all happen all at once.

- Don't offer false confidentiality.

Never agree to keep secrets or say that you won't tell anyone else if a child asks you to do so when disclosing. Always explain that you will have to tell someone else in order that something can be done to help them or keep them safe.

- Offer reassurance.

Children may need adults to reassure them that they have done the right thing by speaking to someone about their experiences. Children need to know that

we are taking them seriously should they disclose. They need to know that we care about them and want to help them. They need to know that abuse is not their fault.

Recording

- Respond with accurate and timely record keeping.

If a child uses language and words that are unfamiliar to a practitioner or describes something to them, it is important that they recollect and record exactly what is said by the child in the child's own words without adding opinion or interpretation. It is important to record this as soon as the opportunity arises when the details are clear and fresh in mind; this way they can be recalled with clarity.

Reporting

- Always report disclosure of abuse.

Details and information about abuse through disclosure should be reported to the designated safeguarding lead in your setting immediately. If a practitioner is the designated safeguarding lead, they will consider having a conversation with statutory services where appropriate.

- Don't speak to the alleged abuser unless advised by social care to do so.

If on seeking advice from social care, practitioners are encouraged by to seek clarity or ask questions of a parent, make sure that this advice is recorded as such. If it is considered that by speaking to parents about abuse compromises that safety of the child or puts them at further risk for example in the case of sexual abuse, a practitioner should be confident to challenge this advice.

Do not attempt to investigate allegations of abuse against a child, this is the role of statutory services. If other professionals begin to ask questions and attempt to gather facts themselves, this may place the child and other children

at risk. It may also prevent processes such as child protection enquiries from taking place, allowing the abuse to continue to the child in question and other children with whom the accused perpetrator comes into contact.

If a child speaks out about abuse, discloses something to an adult or makes an allegation of harm against someone, it is vital that we always respond from a child-centred perspective and ensure that actions during and following a disclosure focus on the needs and wellbeing of the child.

Making professional judgements

There are a whole range of elements needing to be considered when making professional judgements that in turn lead to actions to help and protect children. We must remember that everyone working with children has a responsibility to safeguard them and this cannot happen without applying some element of consideration, having thoughts or feelings about the situation. Whilst early years practitioners such as those who have the designated safeguarding lead role are required to apply the highest level of scrutiny, ultimately, everyone makes judgements in one way or another. Making professional judgements is the not the same as being judgemental; we need to be clear about this. Effective safeguarding practice requires judgement to be one of it's essential drivers.

Experienced and skilled practitioners can draw upon lots of things that influence their actions. They need to be *intuitive*, *analytical* and *decisive*.

Intuitive

How often have we heard or used the phrase 'something doesn't feel right to me', or 'I just have a feeling that won't go away'? We are often reluctant to use emotional responses or consider feelings in safeguarding contexts when in fact we should be using them as part of the process that determines our response. Munro (2020) talks about intuitive reasoning that works hand in hand with other approaches such as analytical thinking when making judgements. She also believes that 'the centrality of empathy and intuition needs to be acknowledged' in child protection practices and that it should be seen as a guiding aspect towards our considerations. Munro states that intuition can be 'articulated' and the 'ability to use it can improve with practice'. If we return

to the topic of neuroscience and understanding brain function, we can see the interconnectivity of the neocortex – the reasoning part of our brain – and the subcortex – the emotional reasoning part of the brain. Both are inseparable, supporting the theory that intuitive reasoning is no less important than other processes that inform judgements, decision making and drawing conclusions. Munro draws upon the work of Hammond (2007), who uses sailing as a useful image to help understand the relationship between reason and emotion. Hammond describes reason as helping to 'steer the boat, but emotion provides the destination'. Intuitive and emotional responses offer a pre-requisite for additional and important safeguarding actions that enable practitioners to pursue other aspects of effective practice. This includes:

- Applying professional curiosity and finding out more about a situation.
- Responding and acting with a sense of urgency for the sake of the child.
- Becoming fearless in an approach to keep children safe or protect them, sometimes at the expense of practitioners' own positions and reputation.
- Demonstrating tenacity in the endeavour to meet a child's needs or go the extra mile.
- Challenging the status quo or going against the grain if practitioners believe others are not responding appropriately to a concern they have about a child.

Analytical

Analysis of a situation or circumstances for a child is something that is done constantly and sometimes without even realising it. Asking questions, pondering upon an uncertainty, or critically thinking about or examining a response from a parent who fails to reassure us about a child's safety all require levels of analysis. Early years practitioners will draw upon several things when analysing or pondering upon a situation that in turn informs their decision making.

Time to analyse – a scenario

What factors in Sarah's scenario would you use to analyse her situation? What are the things that stand out as concerning and are compromising her safety?

Sarah is three years of age and is one of four children living with Mum and her siblings in Grandma's home since the family were evicted from their property. Sarah's Mum has some learning difficulties and has a history of post-natal depression for which she takes medication. Staff at nursery often note that Sarah comes to nursery 'dirty and unkempt' and that she has recently lost weight. Her attendance is inconsistent, however when she does attend her nursery sessions, she eats snacks and food very quickly and has been seen to take food from other children at mealtimes.

Applying analytical approaches to bring together the main risk factors for children draws upon the features that give us most concern and that draws conclusions on the level of need for a child, which then informs our next steps. Analysis helps highlight the issues that require us to take action helping to determine what exact and appropriate actions are needed.

Decisive

Effective safeguarding practice requires confident practitioners to make the right and appropriate decisions about a child. Whether the decision is simply to follow a procedure and pass on a concern, or to return to something that intuitively we believe is worth taking further. Whatever the decision, be it small or large in consequence, it is worth reflecting upon what we need to inform our decision-making actions.

Being clearsighted about a situation will determine a number of things.

Asking the right questions:

- What do we already know? Is this sufficient information in itself to inform our decision making?
- Do we need to find out more and who will provide us with the relevant information needed in order to bring clarity or focus?
- Will the process of clarification or gathering new information involve following information sharing practices that engage other professionals and therefore require consent from parents?

Effective decision making can be both independent and collaborative. I was hugely disappointed when a childminder seeking information from a health

professional about a child in their setting when asking for clarity was told 'I can't possibly comment'! We need each other to help with decision making, this is the whole purpose of joint working. Collaborative practice at all parts of the process is a powerful and necessary strategy and should be seen as such by every professional working with children.

It is important however to note that practitioners do not need to have the full picture before deciding to act in one way or another.

Effective record keeping

Record keeping, especially when gathering evidence or information over time, is an invaluable tool to use to inform decision making. It is another effective safeguarding action that early years practitioners should frequently engage with.

What should be recorded?

Whilst there are no specific or definitive lists of things that practitioners must record as such, it is good practice to make note of various points that help ascertain or monitor a situation.

- Signs and indicators of abuse or neglect such as bruises, injuries, child disclosures or changes in a child's behaviour.
- Conversations with parents or other professionals that raise concern.
- Injuries a child may receive outside of the setting with dates and times of when they occurred, including explanations and reasons given by parents as to what happened and who was with the child at the time of injury.
- Absence from the setting and reasons given for the absence. In addition to noting times of absence and a record of what the setting did to establish contact with the child to ensure that they were safe and well. Any further actions taken in the light of any outcomes.
- Inconsistencies in care for a child such as frequent changes in adults given responsibilities to bring or collect them from the setting.

It is useful to think about the outcomes that efficient record keeping will offer practitioners. Recording provides an invaluable means by which to inform and

manage other important safeguarding processes. Effective record keeping enables many things.

- A clear evidence-based process that provides important information about a child over time.
- A chronological record for gathering information or monitoring a situation or actions taken.
- Supports practitioners to make professional judgements.
- Assists information sharing.
- Provides information that can be used as part of a referral.
- Documents strengths, positive outcomes and changes in a situation.
- Provides a means by which to support and monitor progress or lack of parental engagement.
- Records can be used as an effective way to compile and write reports for multi-agency meetings and processes.
- Serves as a source of evidence for legal proceedings.

TIME TO REFLECT

Think about your systems for recording. How enabling are they in helping you and others focus on children's lived experiences? How do they inform actions to safeguard or protect children?

When considering intuitive, analytical, and decisive actions here are three important things to think about.

Think . . .

1 Patterns

What do patterns tell us about a situation? Patterns that show similar or the same adverse outcome for a child that are repetitive and frequent should raise concerns. Analysing patterns help practitioners to recognise things such as notable changes in a child's behaviour or wellbeing that manifests every other week or similar. A child may be anxious, afraid or hungry after spending time

with different parents or significant adults such as parents′ partners or older children living in the household where the child resides for part of the time.

2 Jigsaws

What pieces of the jigsaw do we *already have* in terms of information or knowledge about a child? What pieces of the jigsaw do we *need* to be aware of to build a clearer picture that will inform decision making or taking decisive actions that could safeguard or protect a child?

3 Chain reactions

What might happen as a result of an incident or circumstance that could trigger significant risk or potential harm for a child? A child whose family becomes homeless and moves into a household with unsuitable adults or young people placing them at increased risk. Or a parent whose mental health is in substantial decline and confides in a practitioner that they cannot cope.

TAKING DECISIVE ACTION SHOWCASE – TAKING ACTION TO SUPPORT PARENTS AND PROTECT CHILDREN

This showcase provided by a nursery shows the importance of strong relationships between parents and staff, enabling parents to reach out for help and support when they are struggling. Decisive action taken by the nursery not only served to protect children in the short term it also led to improved outcomes for the wider family in the long term.

Working to support Mom

Mom lives on her own with her four children, one of which attends the nursery. One day she approached the nursery manager asking if she could speak with her. Mom became very emotional explaining that she wasn't coping at home and that she needed support to keep her children safe. She went on to describe an incident where someone in the neighbourhood had set fire to her front door and this along with other threats from neighbours was placing their family in great danger.

Taking action – the nursery manager's response

After listening and consoling the troubled parent, the manager reassured Mom that she would do all she could to help her and offered to speak with the social care team to request their support. A very thankful Mom left the nursery and awaited a call from social care.

On investigating further, social care identified the extent of needs for this family and children warranted ongoing support from them. A plan was put in place and along with the nursery support was given to Mom and all four children. Things seemed to be moving in the right direction. However, through conversations between the nursery and social care it soon became apparent that Mom was not being completely truthful about her willingness to engage or change. She had repeatedly missed appointments with social care and was neglecting the medical needs of her children. Furthermore, evidence had emerged that she was using drugs herself, which compromised the safety of the children. The extent to which she had lied and shown disguised compliance towards

professionals contributed towards the decision by social care to remove all four children.

Working to support Dad

All children moved to live with Dad and the nursery built an excellent relationship supporting him to gain custody of his children and helping with the ongoing engagement in respect to his child attending the nursery. The setting noted such a difference in the child; they presented as clean, calm, and happy and all their needs were being met by Dad.

The outcome

Mom moved into a new area and has begun to turn her life around. She is engaging in court processes and meetings around the care and wellbeing of the four children.

TIME TO THINK

The showcase demonstrates several actions taken by the nursery to make sure that their practice centred on the child's needs. What actions can you identify and how did they contribute to the process and final outcomes for the children concerned?

Taking action to protect a child
Making a referral to social care

If it is deemed that a child requires support or protection because of recognising significant harm, a referral to social care should be made by the designated safe-guarding lead. The family should be informed of the referral except in instances of sexual abuse, fabricated illnesses, forced marriages or female genital mutilation and where if doing so would place the child at increased risk of significant harm.

A call to social care will help establish some important information or details that should be considered when making a referral. Social care can advise and help practitioners to achieve clarity on a situation.

Some things to consider when making a referral:

- Always clearly state the reason for the referral.
- Communicate the needs of the child as central to the process.
- Draw upon knowledge of the child and their circumstances.
- Use or apply thresholds of need (where relevant) to support the referral.
- Use professional judgements to inform decision making.

Professional challenge and escalation

Early years practitioners especially those with safeguarding lead responsibilities will sometimes need to take actions to challenge other professionals and escalate concerns that others have not deemed to be as high as they believe them to be. We will explore this further in chapter 6 when considering multi-agency work and practices.

Key messages from chapter five

- Taking action to safeguard and protect children involves a whole range of things including making decisions, professional judgements and drawing upon conclusions.

- It is important for practitioners to understand differing levels of needs for children and know how to respond to them.
- Effective safeguarding practice involves knowing how to respond to a child's disclosure of abuse or neglect.
- Professional judgements are informed by intuitive reasoning; they require analytical approaches and informed decision-making processes.
- Actions taken to help or protect a child should always centre on meeting their needs and/or ensuring their safety and wellbeing.

Figure 5.1 This is what I feel like if no one listened to what I have to tell them.

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Neuroscience in Practice

Play Matters!

I am sure no one interested in how small children develop and flourish would argue with the title of this chapter – Play Matters! Of course it does, I hear you shout enthusiastically… Play Matters! It is a simple statement that any champion of early childhood would agree with emphatically. Without question, a chapter on play definitely needs including in this book. However, as well as a book about early childhood, this is a book about neuroscience and the science behind brain development. Can the two *really* go together? Can science *really* help us to understand *why* play matters? Are there areas other than early childhood where we can look for evidence? Maybe the title of this chapter should be – Does play matter, and if so, why? (OK, maybe not so catchy.)

What Is Play?

We will shortly explore some key play theorists' definitions, but before that, it might be helpful to consider what play means to us.

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Play is….

Consider the title of this exercise, and finish the sentence:

Play is……………………………………………………………………

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In other words – what does play mean to *you*? What is *your* definition of play?

When you have jotted down a few thoughts, consider the following questions:

- What key words are included in your definition?
- What do you think influences your definition?
  - Childhood – home/school, etc.?
    - How does this influence your definition?
    - Why do you think that is?
  - Family, cultural background and community, etc.?
    - How does this influence your definition?
    - Why do you think that is?
  - Career – training, research, experience and so on?
    - How does this influence your definition?
    - Why do you think that is?
- Anything else?

As part of the research for this book, I asked children I know, and I also asked this question of friends and colleagues (in person and on Twitter). I asked people to ask children in their work or personal lives to share their views on play, or to finish the sentence, 'What is play…..?'

Play is…..

- Play is messy (Aged 2)
- Playing is super fun, I like playing in the rain (Aged 3)
- I just love to play; I love to play with my toys and play outside (Aged 5)
- Play is time with my friends (Aged 8)

There were so many comments that took my breath away. The answers were interesting, insightful, and full of childhood understanding. Supported by a highly sensitive and tuned-in adult, this message comes from a 3-year-old, and is one we could all do with remembering:

> Relaxing in the hammock with a little girl during today's session, she asked me to
>
> "Come and play with me"
>
> [I replied] "But I don't know how to play, what should I do?"
>
> She gave me a daisy,
>
> "Just hold this, go for a walk, and take it on an adventure"….
>
> (Tweet from Lea Archer: AKA Free-Range Forest @LeaLeaLemon)

The History of Play

Now we have a personal definition of play, and some thoughts on how children see play, let's consider some of the more famous (and maybe not so famous) quotes from some prominent play and child development theorists. Well over 100 years ago, German educator, and the founder of kindergarten (the garden of children), Friedrich Froebel truly understood the power of play.

> Play is the purest, most spiritual activity … typical of human life
>
> It gives … joy, freedom, contentment, inner and outer rest, peace with the world. It holds the sources of all that is good with the world.
>
> (Froebel, 1887: 55)

On the Shoulders of Giants

The very language we use in early childhood is rooted in history. The term pedagogy, for example, comes from the Ancient Greek words for children (paides), play (paidia), and education (paideia):

> The central aim of pedagogy (paidagogia) is to encourage learning as a form of play (paidia).
>
> (Krentz, 1998: 205)

Whilst the word 'pedagogy' is not always used collectively (or indeed comfortably) across the early childhood sector, the idea of the importance of early childhood, and learning and development through play, is certainly wholly embraced.

I often say that in the early childhood profession, we stand on the shoulders of giants. We have over 2000 years of history to call on, and that gives us what Nutbrown and Clough (2014: 3) call "a 'rootedness' to our work".

Year	*Quote*	*Reference*
35–97 (AD)	The time gained in childhood is clear profit to the period of youth. Let us not therefore waste the earliest years.	Quintilian (translation by Butler, 1963: 29)
1762	Let him be taken every day, far out into the fields. There, let him run about, play, fall down a hundred times a day; the oftener the better, as he will soon learn to get up again by himself.	Worthington, 1889: 41 (quoting Jean-Jacques Rousseau)
1842	Where are these rational practices to be taught and acquired? Not within the four walls of a bare building, in which formality predominates ………. But in the nursery, play-ground, fields, gardens, workshops … museums and class-rooms. …The facts collected from all these sources will be concentrated, explained, discussed, made obvious to all, and shown in their direct application to practice in all the business of life.	Owen, 1842: 97
1887	Play is the highest form of child development. Play at this time [early childhood] is not trivial, it is highly serious and of deep significance.	Froebel, 1887: 54 Froebel, 1887: 55

1933	Let us turn now to the role of play and its influence on a child's development. I think it is enormous. In play a child is always above his average age, above his daily behavior; in play it is as though he were a head taller than himself. As in the focus of a magnifying glass, play contains all developmental tendencies in a condensed form; in play it is as though the child were trying to jump above the level of his normal behavior.	Vygotsky, 1933: 875 Vygotsky, 1933: 890
1937	If we were asked to mention one supreme psychological need of the young child, the answer would have to be "play" – the opportunity for free play in all its various forms. Play is the child's means of living and of understanding life.	Issacs, 1948: 149
1949	He becomes a man by means of his hands, by means of his experience, first through play, then through work.	Montessori, 1949: 37
1955	First and foremost, then, all play is a voluntary activity. Play to order is no longer play.	Huizinga, 1955: 1094

Over 2000 years ago, Plato (429–347 B.C.E.), and his student Aristotle (384–322 B.C.E.), considered play an important part of early childhood learning and development. As we travel through history, Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) and Johann Pestalozzi (1746–1827) were amongst the first to speak out on the belief we should listen to children and be guided by their curiosity and interests.

Margaret McMillan (1860–1931) worked with her sister Rachel to develop outdoor nursery provision and the first teacher training college. McMillan talked of the need to look holistically at our work with children, and understood the importance of taking the home environment into account. John Dewey (1859–1952) would also add further to what we now call a child-led approach.

Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1896–1934) was very clear on his beliefs around the importance of play. Equally, Dr Maria Montessori is also highly regarded for her belief in learning through play and experience. In the quote in the grid, Montessori uses the term 'man' to mean the species, or human. This quote is often shortened to the slightly easier to remember, "play is the work of the child". Susan Sutherland-Isaacs (1885–1948)

believed in the importance of early education, and that any setting where young children are, should be developed on love, kindness, and relationships. Whilst Paolo Freire (1921–1997) talked of the importance of conversations, community, and the significance of real experiences.

It is easy to see how our play-based approach to early childhood has developed. As we move through history, other voices join the call for recognition of the importance of early childhood. Names such as Athey, Bandura, Bronfenbrenner, Bruner, Donaldson, Erikson, Freud, Goldschmied, Katz, Laevers, Malaguzzi, Maslow, Parten, Piaget, and Steiner are just some you may recognise. (A quick internet search will bring up plenty of places to explore these and many more.) These, and other giants of the early childhood world, added their thoughts to the ever-growing knowledge and understanding of play and child development.

And it wasn't just education and early childhood theorists. As Britain developed during the Industrial Revolution of the 1800s, philanthropists such as Robert Owen, George and Richard Cadbury, and Titus Salt understood the importance of learning by experience and learning by doing. Outdoor play and experiential learning featured heavily in the support and opportunities that were provided for the younger children of the families who worked in the factories and mills.

The history of play and early education during the Industrial Revolution in Britain is liberally sprinkled with various philanthropic and charitable endeavours by the educated, privileged and/or wealthy business men and women of the time. The research is plentiful. We learn of efforts to abolish child labour, improve health, and well-intentioned programmes to support education within the U.K. It is clear that the philanthropists of the time had a social and moral conscience in relation to their local communities. The disturbing history of how some of those developments came about is only now starting to be considered. We cannot talk of modern Britain, and the history of how early education was developed (and therefore financed), without acknowledging our appalling treatment of other nations.

As international travel became easier and global markets opened up, this funded the Industrial Revolution. Access to land in other countries brought access to crops. The raw materials of sugar, tea, coffee,

cocoa, and cotton, for example, could be manufactured, monetised, and scaled up for huge profits, at devastating human cost overseas.

> The great bulk of that essential raw material came from the Mississippi Valley and the "white gold" [cotton] of the Deep South was harvested by the black hands of enslaved Africans. In the first half of the nineteenth century it was possible for slaves in the Southern states to spend most of their stolen lives producing the cotton that stoked Britain's Industrial Revolution.
>
> (Olusoga, 2016: 26)

It is now known that at a time when the importance of early childhood in the U.K. was seeing positive developments, we were also making iron slave collars to be used on children elsewhere in the world. Whilst not every philanthropist was involved in slavery, works such as *Britain's Forgotten Slave Owners* (BBC, 2015) or the Centre for the Study of the Legacies of British Slavery at University College London, are necessary commentaries into the way profit from the slave trade permeated (and therefore funded) all areas of life in Britain. For me, this brings into sharp relief why equality and diversity need to be such an integral part of our early childhood curriculum – for both practitioners and children. Discussions like this need to continue across the sector, so we can better understand our collective history. We need to learn more, we need to do more to acknowledge the past – so we can do better now, and in the future.

(Note: If this has raised questions for you, then I would urge you to explore the bibliography for more. In addition, my eternal thanks go to Dr Yinka Olusoga for help with this section to put some of the history into context.)

As we have explored, the history of the early childhood sector is a rich weaving together of ideas, thoughts, and opinions. Theorists and writers, academics and educators, philosophers and philanthropists who all believed in, and shared their values, beliefs, and observations on the importance of early childhood and play. People who took the metaphorical early childhood baton, studied it, added to it, analysed it, moulded it, developed it,

and passed it on. We also have contemporary writers and thinkers, who continue to guide our reflections and practice. The works of Dr Jools Page (Professional Love), Prof. Chris Pascal and Prof. Tony Bertram (Centre for Research in Early Childhood [CREC]), and Dr Jack Shonkoff (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard) are amongst those who continue to advocate for the importance of early childhood. Today, we are ever grateful for those who passed on, and continue to pass on, the metaphorical baton of early childhood.

The observations, thoughts, knowledge and understanding of many have been carefully passed down the years to support our ongoing and developing knowledge of early childhood. This brief section begins to show how our understanding of play has been shaped and influenced. The names, many akin to old friends, are much cherished by those who continue to read, support, and share this work – and continue to pass on the baton to the new generation of early childhood practitioners. This *should* give us belief, a sense of security and a confidence in what we do. In addition, we can build on this "rootedness to our work" (Nutbrown and Clough, 2014: 3). We can add to the growing knowledge and understanding. We can consider how we pass the baton on.

This then leads to the questions:

- How does this rich and vibrant history of the understanding of play link to our modern interpretations?
- How can our ever-developing learning inform future practice?
- How does this link to our understanding of neuroscience and brain development?

Our Understanding of Play

Our understanding of play comes from a range of places. As well as being influenced by the theory and research, some of which we have just explored, we have personal influences on our approaches to play. From before we are born, we are influenced by the things we hear, feel, and experience, and so on. You may have guessed from other chapters, or my other books or having heard me speak, that I am a huge advocate of the work of Urie

Bronfenbrenner (1917–2005), and that I have been greatly influenced by his work. There is one particular quote that is my all-time favourite, and one I use whenever possible:

> Learning and development are facilitated by the participation of the developing person in progressively more complex patterns of reciprocal activity with someone with whom that person has developed a strong and enduring emotional attachment and when the balance of power gradually shifts in favor of the developing person.
>
> (Bronfenbrenner, 1979: 60)

You probably hear this more often as the slightly misquoted, but easier to say and remember:

> In order to develop normally, a child requires progressively more complex joint activity with one or more adults … *Every child needs at least one adult who is irrationally crazy about him or her.*

Bronfenbrenner's ecological and bio-ecological models are well respected in the early childhood world, and definitely worth exploring (see bibliography). The original theory was specifically about the layers of influences on child development, and how they each interconnect. Later, Bronfenbrenner discussed how the systems could also be seen over a lifetime. Bronfenbrenner described the theory as "a set of nested structures, each inside the next, like a set of Russian dolls" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979: 22).

However, here we could also use Bronfenbrenner's ecological model as a way to explore our own understanding of play. We can consider our own experiences and interactions and explore how our thoughts and practices on play have been shaped and influenced:

Microsystem – Bronfenbrenner described the microsystem as the influences nearest to the developing child.

- In terms of exploring our approaches to play, this could be the influences from our own childhoods, our families, neighbourhoods, our cultures and so on.

- In addition, there can be different microsystems that we move between. This could be, for example, our immediate close networks, such as college, university, workplace, colleagues, teams, leaders, and managers.

Mesosystem – Bronfenbrenner described the mesosystem as the way various microsystems interact with each other.

- In terms of our approaches to play, this could be around if our childhood homes and schools agreed on play, or if there were conflicts. Did our neighbourhoods and communities support children to play or did they discourage it?
- In addition, the mesosystem is about the various influences as we move between different microsystems. This, for example, could include the wide range of learning and work environments we move between. How do these influences link to our other microsystems – do they support? – or is there challenge or conflict?

Exosystem – Bronfenbrenner described the exosystem as systems that we are not directly involved in, but still have an influence.

- In terms of our approaches to play, this could be media influences as well as local services, systems, politics, and policies on areas such as health, welfare, and education.

Macrosystem – Bronfenbrenner described the macrosystem as the impact from wider influences, such as a society's values, attitudes, beliefs, and assumptions. Overarching social, economic, political, health, education and legal systems also sit here.

If we consider historical perspectives again and think of Britain in the late 1800s–early 1900s as an example here, society believed children were not important. The phrase 'seen and not heard' is often used in association with this era, and clearly shows the culture, attitudes, and beliefs of the time. School attendance was not a legal requirement. Many children had to work to support their families, often in dangerous jobs in coal mines, factories, or cleaning chimneys. Access to healthcare was impossible for most ordinary families, and many children died from diseases such as measles, flu, and tuberculosis (TB, sometimes called consumption).

- In terms of our approaches to play, this is about the society we live in now. What are the values, attitudes, beliefs, and assumptions today? What about the overarching systems? How do these things influence our approaches to play?

Chronosystem – Bronfenbrenner added the fifth system later and described the chronosystem as the influences over a period of time. Some influences remain constant and change very little, others can change dramatically. Changes can also be caused by events or experiences – and can be external/environmental or internal/personal. Changes can also be expected or unexpected. So, for example, starting a new school would be seen as external/environmental but expected, whereas a sudden serious illness would be internal/personal and not expected.

- In terms of our approaches to play, this could include if we still feel the same about play as we did as children, or during initial learning, for example. How have key events or experiences influenced our approaches to play? What has changed over time, and why?

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Personal Influences on Play

Look back over the descriptions using Bronfenbrenner's model as a way to look at your influences on play.

Then, reconsider your thoughts from the earlier reflective practice exercise – '*What Is Play……?*' at the beginning of this chapter. Then, consider the following questions:

- Can you see where your influences have come from, and where they fit into the systems and layers?
- Are there influences you had not considered earlier?
  - Has that changed your thinking? If so, how?
- Can you see where the influences of your colleagues/teams/networks come from?
- Can you see any challenges or conflicts?
  - Why do you think that is?
- Any other thoughts?

I am sure that your reflections will clearly show how we all have our own unique systems, and how as we move around, we interact with other people, and *their* unique systems. Our influences may be similar, or completely different, or perhaps even challenging or conflicting. Therefore, our approaches to play may be similar, completely different, or perhaps even challenging or conflicting. The key here is how we, as a sector, create a true and honest "community of practice" (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) that continues to strive to recognise, acknowledge and promote the value of play.

> As you are reading this … I encourage you to think about the communities you are part of, what you might do for them, and how they benefit your work.
>
> (Murray, 2019: 116)

In other words, how do we use the various systems and communities we are part of to best support early childhood? How do we take all of our previous influences, personal, environmental, expected, and unexpected, and build on the rich evidence-based, research-informed history of the importance of play in early childhood? How can we help and support other systems that maybe do not always understand our philosophies? How do we create a unified and comprehensive approach to play?

And importantly, where does that leave us now? The theorists passed on the metaphorical 'play baton' and charged us with ensuring that play remains central to childhood. How do we pass the baton on? Is there a baton to pass on – is it in danger of being lost?

When *this* book is published, the early childhood world will be able to refer to over 2000 years of evidence-based, research-informed practice and theory, as we have seen, from a range of sources. In relation to early development, play features highly throughout. Yet, it appears that, even now, there are areas where the importance, impact and criticality of play is still mocked, misunderstood, or misinterpreted – areas where the importance of play still has to be defended. Maybe it is about time we reclaimed our history and our heritage in discussions around future developments regarding the importance of, and understanding of, early childhood and play:

> [This] sometimes stems from poor interpretations of principles of good practice, such as when "developmentally appropriate practice" is taken to mean

> that teachers let children play aimlessly or leave them to '"develop" totally on their own (Kostelnik, 1992). At other times, it may stem from the thinking lodged in the day care versus education dichotomy… we are still struggling with the value of [early childhood].
>
> (Phillips and Bredekamp, 1998: 444)

As Daniel (2018: 5) discusses:

> In an ideal situation Members of Parliament, Theorists, Economists, Educators, Parents, and the society at large would have a universally agreed value system for the EYS [Early Years Sector] which would in turn ensure a consistent approach that would be sustainable beyond the political party that is in power. However, the current EYS is afflicted with the undue burden of rapid and relentless change and the opinionated vagaries of opposing political parties. These dynamics, alongside rolling policy development, continue apace to shape (or misshape) the EYS.

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Passing on the Baton for Play?

Let's take a moment to reflect on where we feel we are currently, in terms of our approaches to play. Think about the following quotes:

Frost, (1998: 8) offers:

> Play is essential for healthy development as it seems to facilitate the linkages of language, emotion, movement, socialisation, and cognition. It is playful activity … that makes a positive difference in brain development and human functioning.

Lillard et al. (2013: 28) discuss:

> The hands-on, child driven educational methods sometimes referred to as "playful learning" (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2009) are the most positive means yet known to help young children's development.

Drew (2019: 216) states:

> There remains the likelihood that children's play spaces and play activities will continue to be restricted and restructured to meet the anxieties of adults, rather than the needs or desires of children.

Then consider the following questions:

- How do you feel reading the quotes?
- How do the quotes relate to your beliefs, values and understanding of play?
  - How do the quotes relate to your practice, beliefs, and your influences:
    - To your colleagues/teams?
    - To your workplace?
- Does local and national policy support your practice to support and develop children's play?
  - Why do you feel that?
- How do you think we can ensure we have a baton to pass on to future play and early childhood practitioners?
  - Why do you think that?
- Any other thoughts?

However we feel about the current outlook on play, we need to ensure we build on our rich history, add to the knowledge, and work out a way to pass this forward. I would like to go back to the historical theorists' grid and give the final word in this section to Huizinga (1955: 1094).

> Whatever happens, whatever we believe, (now or in the future), play should never be "to order."

The Case for Early Childhood: The Case for Play

So, I think we have now come full circle, well almost. I think it is safe to say that play matters! We can utilise our rich and diverse history to share the evidence for play and child development and why we should value childhood. In addition, there is evidence that, economically, investing in early childhood resources makes a bigger impact on long-term economic developments. Art Rolnick and Rob Grunewald (2003) of the Minneapolis Federal Reserve Bank found that:

> Early education investments yield a return that far exceeds the return on most public projects that are considered economic development…yielding more than $8 for every $1 invested.
>
> (Clothier and Poppe, 2004 [no page])

Furthermore, Nobel Prize–winning University of Chicago Economics Professor James Heckman has spent a lifetime researching the impacts of early childhood. (The Heckman Equation website has a wealth of easily accessible materials, many of which are free to use and share, and I would urge you to explore this further.) As Heckman and Masterov (2007: 24) explain:

> Early skills breed later skills because early learning begets [causes] later learning. … investment in the young is warranted. Returns are highest for investments made at younger ages and remedial investments are often prohibitively costly. … Returns for disadvantaged children are highest for investments made at young ages.

In other words, it makes sense to invest in early childhood, as it costs much more to put things 'right' later. Art Rolnick, James Heckman and others may be talking about the impact of economic investment in support of early childhood, and I recognise this can be seen to be purely about money. However, the case for investment in early childhood is also clear in relation to the impact on brain development.

> A fundamental paradox exists and is unavoidable: development in the early years is both highly robust and highly vulnerable. Although there have been long-standing debates about how much the early years really matter in the larger scheme of lifelong development, our conclusion is unequivocal: What happens during the first months and years of life matters a lot, not because this period of development provides an indelible blueprint for adult well-being, but because it sets either a sturdy or fragile stage for what follows.
>
> (Shonkoff and Phillips, 2000: 5)

In other words, development in early childhood matters as it paves the way for what follows, be it sturdy or fragile. So, does this include play? Does play support brain development? Well, it turns out that science can answer that question too:

> Did you know that the most important interactions you have with a child can happen through play? By engaging in playful serve and return with a child, you can literally help build stronger connections in the brain. Strong neural connections are the foundation for all of a child's future learning, behavior, and health.
>
> (Center on the Developing Child, 2022)

Or, to put it another way, those simple, early childhood classics of back-and-forth, give-and-take, synchronised interactions. In other words – play! From repeating baby's babbling noises and playing peek-a-boo, to rolling a ball, the uncomplicated but vital exchanges between a child and an in-tune adult (and we will explore this more later). The biological evidence for this is growing and deepening. For example, research is now showing children who experience consistent 'serve and return' relationships have greater brain volume (especially grey matter), better language development, lower stress

levels and better development of empathy. And, due to ongoing scientific development we can actually see photographs and images of how this looks and works. (See bibliography for more.)

I am sure it will come as no surprise that there is always going to be some grey areas when it comes to brain development and the ongoing advances in neuroscience. For example, this rather lovely quote regularly does the rounds on social media, purportedly said by the late Dr Karyn Purvis, a researcher and developmental psychologist; however, nowhere can I find any substantiated source.

> Scientists have recently determined that it takes approximately 400 repetitions to create a new synapse in the brain—unless it is done with play, in which case, it takes between 10 and 20 repetitions!
>
> Dr. Karyn Purvis

Wouldn't that be a lovely thought – that play makes connections faster in the brain. So, although I cannot find any confirmed basis for this particular quote, Dr Purvis was a highly regarded academic and it is easy to find her work if you wanted to explore it further. (Oh, and if you do find the origin of the quote, please do let me know.) What we *can* prove, however, is that a developing brain forms more than 1 million new neural connections every second. I think that is phenomenal. This is why I love what I do, and why I am so passionate about the early childhood sector…because what we do for every child, literally every second of every day, helps.

There is a link with sustained shared thinking here too, where an in-tune adult supports and encourages a child to develop their thinking and learning, through carefully supported play. Like serve and return – there is a back and forth here too that supports the developing brain to make connections through play. Sustained shared thinking is a finely tuned balance between the child and adult leading, which questions, clarifies, develops, and extends ideas and thinking (Brodie, 2009: 2014). Like this case study from Carey, which looks at the way serve and return, and sustained shared thinking, support a child to develop neural connections as their thinking and learning develops. Carey is a practitioner who works in a preschool setting; Shaykh is 4 years old and has been at the setting for some time. This is Shaykh's last term before going to school. Carey discusses an interaction with Shaykh:

PRACTITIONER REFLECTION: CASE STUDY

Sticky Tape Fingerprints

Shaykh is in the craft area and engaged in sticking bottle tops onto a piece of paper, skilfully using the sticky tape dispenser. As Shaykh pulls a piece of tape off the dispenser, Shaykh notices a fingerprint on the clear tape.

"I can see my fingerprint!" Shaykh commented to me.

"Oh yes! Did the police talk to you about fingerprints when they came to visit nursery?" I asked.

"No, but I've seen it on my television before", Shaykh explained. "Someone's lunch had been stolen and they used fingerprints to catch the person that took it."

"It's a bit hard to see the prints", commented Shaykh. I suggested that we could stick the tape onto some coloured paper so they could try and see the fingerprints a bit clearer. Shaykh found some coloured paper and returned to the table to stick the tape onto the paper.

We worked together to help each other collect fingerprints from our fingers, talking about which finger was next and who had the biggest fingers.

Shaykh said, "It's a bit difficult to see the prints" and together we thought about why they were still a bit blurry.

"Perhaps we have to do it really slowly and carefully, so the print stays on the tape", suggested Shaykh. This seemed to work and create clearer marks.

Together, we looked closely at the marks and discussed the patterns we could see.

"Did you know that your fingerprint is unique to you? Only you have those patterns, which is why the police can see who they belong to if they need to", I asked.

"Yes, they said that on my television!" replied Shaykh.

The interaction then came to a natural end.

Fingerprints were not the planned objective for this lovely example of interaction and sustained shared thinking. The activity was truly child-led, as it came purely from the child's interest.

Reflections on how this could be extended for the child:

- Use ink pads to create fingerprints.
- Revisit the TV cartoon to see what information could be used or extended.
- Use mathematical language to describe the size and shape of the prints.
- Use descriptive language to describe the patterns.
- Find magnifying glasses to examine the prints.
- Photocopy/enlarge the prints from the child and the practitioner so you can clearly see the differences in the patterns.

This activity became a teachable moment by careful scaffolding from Carey, a highly skilled, in-tune and interested practitioner. Talking about prior experience (the recent visit from the police) prompted and empowered Shaykh to be able to relate it to prior knowledge (the TV cartoon). Working together (back and forth/serve and return) they were able to resolve the problems they encountered (not being able to see the prints clearly). All of which will have supported neural connections in Shaykh's brain. A true sustained shared thinking, learning moment… but I bet Shaykh wouldn't call it that.

Therefore, to bring all of this together:

- Research can evidence how 'serve and return' type activities strengthen neural connections and support brain development.
- Evidence shows that early childhood investment makes a difference, and financially costs less in the longer term.
- Science shows us that the developing brain is pre-programmed to respond to environments and what is happening around it (whether useful, stressful, or otherwise).
- Over 2000 years of evidenced-based, research-informed early childhood theory and practice is available to build on.
- There are laws that advocate the 'right to play' (UNCRC, 1989).

So back to the discussions at the beginning of this chapter:

> Play Matters…. This is a book about neuroscience and the science behind brain development. Can the two *really* go together? Can science *really* help us to understand why play matters? Are there areas other than early childhood where we can look for evidence?

I will leave you to reflect on those questions and consider how the discussions we have explored in this chapter might help you in your practice and might help the early childhood community to pass on the baton to future practitioners. After all, as we have explored many times, it is adults who have the biggest influence on childhood and brain development – and we will explore more of that in a later chapter.

And finally, just a couple of quotes, to bring this chapter to a close:

> Children can and will play in most places. A rich environment for play includes: natural elements; opportunities for risk and challenge; places to express emotions; stimulation for the senses; chances for social interactions; interesting and varied physical and human environments and sufficient space to do what is wanted.
>
> (International Play Association, 2014)

Children have a built-in, innate ability to play: a small puddle, a blowing leaf, or a few pebbles can create hours of fun. Yes, there is probably learning, but whether the children would call it that is another matter. I would like the final words on play to go to folklorists Peter and Iona Opie. The Opies dedicated their lives to studying childhood culture, children at play, and the history of classic childhood games and rhymes. Their books have been a constant friend and companion throughout my career. This is from "Street Games: Counting-Out and Chasing" (1969: 638):

> Where children are, is where they play.

Chapter Reflection

Thinking back over this chapter, consider the various elements (sections, quotes, reflective exercises, terminology, etc.). Are there any elements that:

- Were particularly useful?
- Need re-reading, or more thought or reflection?
- You want to look up and/or explore further?

Any other thoughts or reflections?

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2 Wellbeing and creativity

In this chapter I am going to explore how wellbeing and creativity interconnect. They are terms we often hear used together for adults, but we don't hear them as much within the early years. My aim with this chapter is to explore how these are important features that partner with one another.

Adult creativity and wellbeing is without a doubt a growing area. If you Google creativity and wellbeing you will find lots of links to pages from mental health charities, blog pieces and news articles all talking about how individuals have discovered that creative activities have boosted their wellbeing. There are a whole range of tools you can buy – from adult colouring books, to how to make a mandala, etc. – and a range of creative wellbeing journals. I have listed a few at the end of the chapter that I like in this genre. One of the best books I have read recently is by a father and daughter team, Kitty and Al Tait (2022). Kitty had severe depression when she was 14, and baking bread with her Dad became her creative therapeutic outlet, to the extent where they have now set up a bakery called The Orange Bakery. Their book describes their story with recipes at the end.

MOMENT FOR REFLECTION

Before we continue, think for a moment about how creativity supports your wellbeing? In Chapter 1 I encouraged you to think

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about how you engaged in creativity, but for now I would like to encourage you to reflect on whether creativity supports your wellbeing.

The Covid-19 pandemic was a time when many adults turned to creativity to support their wellbeing, by, as examples, making sourdough, learning to bake, learning an instrument and/or taking up knitting and crochet. For some, they appeared to find this creative exploration supported their mental health and wellbeing. I don't know if you tried any creative practices during this time? I tried making sourdough but failed! I also tried crochet and failed at this too! But I did make a lot of progress on my garden and I made soap and I tried some knitting projects.

Grayson Perry's Art Club on Channel 4 was a great example of how people have found art supported their wellbeing. What I loved about this was the wonderfully eclectic, diverse range of contributors, from all ages, races, cultures and abilities. I found Grayson and Philippa's encouragement, delight and welcome so wonderfully inclusive, in a way you don't often see in the media with creative programming. If you haven't seen the programmes, they are worth watching on catch-up and you can find a link in the reference section. As a follow on to each series there has been an exhibition of the work shown in a national gallery, with the first series in Manchester Art Gallery and the exhibition for series two in Bristol Art Gallery. I recently visited the Bristol exhibition and was deeply moved by the quality of the work and the stories that accompanied them. There was a strong sense of people using creative practice as a way of holding onto something hopeful and good in a time of desperation and despair. I was also moved by how everyday, non-professional artists were having their work exhibited in a public gallery. This felt deeply empowering and encouraging.

As I write this it is the summer of 2022, and thankfully the recognition of the importance of wellbeing has not been lost. Creativity is still mentioned, maybe not as much, but I think it has become more of a recognisable, important thread through many of our lives. During the research for this book I discovered an organisation called 64 Million Artists and on their website they say "*We believe everyone is creative, and when we use our creativity we can make positive changes in our lives and the world*

around us". During January they organise a daily challenge and send out daily prompts to encourage an engagement in creativity. They also do weekly challenges throughout the year. Perhaps you could join their January challenge, or maybe it is something you could involve your setting in? I have signed up for the January 2023 one.

As well as the current spotlight on adult wellbeing and creativity, over the last few years there has been a greater emphasis on focusing on children's wellbeing, particularly in schools and within early years. This was particularly the case after lockdowns, where initially there seemed to be more conversations around linking creativity and wellbeing, but it seems to me that this has faded over time. I do still, however, hear of 'wellbeing weeks' where creativity is sometimes included. However, I'm not a fan. I feel there is a danger of them being tokenistic and I would rather see creative wellbeing practice embedded throughout the year.

Yet, one positive element to come out of the pandemic was a growth in online resources for families and education settings to support creativity and wellbeing. In London they have a health and arts creativity and wellbeing festival, a collaborative event with the Culture Health & Wellbeing Alliance, which had started as a small London festival went on to become a national festival in 2019. Additionally, in 2020 Artsmark (accredited by Arts Council England) created resources aimed at parents to use at home with their children and ideas to be used in schools to support wellbeing. Although they have some good ideas, they are mainly for children over 5 years old, with little for the early years.

How does creativity support our wellbeing?

In 2019 the World Health Organization (WHO) published a scoping review (Fancourt and Finn 2019, p. 8) exploring the evidence of the role of the arts in improving health and wellbeing. Amongst their findings, they concluded that the arts can support "*child development, help to prevent ill health, encourage health-promoting behaviours, help people experiencing mental illness, [and] help to support people with neurodevelopmental and neurological disorders*". In the area of child development, they focus on

how singing can support mother–child attachment and can reduce stress hormones in both. The review also explores how singing between mother and child can also support language development. From reading this, I can see no reason why this isn't also the case for any caregiver, male or female. Furthermore, the WHO report specifically highlights that we need to ensure that culturally diverse forms of arts are available and accessible to all.

In 2019 the BBC in collaboration with University College London (UCL) led a study with 50,000 participants exploring how creative activities can help to manage mood and support wellbeing. The research was led by Dr Daisy Fancourt from UCL, and they found that there are three ways creativity can support our wellbeing:

- Using creativity as a distraction tool to avoid stress.
- Using creativity as a contemplation tool to enable the mind to have some space to problem solve and plan.
- Using creativity as a tool to aid self-development, building up self-esteem and confidence.

The study also found that continuing to learn and try new creative pursuits can be more beneficial than sticking with only doing the same creative activity for extended years.

MOMENT FOR REFLECTION

Looking at the list from Dr Daisy Fancourt and her research, can you think of ways the creative work you have done with children has aided them in the ways mentioned?

As highlighted above, the study found that continuing to learn and trying out new creative pursuits can boost our wellbeing. Think for a moment, is there something new you would like to try out? Maybe you could plan in some time to have a go at a new creative activity.

Cultural diversity

The WHO report discussed above specifically says that we need to ensure that culturally diverse forms of art are available. I know in the early years there is a history of 'celebrating' certain events such as Diwali and making lamps, but I worry that sometimes this can be tokenistic. A challenge for us all is to reach out and find out about the rich cultural and creative diversity that surrounds us. Our natural inclination is to turn to what we know, I know I do that. However, if we start to be more curious, find out about what other communities do, ask questions and invite people in, then we can widen our understanding, and the children's understanding, and we all benefit.

You can start with the families in your setting; find out what books they read, the music they listen to, the instruments they play, the food they cook and the festivals they celebrate. Ask parents and grandparents if they can share their knowledge with you. Ask if they are willing to come in and show and demonstrate or to participate with your setting their skills and experience and knowledge. Then move out and make links with your wider community; often people are happy to come in and share with early years settings and schools. We need to make sure we embed this – that it isn't just a once a year cultural heritage event or an occasional remembering of another festival. Cultural creative awareness needs to be embedded in our practice. It takes time to make these links and go to the effort to find out, but it is so worth it. In a previous book I co-authored with Jamel Campbell (2022) we discussed this and many other examples. I learned loads from Jamel in that book project and he is going to be sharing some more ideas in an interview with him later in this current one.

Children, creativity and wellbeing

I know I use creativity in many of the ways revealed in the BBC and UCL research to support the wellbeing of the children I work with. As mentioned in the Introduction I support 4 year olds who have been identified as having high social, emotional and mental health needs. Creativity is an important tool in my work to support these children and I regularly see how it lowers their stress levels and gives them the contemplative space that then helps them to move on.

EXAMPLE FROM PRACTICE – CLAY NESTS

Sometimes I use clay with the children I support. One little girl I was working with was having an agitated day; the noise in the classroom was too loud for her, she had fallen out with her friend and she was finding phonics difficult that morning. When I started working with her, her shoulders were tense, she was frowning and said she was feeling quite grumpy, and her eyes were looking dull. I showed her my clay. This week we had been thinking about birds, the nests they make and how they make nests safe and cosy for the new chicks. She started to play and explore with clay. The invitation was to make a nest, but she didn't have to; she could create whatever she wanted or just play with and explore the clay. This little girl enjoys having an idea or a suggestion, so she wanted to make a nest. As she worked with the clay her shoulders started to drop and her tongue was out showing intense concentration on her task. She carefully moulded the shape of the nest, using her elbow to make it just the right shape, and she delicately used her fingers to create a smooth surface all around and inside the nest, telling me it needed to be smooth for the chicks. She then added decorations using the end of feathers; she wanted to decorate the nest so the chicks could look at something. Once she was happy with it, she then added sticks, feathers and old leaves to make the nest cosy and safe. This activity lasted around 30 minutes and by the end of our session her frown had gone, she was smiling, she looked calm, her shoulders were relaxed and she had a twinkle in her eyes. She told me she loved using clay and I asked her if it helped her feel calmer and she agreed she thought it did. I have often used clay with children, but with this little girl it seemed to connect with her in a different way than the other children. It not only helped her to de-stress, but I had noticed how she was able to engage in the material in a different way to many of the other children I support. From observing her using the material, I wondered if she had found her thing. I did go on to use clay again throughout my work with her.

Flow

There has been growing research led by the psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (2002) around the link between flow and happiness. He describes flow as being *"the state in which people are so involved in an activity, that nothing else seems to matter"*. He found people experienced happiness when they were in deep flow. We often see children in moments of flow in their play and activities. My example of the girl above shows her experiencing flow; her tongue was out, she was in the moment of developing and creating that nothing else mattered. For that moment she forgot about her irritation and concerns, and she was happy and in flow. Mona Sakr et al. (2018) have a useful section in their book reminding us of the need to observe and recognise when children are experiencing a state of flow. They suggest that observations are key in helping us to understand what supports a child's engagement. I recommend using the Leuven scale for wellbeing and involvement, created by Ferre Laevers (2007) through his experiential education project. He advocates for deep level learning and his description of this is when children are in moments of flow. A link to his work and the involvement and wellbeing scales are at the end of the chapter.

MOMENT FOR REFLECTION

Can you think of a time when you have observed a child experiencing a flow moment during a creative practice?

Can you think of a recent time you experienced a moment of flow in creative practice?

How do we use creativity to support children's wellbeing?

I am aware that for some children their experience of creativity does not boost their wellbeing. If they are in a setting or home where creativity is more of a

template model, with an ideology of following precise instructions, there is very little about that which will support their wellbeing. I love creative practice when it has an open-ended approach to it, without a fixed end product. When I was involved in the 5×5×5 Project in nurseries and schools in Bath and North East Somerset, it was important to have artists on the project who were able to follow children's interests, enquiries and curiosity. The model was not about having a one size fits all, 'this is how we make something', but more a collaboration between child and adult, together discovering, inquiring and learning with one another through creative practice. I believe this type of practice is so inclusive; it welcomes and celebrates everyone's ideas and efforts. I have seen through my practice in the nurture work that when children are given the space to discover, create and be imaginative, then they begin to relax, have fun and often find some calm. However, if we set constraints, with exact ways of making or not making, this can lead to distress, frustration and feelings of inadequacy. This free approach is what we naturally use with babies and toddlers, giving them creative resources to be able to play with and discover; it is not based on their ability but rather their inquisitiveness and curiosity. But it seems to be an approach that we use less and less as children get older. That said, I am aware that for some adults this can be a huge challenge. Over the years I have worked with a lot of artists, and it's a real skill when an artist can create a space for children to experiment and learn new skills without imposing a fixed idea and a fixed way of doing something.

The Reggio Emilia model

There is a lot I love about the Reggio Emilia model, but before I explore this a bit further I am aware that this is a model that has been developed and adapted in Reggio to fit their culture. This is not a model that we can take a carbon copy of and make work in our setting. However, there are certain aspects that we can look at, be inspired by and adapt for our children and community. One area that is very unique to Reggio practice is how they employ artists to work with the children. I know some nurseries in the UK bring in artists, and some schools will have artists visit for an art week, however, in Reggio, each of their municipal infant–toddler centres and their

preschools has an atelierista (artist) as the main part of their staff team. Their job is to look after the atelier (art room) and to support the children's creative practice; to enable the children to express themselves through "*One hundred different languages*". The atelierista will bring in 'provocations' for the children that might spark an idea or bring about a creative or imaginative response. A provocation can be many things – something based on an interest of the children, an object or picture or maybe an item from outside – but they are often open-ended resources to allow more imaginative interplay. The provocations are not to direct the children on how to use them, but instead to act as a prompt, to create a question, an idea, an invitation. I touched on this in the previous chapter and will briefly mention Reggio again later in the book. Reggio is one of many creative practices that I believe we can learn from.

The other role of the atelierista is to help children master techniques. In the book *The Hundred Languages of Children* (Edwards et al. 1998) one chapter is titled 'The role of the Atelierista'. In an interview with Lella Gandini, one of the atelierista, she describes their role as having two functions, of which one is to help children to "*become masters of all kinds of techniques, such as painting, drawing and working in clay*". She says the other function is to support the educators to understand the process of how children learn creatively.

When I visited Reggio Emilia I was working for a large national children's charity and my job was to lead on participation work. The underlying principle to my work was article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which states that all children have a right to be listened to and have their feelings and wishes taken seriously. This article underpins the work in the Reggio early years settings and one way we see this is how the educators and atelierista are following children's interests. Their work all stems from what the child/ren is interested in. I and many others have written in previous books about the need to base planning around a child's interests; when we do this we are then working collaboratively with children, learning and exploring together.

In the next section of this chapter, I am going to explore how creativity can support a child's wellbeing when they have experienced trauma. One of the members of our team is an art therapist and she works with primary aged children, her name is Juliette Marsh.

Interview with Juliette Marsh, Art Therapist

Sonia ***Can you explain what an art therapist does?***

Juliette *Art Therapy is a form of psychotherapy which can help individuals express and explore feelings through art making and also through the relationship they form with the art therapist. It is often considered a three-way communication, as the client, therapist and artwork all contribute to the therapeutic process. For children, Art Therapy can be particularly beneficial, as it can provide a visual language. Artwork can become a tangible way to communicate any past or present issues, which may be hard to articulate in words.*

Sonia ***Do you choose the art materials?***

Juliette *There is a range of art materials supplied and the child is given the freedom to select what they want to work with. The art materials range from dry materials, such as colouring pencils, pens, and chalk pastels, to wet materials like paint and clay. There is also lots of paper and a box of toys and sensory objects to play with. They have a range of activities that they can do, but I don't select for them. The art materials are often the initial hook into any creativity, so it's important that they have the autonomy to choose. When they come into a session there is no pressure to sit opposite me and talk, instead it's a space for them and their art making. Hopefully they will be engaged and think, 'I want to play with that or draw with that'. Most of the time they don't need my input or assistance, although sometimes they will invite me to make art alongside them.*

Sonia ***When they do invite you, do you join in?***

Juliette *If I'm asked to join in, then most of the time I will do, although there is a tendency in Art Therapy to not actively participate in art making. Art therapists need to maintain their awareness so that they do not get distracted by their own practice or miss*

picking up on cues, like body language. However, for a child that can feel quite scrutinising, especially with someone just watching what they are doing. So, if they invite me, I will take part, as I do think it can help to reassure them. Although, I try and do something light-hearted so that I am able to maintain my focus and witness what is going on for the child.

Sonia ***How do you introduce your sessions to the children? How do they know what they are coming into?***

Juliette *Consent is an important part of the process and so parents or carers will consent on behalf of the child, but I encourage them to have that initial conversation beforehand. The child needs to be aware of what they are coming into, so I will reiterate the details and boundaries of the therapy in the first session. This helps them understand how the sessions will run and that there is a choice in attending. The child needs to feel that they are an active participant, rather than feeling it is something which is being done to them.*

I go onto explain that hopefully in time, therapy will feel like a safe space where they can talk and create artwork about things that they might be struggling with. For a child, these might be big feelings, difficult experiences, or traumatic events that they have experienced in their past, or they're dealing with in the here and now. Most children seem to understand that Art Therapy is a different space to an art class or recreational art making and that their problems may need a separate space to be shared and processed.

Sonia ***It sounds like you are holding that space for them, but you are not giving them words, it sounds like it is about enabling them to have a space where they can talk if they want to. Presumably, there is no pressure on them having to talk about things?***

Juliette *It's so child-led and when you're working with children any difficulties or sensitive topics have to emerge at a pace and rate*

that they feel comfortable with. We are very lucky in our organisation to be able to offer long-term therapeutic interventions.

I think if it was a short-term therapy and we were only given six sessions, it would be much more strategic and target oriented. But as I am given longer than that, I am not going to be putting any pressure on a child to share their internal world, until they feel ready. There are no set questions, as it is about letting them do what they can do, at a pace which feels safe. I think that is an important part of building trust in the therapeutic relationship and the formation of an alliance over a period of time.

Sonia ***As an artist why do you think creativity works in that therapeutic, or wellbeing, supportive way?***

Juliette *There is something about art making that taps into our early form of expression when we are pre-verbal. Creativity feels much more natural when we are young, yet it seems to be a form of communication that we begin to lose as we get older. However, I think creativity is such a fundamental part of who we are as individuals, and we need to encourage ways to hold onto it. I am always going to be an advocate for art as an artist myself, but anything creative I think needs to be embedded at an early age and then maintained. It's important that children have opportunities to not only make art but also explore and experiment creatively. For many individuals this type of expression may be one of the only ways they can share the really big stuff, as they might not have the emotional literacy or language to be able to explain in words. Although children are very resilient, difficult feelings often start to spill out in other ways through dysregulation or harmful coping mechanisms. So, by having a healthy outlet for those emotions, like art, music, theatre or dance, we can support their mental, physical and emotional wellbeing.*

Sonia ***The book is about early years, what age have you started Art Therapy with?***

Juliette *The youngest child I have worked with individually is 5 years old, but I have also done group work with mothers and babies when I was a trainee. Being able to see the process of mother/carer and baby art making was really interesting and it was lovely to witness their interaction. The art making process seemed to create a space for them to connect, which can be quite difficult if you have struggled and experienced something like postnatal depression. Some mothers worry that the bond they have formed with their baby may not be as strong, so having little moments where they are doing something that is very reciprocal can help build on that bond.*

Sonia ***That is interesting I haven't heard of it that way. I knew locally there was Art Therapy on offer to mums with postnatal depression, but I hadn't heard of the babies coming in as part of that, I can see that could be powerful.***

Juliette *Yes it can be, and there is the additional the element with a baby where they [the mothers/carers] need to support them physically with the art making. This provides a degree of contact and shared sensory touch by using the art materials, which can create further connection.*

It can also provide opportunities for attunement and healthy attachment as mother and baby are having to watch, listen and respond to each other within that mutual interaction.

Hopefully, this interview with Juliette may have given you a glimmer of insight into how Art Therapy can be beneficial to children who have high wellbeing needs, have experienced trauma or maybe experiencing high anxiety. Often with children we think of play therapy as a therapeutic intervention, and play therapy is fantastic, but every child is different and some children will find Art Therapy more beneficial.

EXAMPLE FROM PRACTICE – JUNK MODEL SCULPTURES

For this book I have interviewed and visited a number of different people and settings. One of the settings is a preschool in the centre of Bath called Widcombe Acorns. They are based in an old church hall, and their outdoor space is partly an old graveyard. I have known Widcombe Acorns for years and it has always been a delight to visit them and work with them. They will pop up a few times in the book, but below is a description of what Dena, their manager, describes as Acorn staples:

Junk modelling
Woodwork
Loose parts outside
Disco dancing twice a day
Helicopter stories
Clay

On my recent visit to Acorns, Dena talked about how the Acorn staples have enabled the children to return to and strengthen their skills. This year's cohort of children have particularly enjoyed making junk model sculptures and it is something that they have returned to continually throughout the year. The staff have noticed how the children have improved and developed their skills and abilities; they have noticed how the children will often make something and then return to it, to tweak it, improve it, add to it. The staff have now set up a separate table for the decorating, they have a design table and then a decorating table, so the process can be continued and extended. This reminded me of the Reggio practice where children are encouraged to revisit and extend their practice and enabled to keep adding to work rather than finishing in one go. If we think about artists' work, lots of artists will keep returning to their work to add to it.

I wanted to finish this chapter with some practical thoughts about how we can use creative opportunities to support all children's wellbeing on a daily basis.

Practical ideas to try to support wellbeing and creativity

Below is a list of thoughts and ideas you can use, many of which will be explored in further detail in the rest of the book.

Have a wide range of different art materials available, that are available all of the time.
Offer craft opportunities.
Make opportunities for children to come back to a piece of work and continue working on it.
Have pictures, photos, artwork around for children to see and be inspired by.
Think diversity in what you are offering.
Have time and space to dance and sing, play different types of music and show different types of dance.
Share stories and poems daily.
Encourage fantasy and imagination.

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64 million artists – https://64millionartists.com/thejanuarychallenge/
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Sakr, M., Trivedy, B., Hall, N., O'Brien, L., and Federici, R. (2018). *Creativity and Making in Early Childhood.* London: Bloomsbury.
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Useful information and links

Artsmark – https://www.artsmark.org.uk/blog/creativity-and-wellbeing-perfect-match
BBC and University College London – https://www.bbc.co.uk/mediacentre/latestnews/2019/get-creative-research
Creativity and wellbeing practice examples, Education Scotland – https://education.gov.scot/improvement/practice-exemplars/creativity-and-wellbeing#resources
Fancourt, D. and Finn, S. (2019). *Health Evidence Network Synthesis Report 67. What is the Evidence on the Role of the Arts in Improving Health and Well-being?* Available at: https://www.culturehealthandwellbeing.org.uk/sites/default/files/9789289054553-eng.pdf
Grayson Perry's Art Club – https://www.graysonsartclub.com
Leuven Wellbeing and Involvement Scales – https://www.family.co/blog/leuven-scales
London Arts & Health Wellbeing Festival – https://londonartsandhealth.org.uk/creativity-and-wellbeing-week/
United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child – https://www.unicef.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/UNCRC_summary-1_1.pdf

Further reading

Books for adults

Brand, L. (2022). *The Joy Journal for Adults*. London: Bluebird Books.
Ephgrave, A (2018). *Planning in the Moment with Young Children: A Practical Guide for Early Years Practitioners and Parents*. Abingdon: Routledge.
Mainstone-Cotton, S. (2019). *Listening to Young Children in Early Years Settings*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Books for children

Brand, L. (2020). *The Joy Journal for Magical Everyday Play*. London: Bluebird Books.

The power of professional love

Working above and beyond our biases

Practitioners in the early years know, without a shadow of a doubt, that care and education are inextricably linked. In my opinion this dynamic never really changes, even when children become more self-sufficient; the level of care just becomes less physically hands-on as children become more independent. As we have said many times before, children thrive when they feel that they belong, especially when that belonging comes from a place of emotional warmth from the adults in their lives. The use of the word *love* in a professional capacity can be quite uncomfortable, especially in the early years when we can be preoccupied with safeguarding practices and possible allegations of inappropriateness. So we spend hours trying to find safer words that say *love* without actually saying *love*. The concept of professional love was created by Dr Jools Page, who coined the phrase to explain the difference between parental love and professional love. A child's emotional needs do not stop when they come into our settings and professional love does not ever replace parental love; it simply extends the loving support of comfort and reassurance that children need to flourish. Professional love is an interesting concept because it comes with the discernment to vary how this love is manifested in order to meet the needs of individual children who are all unique individuals. Professional love has those boundaries that come with our roles in working in the early years, but when you think and act from a place of love as an essential aspect of the practices and processes in our settings, the best outcomes are possible for *all* children.

Do you remember the feeling of being overwhelmed that we spoke about at the end of Chapter 6? Well, once we start seeing the world through the lens of professional love, our eyes, minds, and hearts become open to the signs we used to miss and suddenly the path for going forward lights

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up before us. This does not mean that we will never stumble or fall but the amazing part of walking this journey with others is that you are not alone. There will always be someone to help us up. When we co-create this new world in the way that we spoke about earlier, we come together as a group of different people with different perspectives and work together to creatively develop strategies for our defined challenge of anti-racist practice within our settings. We become focused on a way of working that is:

- Human-centred.
- Mindful of the experiences of children, staff, and parents.
- Constantly valuing the collaboration of children, parents, staff, and stakeholders.

I genuinely believe co-creation to be fundamental to our world becoming more empathetic, more interconnected, and more humane and I know from experience that the combination of professional love and co-creation is powerful in anti-racist practice because it incrementally and consistently shifts the dynamic. For the rest of this final chapter, I am going to focus on linking strategies to theory and sharing some examples from my own practice that have made a real difference in implementing anti-racist practice in our setting.

STORY TIME: SOME OF MY EXPERIENCES AS A BLACK EARLY YEARS LEADER

In human culture, storytelling is a long-established tradition. People tell stories for all kinds of reasons – to entertain, to share knowledge, to pass on information and traditions, to maintain cultural heritage, or simply to warn others of danger. It is clear that a fundamental aspect of storytelling is based in human emotion. The basic beliefs and values of people and groups are projected into stories. Stories teach us how to live, how to behave, and stories are dynamic. Stories are told about individuals, groups, communities, cultures, societies, and nations and they are a powerful leadership tool and also a powerful learning tool in our profession as early years practitioners. As human beings we are programmed for stories. They're a part of who we are. It's how we

evolved to understand our place in the world before we had written language. I love the brain and how it works; essentially our brains run on electrical pulses that light up when we connect to stories. When our neurons are triggered in this way it helps us to remember more of the information we are receiving. So, with that in mind, it's story time.

Power and the "feel-good factor"

We need to have realistic expectations of leading a racially inclusive early years environment; with the best will in the world, not everyone can "gel" with it. In my first year of working with this ethos, I lost four members of staff despite the safe, non-judgemental spaces for dialogue, the supervision, the peer support, and working more with parents in a more inclusive manner. One member of staff told me that she had always enjoyed her job before I came, that she used to "feel good" and that the parents were always grateful to her. The issue for me, in observing her practice, was that how she interacted with parents and children was very power-based. The parents knew their place and were made to feel grateful for her attention, so changing the tone of relationships with parents to where they were valued as co-educators was very challenging for her, especially when parents started communicating with her from a position of equal value. The work environment lost "the feel-good factor" for her when relationships with children and parents, who were predominantly non-white, became more equal.

"Who are *you* to make *me* feel bad?"

An older member of staff felt that she held all her good practice in her head and knew instinctively what to do with children. My observations of her showed that she did not even know the names of the children and the reports she wrote about children's progress seemed to be more about quickly dispensing with the responsibility of having to write a report than actually producing something that bore any resemblance to the children she had been teaching for a whole year. She actually said that the teachers in the primary school do not read

the progress reports anyway so it was a waste of her time and also, if she had wanted to spend her time doing planning, observation, and assessment, she would have gone to work in a predominantly middle class area of Birmingham such as Sutton Coldfield! I was gobsmacked! That was such a loaded statement, but her bias was so deeply embedded that she had no idea of the implications behind what she had said. When I asked her if only children in areas like Sutton Coldfield are entitled to a high level of professional practice, she dissolved into tears and accused me of trying to make her feel bad. She retired at the end of that summer term, and she did not hold back in letting everyone know that she was not yet ready to retire but she felt she needed to go because "people like her [meaning me!] come along and try to change up everything and make people like me [meaning her] feel bad."

"The rough kind"

Regular supervisions with staff are a part of my leadership practice. After years of working with a particular member of staff, one day during his supervision he suddenly told me that when I was first recruited, he had somehow got to know about it before everyone else so he had gone around telling everyone that "one of the rough kind" was coming to work in the school. At this point he was apologising for thinking of me in that way without knowing me, and he was also thanking me for the support I had given to him as a young practitioner. While I was a little surprised at being stereotyped as being "one of the rough kind," I wasn't shocked by it. I chose instead to focus on his growth, and I appreciated the fact that he felt comfortable enough to confess this to me even though he did not have to. The truth is, I had already heard about this years before, but never in a million years did I ever expect him to tell me of his own accord. My respect for him really grew.

Motivation to do and courage to withstand

One of the ways that I build and sustain a shared vision with staff is by carrying out anonymous surveys. They are anonymous because,

in my opinion, what staff have to say is far more important than who says it. The first time I did this was actually quite hard as I had to deal with some very hurtful things that were said, including staff who were very open about not wanting a black person as a leader in their setting and some very personal comments that, quite frankly, blew me away. It took me about a week to not internalise this, and then I worked on producing a document which each member of staff received, reporting the raw findings of the survey with their comments and analysing the comments against our situation.

On the positive side, I was able to adapt some of our practice with some really helpful suggestions from staff and it was actually a really powerful experience for all. Staff mentioned they knew the survey was real when they were able to read their own comments; there was an expression of deep shock in regard to some of the racist comments and one member of staff spoke up and said that though it was alarming to see the comments on paper, it really made her think about how these feelings are generally kept hidden. This was the start of us devising ways of working together to learn more about each other as people, which was hugely rewarding for our practice with children and parents as well.

"Bad to the bone – well it's genetic, isn't it?"

I remember constantly hearing a child's name just being bellowed by staff day after day. He was the one little black boy in the class at the time and to be fair, he was high-spirited. This resulted in him being called out for anything and everything that was negative in the class. At the point where I intervened, I observed that children had picked up on this and would make up stories about him just for him to be shouted at. Parents were frequently complaining about not wanting their child to be in the same room as this little boy. I spoke to his mum, who said to me that she dreaded picking him up after nursery because, every day, she was greeted with how "bad" he was, which translated to her as how bad a parent she was. It had gotten to the point where she was so frustrated that she actually beat him with a belt, but that hadn't helped

either as she ended up crying because of how awful she felt. She told me that she was afraid to tell anyone how bad it was because she was afraid "they would take her child away from her."

I will never forget how tired, stressed, and afraid this mum was, and she confided in me that if I hadn't approached her, she never would have felt comfortable coming forward. I explored the things that triggered his behaviour with his mum, and I discovered that it had a lot to with his diet and his beleaguered mother who was struggling to manage with three children all under the age of five. Between the school and his mum we started managing the things that contributed to him acting up, including his diet, providing more challenging activities so he was not bored, giving him more responsibility, which helped him to manage his own behaviour, and focusing on and calling out his good behaviour. Slowly he began to change, and we could all see him for the delightful, funny, clever child that he was.

I had two visitors just before lockdown in early 2020: a tall, well-mannered 16-year-old and his mother. He had asked his mother to stop by to look for me; he told me that he has never forgotten us and that he wanted to come to show me that he was doing well. I can never tell this story without crying; he was three years old when we were working with him, but he still remembered us at 16 years old. This was a stark reminder for me that if our interactions with children are not positive, they will still remember us for the rest of their lives but for the wrong reasons.

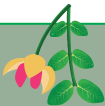
"What about the children we don't take to?"

This may be an explosive thing to admit, but during my many years of working as a teacher I have met children for whom only the deepest reserves of professional love helped to build a bridge to enable a relationship that worked in the best interest of the child. So how do we train ourselves professionally to think the best of every child, even the ones we do not naturally take to? I would suggest that we should:

- Purposefully note and manage our behaviour towards the children we find irritating or disruptive.

- Be positively vigilant and recognise when the children who challenge us the most are doing the right thing.
- Recognise and acknowledge if our treatment of a child is driven by things they can't change about themselves – their skin colour, hair, disability, illness, status, background, etc.
- Stand back and look at our room and our practice. What does our practice say about us? Does it say that we are we welcoming of *all* children? Does our learning environment subliminally value some children over others? Do parents feel included? Do we have high expectations of some children but not others? Does our practice expose an unconscious perception of other people's cultures as inferior to our own, and how is this manifested?

I want to be that practitioner who will see beyond everything that society says is reasonable and logical to expect for any child; the practitioner who will challenge myself to always make the effort to be cognisant of my impact on every child I come across; the practitioner who will push the boundaries to be a positive force in the lives of all children in my care, even the ones for whom I do not have a natural affinity.



THE SPACE FOR STRUCTURAL CHANGE – VISIBLE

Questions for reflection:

1 How can we centre identity and culture in our practice?
2. Are there any voices or perspectives missing in the development of our early years curriculum? How can we address this?
3. How do we embed the continuous process of self-assessment into our practice?
4. Discuss the difference between "tolerance of others" as opposed to "acceptance of all" and how we can demonstrate this in our practice.
5. How do we create conditions for even our very young children to challenge inequality?

Some strategies and frameworks to support change

4S bubble framework

I created a framework that translates "The Water of Systems Change" into a leadership tool to address the segments that work towards implementing anti-racist practice; see Diagram 7.1 below.

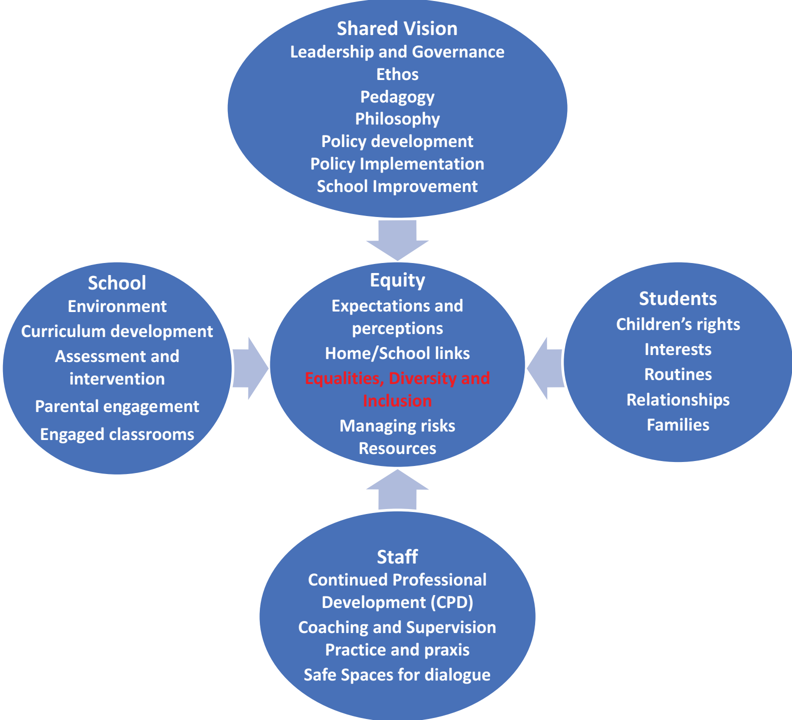


Diagram 7.1 4S bubble framework.

This framework was made for the wider educational system, hence the reference to school. For early years practice we can substitute "setting" for "school." The diagram has four bubbles that each have an "S" heading (Shared vision, School/Setting, Students, Staff) which are aspects of the early years environment. These 4 "S"s coalesce at the mid-point "Equity" bubble which has equality, diversity, and inclusion at the centre point. This could sit alongside "The Water of Systems Change" as a leadership strategy for working through the process of change towards anti-racist practice in our settings.

The EYFS

As practitioners we do not have to look too far to be reminded of our remit for working with children. The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) Curriculum reminds us that our focus is the unique child, positive relationships, and enabling environments that inform the learning and development of children. The EYFS has been revised, but these guiding principles hold firm for shaping our practice in the early years (Diagram 7.2).

Diagram 7.2 is taken from the previous Development Matters (2012) practice guide, and some of the wording has been changed, but the ethos remains the same. I particularly like this version because it is explicit in valuing all people, being warm and loving, fostering a sense of belonging, valuing and respecting all children and families equally, and stimulating resources relevant to all children's cultures and communities. All children need to see themselves and their families reflected positively in their learning environments. However, it is important that we create an awareness of what might feel like tokenism, stereotyping, or negative connotations associated with perceiving something different as either "exotic" or "inferior" rather than an alternative way of being with respect to us all being unique. I am a little bit sad that these principles did not remain as explicit in the revised 2021 version in regard to anti-racist practice in the early years.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child

In our school we actively embed a rights-based educational approach as an underpinning principle in our curriculum development alongside the EYFS;

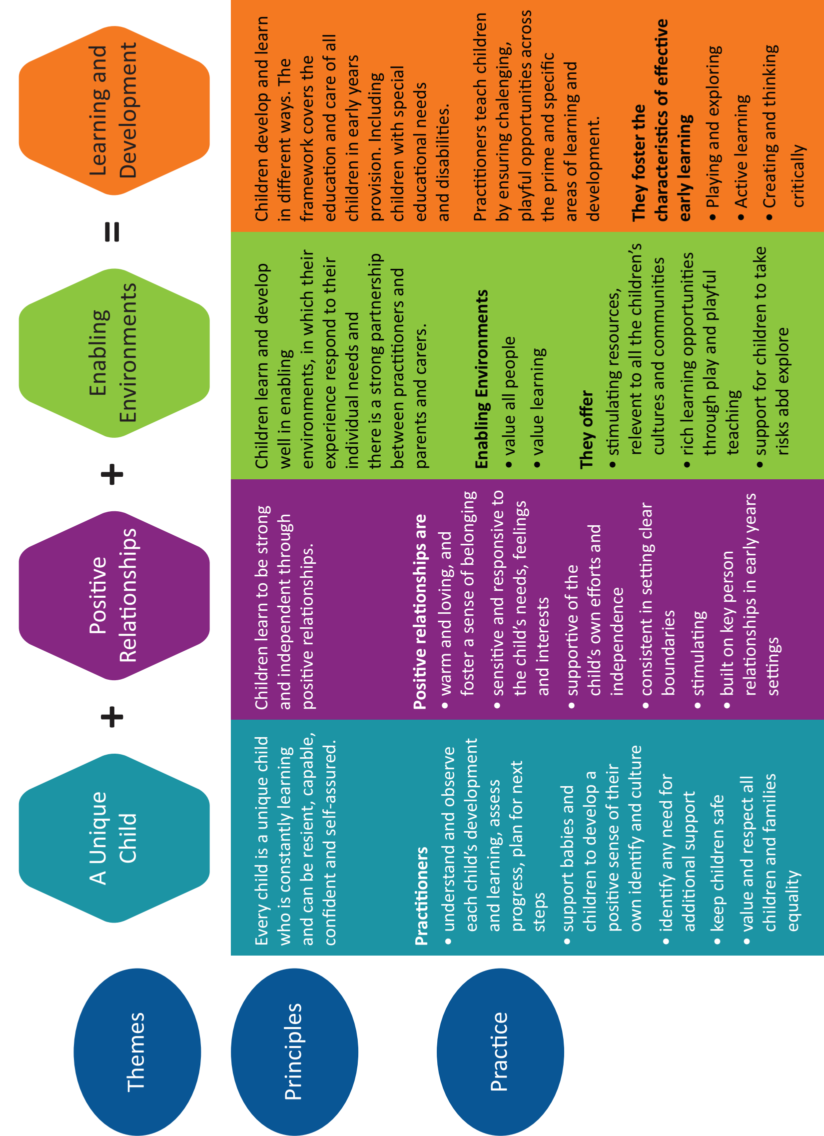


Diagram 7.2 Overarching principles of the EYFS.

essentially, we underpin our practice with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, which has 54 articles in total. There are four articles known as the "General Principles" which help to interpret all the other articles and have a key role in how we manage children's rights. These are:

- Best interests of the child (Article 3).
- Right to life, survival, and development (Article 6).
- Right to be heard (Article 12).
- Non-discrimination (Article 2).

As a setting, we work towards the bronze, silver, and gold UNICEF awards; this is really less about the award and more about keeping us focused on embedding a children's rights–based approach in our practice.

The International Baccalaureate – Primary Years Programme

We also use the International Baccalaureate (IB) alongside the EYFS to structure and clarify how we develop learning opportunities that keep us connected to the world. The International Baccalaureate Primary Years Programme (PYP) was introduced in 1997. The PYP model covers age range 3 to 12 years. The IB models are interdisciplinary (relating to more than one branch of knowledge) and multidisciplinary (combining or involving several academic disciplines in an approach to a topic or problem), but most importantly the PYP is transdisciplinary. It takes into consideration how young children learn, and it employs a fluidity in learning across, between, and beyond disciplines. A transdisciplinary approach to curriculum development dissolves the boundaries between education and life and organises teaching and learning around the construction of meaning in the context of real-world problems or themes. Transdisciplinary learning environments do not compartmentalise learning, but rather explore content within the context of inquiry. For example, when we are working with the theme "Where we are in place and time" children might compare and contrast characteristics of houses around the world or they could explore what children around the world see on their journeys to nursery. There are six themes within the PYP:

- Who we are.
- Where we are in place and time.
- How we express ourselves.
- How the world works.
- How we organise ourselves.
- Sharing the planet.

We know that young children experience the world through relationships, and these relationships affect all aspects of their development: physical, social, emotional, intellectual, behavioural, and moral. The quality and the stability of the human relationships a child encounters in their early years is the basis of either a healthy or a high-risk ecology. These relationships actively influence healthy or unhealthy human development. They help children to define who they are and their aspirations, and also help them to understand how and why they are valued by other human beings. Black and ethnic minority children are routinely deprived of healthy relationships due to racial discrimination, which, over the last 70 years in the UK, has impacted the way black children, especially, engage in the human community and, in turn, occupy their place in society. The IB provides us with numerous opportunities for all children to engage in the human community in a positive way. In our school we have discovered that these themes work seamlessly with the EYFS and also keep us grounded in how we relate to each other no matter where we are from. The interconnectedness of the IB programme is depicted in Diagram 7.3.

Navigating the space for structural change

Quality in early years care and education is usually defined in terms of ratios, group size, resources, the curriculum, and, of course, the expertise of the practitioners. The expertise of practitioners is usually measured more by whether a child shows some progress in cognitive development in the "here and now" and far less on the powerful influence the practitioner relationship can have on the life of a child beyond the setting and way into their future. In the early years we are burdened with the mantra of "school readiness," as in whether we have made children "ready" for school (in all honesty I am usually more concerned about whether schools are ready for children, but I digress). We know that school readiness is far more than just literacy and numeracy skills;

Diagram 7.3 Primary Years Programme model.

it is about a child's capacity to form and sustain relationships with teachers, children, and other adults and whether they are moving into school life having been fortified by a healthy ecology that allows them to develop the social and emotional skills that underpin their readiness to learn. Without anti-racist practice, a lot of black children will not receive the social and emotional skills that foster their dispositions for learning in a positive way.

The concept of a safe space in anti-racist practice

Throughout this book I have mentioned the concept of safe spaces. A "safe space" is not a physical location. It is an agreement to commit to consistently providing a supportive, respectful learning and working environment for all involved. Safe spaces help to combat moral relativism, which can manifest as variance in standards as it applies to different communities of people and their cultures. We generally work in environments where people do not

feel safe to speak up about their feelings or about anything they perceive as unfair, but we know that in productive and successful learning and working environments employees need to feel included and that their beliefs and values are heard and understood. Leaders in the early years are very aware that

> early educator work environments are children's learning environments: children depend on educators who are not only skilled, but have their well-being and needs supported, too. Just as children's environments can support or impede their learning, teachers' work environments can promote or hinder teachers' practice and ongoing skill development.
>
> (Schlieber and McLean, 2020)

Dynamic anti-racist practice comes about when we see and acknowledge diversity and we create safe spaces to accommodate and challenge each other and grow in understanding together; without this deeper commitment to connect with each other, knowledge is gained in the absence of understanding.

A safe space environment does not insulate us from personality clashes and conflicts; it just gives us an agreed strategy for dealing with these issues and helps us to become more self-aware. In addition, it allows us to understand how we impact on others and, ultimately, how to manage ourselves to make that impact a positive one. As a setting, we devise protocols together for our different safe space activities and if there are any residual, nagging feelings after the activities then we agree that the issue needs to be raised during supervision. In supervision, we either reach a compromise and a clear course of action for our next steps or we agree to disagree but commit to checking on the issue in future supervisions if need be. Some of our safe space activities have been very powerful in shifting our anti-racist practice. For best effect we carry out these activities at various times throughout the year, but I have to admit that with budget constraints and cutting back on everything, we have had to resort to fewer activities and focus more on the ones that give the greatest return.

Safe space activities

The intensive listening exercise

The aim of this exercise is to develop deep listening so as to clearly understand what is being said by the other person. Before you respond, you are

asked to think about how to reframe what they have said; starting with the phrase “What I am hearing is …” and ending with “Am I right?,” you then tell them what you understand they have said. The other person then has a chance to confirm your understanding or, if you have misunderstood them, clarify what they have said. This exercise is not as easy as it sounds, especially as people always seem to want to respond or defend themselves without checking that they have really understood what they are hearing. However, this has been a powerful tool for conversations with colleagues, parents, other professionals, and children in our setting.

The round table discussion

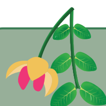
This is a forum to which we bring areas of our practice that are associated with the equalities legislation, as well as other pertinent changes to legislation that we particularly need to pay attention to in our school. We have discussed gender issues, female circumcision, issues of sexual identity (LGBTQIA), beliefs, community, culture, issues regarding community cohesion, race, and unconscious bias. We have dealt with various stereotypes as a round table talk; for instance, some of the issues we have addressed over the years include statements such as “All Muslims are terrorists”; “Black people are aggressive and scary”; “All people are born Muslims and have strayed if they are Christians”; “White people are not allowed special treatment in their own country”; “A whites-only group would be frowned upon”; “My religion says homosexuality is wrong”; “Domestic abuse only happens in certain communities”; “Travellers and Gypsies are dirty.” In some cases, we do not come away with a solution, but we have a better understanding of where someone is coming from and why they hold these opinions and how they need to manage them in an educational setting. You might baulk at hearing some of these opinions being dealt with openly, but we are mindful that no one is highlighted, so round table discussion topics are placed anonymously in a box and pulled out for discussion. What is interesting is that over the years, as staff become comfortable with each other, every now and then someone will say “That is my question/comment.”

The 360-degree questionnaire

This is a team exercise where you rate yourself and the team rates you. The team sits together to carry out this exercise at an appointed time, but it is all

done anonymously and handed in to the co-ordinator of the activity. The questionnaire can be adapted to whatever situations need to be dealt with. The data is collated and fed back to individuals, so they understand how they perceive themselves and how others perceive them. Team leaders or the senior leadership team also fill in a questionnaire – no one is exempt. If there are surprising anomalies, development points, or someone is upset, this is addressed using a coaching approach. I have to say that this exercise works in our setting because we have achieved a good level of maturity as a team; most of our staff have been there for over 15 years. An exercise like this needs lead-in time to prepare staff to give and receive feedback.

These exercises are not a cure-all solution for anti-racist practice, nor are they exercises that can be picked out to "fix" people. They have to be conducted as part of the vision that we build within our settings, without individual people feeling singled out or targeted; this can still happen if someone feels particularly sensitive about the areas being addressed, but when we adhere to the rules that we have all helped to design for how these exercises are conducted, these issues usually resolve themselves. This also means that it is good practice to revisit the rules every time, before conducting the exercises, to ensure that everyone is ok with them.



THE SPACE FOR STRUCTURAL CHANGE – VISIBLE

Questions for reflection:

1. Our work schedule is tight. How can we create space and time for "safe space" exercises?
2. Do an audit of the resources in the setting. Are they culturally representative? Do they stereotype people of other cultures? Are our displays inclusive?
3. If funding is low, in what other ways can we acquire inclusive resources within our settings?
4. How will we manage parents or stakeholders who are not happy with developing anti-racist practice in the setting?