

SPPA Conference 2011

Improving Outcomes for Early Years

Delegates from across the sector attended the SPPA Conference Improving Outcomes for Early Years which was held at the Royal College of Physicians, Edinburgh on 8 November 2011. They heard a range of top speakers who highlighted the importance of early intervention to ensure our children get the very best start in life.

Opening the Conference Isabel Dunn, Chair of SPPA, welcomed everyone and set the scene with a short film *Getting it Right for Every Child*, which focused on the needs of young children and parents. The strong overall message which was to emerge from the day was articulated by a boy in the film who remarked that the 'early years are the building blocks for life.'

Angela Constance MSP, Minister for Children and Young People



Angela Constance MSP, the Minister for Children and Young People, spoke of the Scottish Government's aspiration that Scotland should be 'the best place in the world to bring up children' and that 'this was the best and the right thing to do for families'. She told delegates that despite the challenging economic climate, the Scottish Government's commitment to the early years is stronger than ever as it is committed to a programme of preventative spending through the Early Years Change Fund, including the Communities and Families Fund which will help community childcare and parental and family support services. There is a move away from crisis intervention. The first tranche of £4.5 million will be available soon alongside the £6.8 million Early Years Early Action Fund. She is interested in different models of service within a vibrant mixed economy.

Angela acknowledged that parents and carers play a key role and what they do has the single biggest influence on their child, particularly in the child's early years. Early bonding is the key to the psychological and emotional development of children. She said she appreciates the difficulties parents face, but added that there are still some children who are not getting the best start and in her view parenting is not valued enough. The Scottish Government's Parenting Strategy will help to support parents to do their best. There should be integrated services and a well trained workforce. She is open to views including those of parents and children and SPPA. The Rights of the Children and Young People Bill and the Children's Services Bill demonstrate that the Government is committed to children's interests. The Children's Services Bill will embed the Early Years Framework and early intervention, will build on *Getting it Right for Every Child* and review the Children (Scotland) Act 1995. The consultation events that have recently taken place round the country attracted 500 people and she commented that the First Minister has said in the past that 'no-one has a monopoly on wisdom.'

As the Minister took questions from the floor she mentioned that the Early Years Task Force was meeting that afternoon and would be discussing how to move from crisis intervention to early intervention and prevention. Her closing remark was 'We need to change our communities and our children.'

Read Angela's speech to conference [here](#).

Siobhán Fitzpatrick CBE, Chief Executive, Early Years - the organisation for young children, Northern Ireland



Siobhan addressed delegates on Promoting the Value of Local Community Led Early Years Services as Part of a Mixed Market Economy of Provision - Improving Long-term Outcomes.

She spoke about the journey that the organisation had taken to become one that focused on the outcomes for children and families. Early Years came from the parents and was formerly known as NIPPA. It was founded in 1965 by pioneering parents, mainly women. It is a cross community/community development organisation which has been shaped and influenced by 40 years of conflict and 700 years of history.

For over 50 years, the organisation has fitted in with early years initiatives and government policy. The last ten years have seen the organisation focusing on improving outcomes for children. Investing in activities was the old model, now they are taking an alternative evidence based approach. The Media Initiative for Children Respecting Difference Programme has clearly demonstrated this.

Siobhan outlined the organisation's community development practices and principles. Consultation with stakeholders had been a vital element of this. They had built on the strengths in families and communities. They had embarked upon up skilling practitioners and these qualifications had raised the viability and credibility of the organisation. The EU Peace and Reconciliation Fund had recognised the potential of investing in the early years. The EU Social Fund, inter-regional funding etc had helped them to diversify from sessional services and to develop other quality services. The Northern Ireland Executive has supported the voluntary and independent sector and increased its support at a time when the block grant had diminished and rural services have been sustained by a grant. Statistics that have been collected from deprived areas have demonstrated the services to be 'very good' and 'outstanding' and 'value for money'.

In summary Early Years had built on its history of community development had used data, evaluation and research, developed their key messages for the government and had benefited from EU funding

View Siobhán's presentation here.

Panel Session: Overcoming the challenges caused by the cuts in funding

Fraser Sanderson, SPPA's Finance Director, chaired the expert panel session. He observed that the difficult financial climate is in contrast to the well received Scottish Government initiatives.



Martin Sime, Chief Executive Officer of the Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations: Challenges and opportunities for voluntary organisations

Martin commented on several paradoxes. The demand on the sector increases as the economy 'stagnates'. Poverty is on the rise as benefits are cut, but resources in the sector are declining as the public cannot give as much to voluntary organisations and we have to 'do more on less'. Public policy is all positive regarding our work and he cited as examples the Commission on the Future Delivery of Public Services chaired by Dr Campbell Christie and Prof. Susan Deacon's *Joining the dots: A better start for Scotland's children* and commented on the fact that more value is being placed on people helping themselves but that

many public authorities fund their own costs first.

The Scottish Government agrees that the voluntary sector does a good job. Although three new charities are set up each day in Scotland, ironically a survey has shown that the public think there are too many charities; however there is still not enough voluntary action. The sector is consulted in decision making, for example the Change Fund and Early Years Task Force, but this is still relatively speaking quite marginal and perhaps tokenistic as there are 45,000 organisations. Procurement and commissioning processes can be difficult and competitive, yet voluntary organisations add value and community involvement to the process. He said he had no answers but the stark fact is that we have to do more on less. His advice was not to rely on government and not to abandon our principles to chase money.



Ronnie Hinds, Chair of SOLACE, the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives: A Local Government Perspective

Ronnie as Chief Executive of Fife Council described his Council's work. His theme was priorities. They had redesigned 0-8 services in line with the Curriculum for Excellence prioritising their services in areas where there is the greatest deprivation, using data to target and intervene. He spoke about 'disinvesting to invest' that is diverting funds to the early years and he gave the example of the Council being able to add three quarters of a million pounds to the early years budget from savings made in the secondary sector. Vested interests have to be acknowledged in this process. He demonstrated that Scotland wide on a pound per pound basis that public expenditure is top heavy and is skewed to the top end

of higher education. He drew attention to the work of Heckman et al (2007) which showed that the rates of return to human capital investment in disadvantaged children is greatest in the early years. He believes that a lot more can be done and welcomed the introduction of the Scottish Government Change Fund. .

[View Ronnie's presentation here.](#)



Dr Alison Stewart, Chairperson, Red Kite Community Nursery: The Red Kite Community Nursery story 'It takes a village to raise a child.' - African proverb

Alison described the journey that Doune Playgroup, established in 1992, had taken to become Red Kite Community Nursery in January 2011. The change had been proposed several times and was a way to reduce confusion as to who their service was for as it is accessible to the wider community.

In January 2010 three hour fully funded sessions were introduced by Stirling Council however these were reduced to two and a half hours in August 2011.

Following consultation with parents, the group is trialling continuing to offer three hour sessions at no extra charge as they feel that the children benefit from the extra half hour. They hope that by providing longer sessions at no extra cost that they will be able to attract new families. As part of Stirling Council's financial cuts, the group lost the services of their SPPA Development Officer Enola Butler in April. Alison paid tribute to her saying that she had been 'incredibly supportive, a tremendous asset and that her value to all of Stirling's pre-schools and baby and toddler groups is immeasurable'.

The group has actively sought grants and new funding sources for example Haven Fun & Fitness, easyfundraising, CSLA Lottery Fund etc. They have benefited from parents who were willing to share their skills with the children and made use of any free learning opportunities in the community such as visits to the library, going for walks in the local area, visits from the Police and Fire Brigade and so on. The group takes a very active role in the community and also provides other services such as Bumps & Bosom Buddies, ICT Specialism and Rising 3's and is currently part of an exciting project to build a new community hall. With the other voluntary sector pre-schools in Stirling, with the aim of supporting each other, they have formed the Stirling Early Years Network complete with website and associated group email.

[View Alison's presentation here.](#)



Ian McLaughlan, SPPA Chief Executive: Supporting the Sector during times of Austerity

Though times are tough on families, early years services and society, Ian's view is that at such times radical new solutions are often found. The voluntary early years sector has a tremendous power to rise to new challenges as it has done over the years in the drive to offer much needed, high quality services in local communities.

He believes that the answer lies in the Early Years Framework, the Christie Commission, colleagues in local and national government, and those who have an interest in early childhood practice and community development. It also lies in three areas of power, partnership, parent and pioneering power.

- Partnership Power: Cuts in public spending are inevitable, with most local authorities having to fill unprecedented gaps in their education budgets, partner providers are being squeezed and non-partner providers are struggling to remain financially viable whilst coping with workforce development and changes to local demographics. Umbrella agencies like SPPA are also being squeezed, and yet, he asked if we could we think differently in Scotland, and looking at the strong partnership between the state and the third sector in Northern Ireland, consider a more cost effective solution of delivering pre-school education. He asked if we can reinforce the concept of learning through play in local community groups and save millions in Scotland by revolutionising and re-investing in the voluntary sector and drive up standards there instead. Can we do what at least one Scottish local authority is considering, that is cutting unsustainable statutory provision of pre-school education and re-investing in the voluntary sector? This is real partnership and it will have powerful outcomes for children and for our sector.

- **Parent Power:** We need a sea change in attitude by those parents in Scotland who believe that their child will be better 'educated' by going to a public sector nursery rather than 'just playing' at the community run early childhood service. We need to debate this with parents and local authorities. Such services have been the lifeblood of many both rural and inner city urban communities and have also enabled many parents to go on to do great things in their family, community or society thanks to their knowledge, skills and values being honed in the playgroup. We need a mixed market provision and not accept that the only provision that will offer quality early childhood learning is that provided by the State.
- **Pioneering Power:** Ian asked if we need another pioneering spirit, this time not led by local parents but led by statutory sector colleagues who recognise the value of the community led services that are delivered by a highly trained workforce, governed by a range of modern models for effective management, along with all day early childhood and family centres, groups of sessional pre-schools and out of school care centres, who get together and share the back office functions with a peripatetic management structure. Can SPPA be better resourced in partnership with local authority partners to run these centres alongside parents who are positively engaged in their community?

Ian called for a greater investment which would help to support and revolutionise the voluntary early years sector just like the most welcome Scottish Government's funding from their Children & Families Change Fund for small day care services, for children attending playgroups. Such initiatives, along with other partnership based initiatives, would not only respect the cherished achievements of the voluntary early years sector in the past, but would also ensure that every child attending these quality, community led services would have the best start to their lives.



Karyn McCluskey, Depute Head Scottish Violence Reduction Unit : The Role of Early Years in Creating a Safe Society

Karyn stated that violence is a public health issue and that concentrating on the early years is the most effective way of reducing it. There are 3,500 people involved in gangs in Glasgow and all of them are from dysfunctional families. They lack problem solving skills; empathy etc and their parents cannot give them these skills. Karyn gave as an example, the difficulties encountered by a 17 year old bringing up their baby in a high rise flat, who may be living in close proximity to someone who is a wife beater and may also have a drug addict living in the next flat. She said that we cannot 'police our way out of violence' and firmly believes that what is needed are extra health visitors to support the families, rather than extra police. She described health visitors as the 'jewel in the crown'. She

believes that it is essential too that we ensure that fathers are involved as good role models. Government needs to nurture support in communities.

The panel presentations were followed by questions from the delegates.

Sir Harry Burns, Chief Medical Officer for Scotland: The Importance of Early Intervention



According to the World Health Organisation's definition 'Health is a state of complete state of physical, mental, and social well being and not merely the absence of disease and infirmity.' Sir Harry Burns elaborated on this by explaining that events round about you influence your well being, along with the physical environment and the presence of other people. The social context of our lives is very important in determining our well being. For young children this context has implications for their future.

He spoke about the work of Aaron Antonovsky who looked at the fact that 70% of Holocaust survivors experienced poor mental and physical health, but he had particularly looked into the fact that the rest had not, and had come to the conclusion that these individuals had a 'sense of coherence'. They were problem solvers. For good health, the social and physical environment must be 'comprehensible, manageable and meaningful'. He said that 'Health is created where the child is, at home, in the kindergarten, at school and by the adults about it.'

He explained that there are sensitive periods in early brain development and that experiences from the environment dictate development. The first three years of life are critical. If children are victims of adverse childhood events and the brain is under stress, then this has an impact on their development which can affect their future behaviour and life chances. He spoke about the functions of the different areas of the brain the Pre-frontal cortex, Hippocampus and Amygdala and the effects that stress can have on these. He talked about Ainsworth's attachment theory and how the deep emotional connection that an infant develops with its primary caregiver is the basis for the development of later relationships. It is increasingly being recognised as determinant of later emotional, cognitive and social outcomes. He said that insecure attachment can lead to boys being more aggressive and to girls being more dependent and less assertive.

The Dunedin Cohort study of 1,000 children which began in the 1970s has illustrated the effects on children who were brought up in chaotic households and by the age of 30 had predictably experienced adverse social and health outcomes. The success of the role of the Family Nurse Partnership in the USA has demonstrated the benefits of early intervention and of supporting parents. Family Nurse Partnerships are now being introduced in Scotland.

He spoke about what we can do to 'create a step change in the health of our children' and of the value of health assets and the asset approach. We must 'do what we know works to everyone all of the time' he said. He argued that all the elements described in Manfred Max Neef's pyramid of fundamental human needs are of equal importance for a person's well being but that crucially if there is no affection, other needs are not able to be met. We should create supportive relationships with those who have 'missed the boat' and support young parents, and this is best achieved through local action.

[View Harry's presentation here.](#)



Kate Cherry, HM Assistant Chief Inspector HMIE: Putting the Child at the Centre

Kate began with an overview of the role of Education Scotland. She spoke about the universal adoption of the pre-school curriculum from 1997 which had given a sound base and of the continuing commitment to improving qualifications across the pre-school care and education sector.

She stated that the most important six years in a person's life are up to the age of five, which includes pre-birth. She said that pre-school matters but what parents do matters too and effective pre-school centres support learning in the home. High quality helps all children and is related to staff qualifications. Many

of the beneficial effects of high quality pre-school remain until late primary and can reduce the effects of disadvantage.

The Growing up in Scotland (GUS) Research had shown that 'At age 5, compared with children whose parents have no qualifications, those with a degree educated parent are around 18 months ahead on vocabulary and 13 months on problem solving.'

Kate presented the findings from inspections for 2010/11 in which 90+% were positive (satisfactory or above). There were however variations across and within sectors. She spoke about how we raise standards. This relies on staff expertise and knowledge, personal responsibility to provide the best for children, the importance of identification/assessment and intervention, the children's environment, our responsiveness to needs and interaction for depth and challenge and enjoyment (for staff and children).

She listed the characteristics of effective staff. They are people who can facilitate and enable children to make choices and be independent, who can engage them in the highest quality learning activities, who are reflective and constantly striving to improve, and who help children enjoy learning and be engaged and stimulated by it. They are those who also can access and use expertise from a range of professionals, who have an ability to develop the skills of the staff that are less well qualified, and have leadership skills to manage the expertise of the staff team to support children's learning

[View Kate's presentation here.](#)

Study Sessions

The Conference study sessions included The Essential Fundraising Toolkit with Dougie Peddie, Freelance Fundraising Consultant; Wee Voices with Mairi Ferris, Early Years Strategy Co-ordinator, Fife Council; Governing Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisations (SCIOs) What you need to know with Lorna Edwards, Development Manager, Office of the Scottish Charitable Regulator (OSCR); Peripatetic Management of Pre-school Groups with Thirza Wilson, Inspector Manager (Fife), Care Inspectorate; SPPA Direct Childcare Services with Joyce Waddell, SPPA Service Manager; Healthy Start: the NHS Healthy Start Scheme and Breastfeeding Information with Gina Graham, Breastfeeding Support Coordinator, NHS Fife.

[View Dougie Peddie's presentation here.](#)

[View Mairi Ferris' presentation here.](#)

[View Gina Graham's presentation here.](#)

[View Lorna Edwards' presentation here.](#)

Presentation of the SPPA Volunteer and Group of the Year Awards

Karen Thompson received the SPPA Volunteer of the Year Award from Isabel Dunn, for her long, dedicated service of volunteering within Benachie Playgroup, in Dunfermline, Fife. Benachie Playgroup was presented with the Group of the Year Award. The group had received an exceptionally highly graded inspection report from the Care Inspectorate.