

## Scottish Pre-school Play Association

Scottish Pre-school Play Association (SPPA), a registered charity, is Scotland's largest voluntary sector provider of direct support services to community led childcare organisations. It delivers essential support and guidance services to providers of pre-school education and childcare services, including all-day care groups, playgroups, parent and toddler groups and under-fives groups. It has a 40 year track record of working with children and families, encompassing many of the most disadvantaged groups in the country, including families on low income, ethnic minority families, lone parent families and families affected by social or rural isolation. It works closely with parents, early year's providers, Scottish Executive, regulators, local authorities and Childcare Partnerships, as well as training providers and other early years umbrella organisations to support early education and childcare settings. It represents the interests of voluntary sector community based settings, provides input to national and local consultations, working groups and policy forums.

SPPA welcomes the invitation to comment on Labour's consultation paper A Positive Start for Every Child.

### Summary

SPPA welcomes the focus on the importance of play and the recognition that play helps children to learn about the world and that it contributes to their development, good health and all round well being. It believes that play has a role in helping children to adopt active and healthy lifestyles and to make use of, understand and process in their active brains, the real, direct and first hand experiences they have.

SPPA believes that appropriate early interventions can support parents and families to give their children the best possible start in life and help children to realise their full potential. It emphasises that interventions must be timely and appropriate to the needs of children and families and the situations and circumstances that they may find themselves in.

SPPA believes that support for and partnership with parents and families, is crucial to ensuring children are given the best possible start.

SPPA recognises that effective and holistic services are best developed through multidisciplinary approaches and collaborative working, both strategically and operationally, to achieve the best outcomes for children and families. It believes that the needs of parents and families are best served through the development of integrated services and collaborative partnership working across the public, private and voluntary sector.

SPPA values the Curriculum for Excellence as a tool that helps to improve existing practice and maximise play, learning and development opportunities for children and notes other care and learning frameworks that help to secure the best experiences and outcomes for young children.

## General Comments

SPPA supports wholeheartedly the message that all our children should be given the best possible start in life, should be able to enjoy a positive happy childhood and that they should have opportunities and experiences to enable them to grow into confident, successful and resilient individuals.

## Promoting Play

SPPA fully endorses the commitment to promote play. It has made representation to MSPs to support motions put before Parliament, to highlight the importance of play in children's and young people's care, learning, development and all round well being, and to call for a national strategy for play which would ensure that decision making at all levels of government should include consideration of the impact of those decisions, on children's opportunities to play. Such a strategy would help to improve the quality of the play experience and therefore the quality of life of Scotland's children; it would also contribute towards the successful implementation of Articles 29 and 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.<sup>1</sup>

At the recent Holyrood Conference, 'The Early Years Investment', Ian McLaughlan, SPPA's Chief Executive, championed the importance of play. He called on all levels of government for more play facilities and more play opportunities to improve the physical and social environment for children and particularly for children in their early years. SPPA would like to see increased play opportunities for children. New facilities should be developed and existing ones maximised, by making better use of school grounds, playgrounds and open spaces, Community planning should include provision for play spaces and recreational facilities which would offer safe environments (away from roads and rivers which are still so prevalent in many communities today) where children can grow naturally, develop an awareness of risk, enjoy themselves, explore, have fun, and develop holistically through play. SPPA would also like to see a greater focus on the outdoors and the use of the natural environment as a play space for exploration, self discovery, learning and challenge. Some good work is going on in Scotland, for example, in the form of nature kindergartens, but more needs to be done to encourage and foster free play outdoors; safe play spaces in which to roam, explore and to 'hang out' in; diverse landscapes which would offer differing experiences and activities for children and young people of different ages and capabilities.

SPPA realises that children's play does not sit neatly within one service, but cuts across a range of areas such as planning, housing, transport, childcare and education, health and leisure. Hence, SPPA would ask for a strategic approach to play which places a duty on planning bodies, housing developers, service providers and others to ensure play and the provision for play, feature strongly in discussions and decision making processes for Scotland's communities. Collaboration and partnerships arrangements with organisations like the Forestry Commission, Wild Life Trust and Scottish National Heritage, as well as landscape designers etc have the potential to foster better use of the natural environment and realise more creative and innovative opportunities for outdoor play and activities, which excite children and engender respect and care for the natural environment. They have an expertise which they can bring to rejuvenating existing, often sterile, play spaces into environments where children want to be, which can be explored with freedom from control and too much supervision, and where young people want to 'hang out' with their friends. Also, involving children and young people of all capabilities in the planning and design of open spaces in their communities, would lead to a better understanding of what children are looking for. It would help to engender a sense of ownership and shared thinking leading to imaginative and innovative approaches to what is needed. Another point for consideration is that many young

children like to play in the street and close to home. They want to be within and part of their own neighbourhood. Yet the freedom to play in the street is curtailed by, for example, poor street design and housing layouts, poor traffic control (moving and parked) and communities putting up signs saying 'no ball games/no playing on the grass' on green spaces, where they exist.. To address this, planning authorities, at all levels of government, need to ensure developers, be they in the public, private or voluntary sector, take into account the needs of children and families in their plans, and provide areas and resources to develop and maintain play spaces in close proximity to where children and young people live. Lastly but not least, children's and young people's play spaces will need to be maintained if they are to remain safe for use and resources will be needed to ensure they remain good places to play and 'hang around' in.

### **Giving Vulnerable Children a Head Start**

SPPA welcomes the statement that high quality education and childcare play a crucial role in ensuring children realise their potential. It believes that policy for early childhood should aim to promote children's rights, reduce poverty, promote social inclusion, engage parents and increase resources for children with diverse learning rights.

SPPA advocates that all young children should have universal entitlement to access appropriate play, care and learning and development opportunities irrespective of where they live, their parents' circumstances and any additional support needs. It emphasises that parents cannot be expected to meet all the costs of high quality childcare, nor should their access to the childcare they need be limited because of cost. It has to be recognised that children's, parents' and family needs vary considerably, and will come into play at different times. Therefore, strategies and practice will need to be developed and resourced in ways that will enable different solutions for different communities to happen, meet the needs and preferences of parents, both working and non-working, and families in a range of differing circumstances and situations, and at different times.

The early years are a period of rapid development and can have a major influence on the rest of a young person's life. They provide the first and best opportunities to give children the best possible start in life and have the potential to reduce the need for later interventions, which can be very costly in human, financial and social terms. SPPA regards early interventions for vulnerable and disadvantaged children and families as being a key component in promoting and establishing routes out of poverty, inequality and deprivation. However, it also sees early intervention as a helpful mechanism that can be used to support parents and families who may, for a variety of reasons, experience difficulties that might impair their ability to function effectively for periods in their family life because of, for example, post natal depression, family bereavement, hospitalisation, job loss etc.

Appropriate interventions at an early stage where and when it is needed supports all children and families but particularly those who are vulnerable. It is important that appropriate services are provided for children and families who find themselves in this situation, but the intervention must be appropriate and proportionate to their need. For some children and families the provision of a nursery place from the age of two may be a solution but for others another strategy might be more appropriate, for example home visiting schemes, family worker support schemes or parent and toddler support groups. Integrated solutions to ensure a holistic approach may be called for, for example, a combination of health visitor support, nursery and parent/family support work.

In relation to the development of basic skills such as communication and social skills SPPA would be advocating strongly the value and importance of play in helping young children develop these skills. It would also be emphasising the importance of giving as much attention to supporting the development of children's sense of self and emotional well-being. In SPPA play as a process of learning in the early years is valued. It is promoted as being key to nurturing children's inclination to learn, and recognised as providing strong foundations on which to build future learning experiences, indoors and outdoors, at home and in early years services. The importance of play, and social interactions through play, in young children's learning and development enables them to be physically active and therefore healthier; to practise and master skills without fear of failure; to develop knowledge and understanding; to develop literacy and numeracy skills, to make friends and form social relationships; to gain confidence, independence and resilience. SPPA believes that play should be given more respect in the process of learning, particularly for our youngest children and SPPA would welcome positively discriminating in favour of a more robust approach to learning through play in the early years to guard against more formal approaches to young children's learning and development. We believe that Scotland's well structured 3 – 18 Curriculum for Excellence, as it applies to our youngest children strikes a positive balance between achieving appropriate attainment levels and avoiding excessive formal learning and teaching approaches. Similarly, the Birth to Three framework offers an excellent resource to those who support and work with Scotland's youngest children, as it helps them to provide high quality care and education using approaches that recognise the ways in which our youngest children learn from everything and everyone around them.

## **Supporting Families**

SPPA believes that it is a disservice to young children and families if professionals, agencies and policy makers fail to take a holistic approach to the needs of young children and families in today's Scotland. Young children's care, well being and education are indivisible; family support is wide ranging and the one size fits all model is outdated. Collaborative working and partnership are the way forward. Policy makers, at both national and local level, must ensure that those who design, control and deliver services establish a common understanding and framework for working together. This is because innovative and effective services which address holistically the needs of children and families will only be developed through using the skills and expertise of individual services and organisations working together in a more strategic way. SPPA has been involved in a number of cross sector partnerships to develop services which have contributed to an increasing range of integrated services being available to meet young children and their family's needs. Our experience of cross sector working in the 16 Local Authorities where the organisation is funded to provide support services has been very positive. SPPA would advocate for more of this type of working as it engenders more flexible innovative services that are responsive to meeting the diverse needs of children and families. SPPA believes that it is crucial to continue to promote and support this type of approach.

Integrated services are crucial to developing personalised packages of support at child and family level, particularly where complex needs are identified. They also offer a way of encouraging service users to engage more actively with services by becoming involved in determining and planning the support they need. The work of Sure Start programmes throughout Scotland has seen a move towards more integrated service provision, often within expanded existing services or through the development of new centres. This has helped to enhance the scope for timely interventions to happen where and when they are needed. Innovative and dynamic packages of support to meet individual needs are able to operate

effectively alongside a universal approach to provision, for example, play development services, toddler support services and mobile crèche services.

SPPA wants to see greater emphasis on working holistically with families to achieve better outcomes. Sometimes the needs of the parent/s can be as important as the child's if positive relationships between them are to be encouraged, and family life is to flourish. SPPA acknowledges that some parents can be difficult to support and communicate with and this is a barrier to successful outcomes for a family. However, services that offer parents opportunities to learn, sometimes with and alongside their child and which offer informal peer support, have a significant place in the range of support that can be offered. Examples include family learning centres, parent and toddler groups, playgroups, and opportunity groups, home-visiting and befriending schemes, amongst others. From our own experience, in play development work, baby groups and toddler groups where we engage parents in shared play and learning sessions, healthy eating workshops, baby massage, bounce and rhyme sessions, oral and dental hygiene initiatives, amongst other things, the benefits for children and parents alike become apparent. For example, the benefits are seen to be in terms of healthier lifestyles, stronger and more positive parent-child relationships, more play and social interaction at home, increased understanding of child development, increased confidence in parenting skills and more engagement with early years services.

SPPA would stress that supporting positive adult/ child relationships and a child's wellbeing and development is core to any intervention in family life, whether it is through formal or informal processes. It would encourage role modeling, coaching, peer support, parenting classes, home visiting, the appointment of parent/family advisers, service liaison officers and accessible information and advice gateways as ways, amongst other things, of helping parents towards providing nurturing and stimulating home environments. SPPA actively works with families and children in areas that do not generally engage with the more formal service provision, and this work has enabled many parents to find out more and seek out the services that are available to them and their children.

Strengthening support to increase a father's role in caring for and educating his children should also feature strongly when we think about supporting families and giving children the best possible start.. Not only should promoting father participation in early childcare initiatives and interventions feature, but consideration has to be given to developing realistic strategies which make it easier for fathers to participate, for example, ensuring activities are for both parents, scheduling after work or weekend activities, establish Dad's clubs so that men can network more easily and establish early an active and effective role in their children's lives.

Giving parents the choice about the type and frequency of service they use, underpins the importance of maintaining a mixed economy of service provision. The key role of voluntary sector providers and other agencies in delivering, solely and in partnership, early years education and childcare that is flexible and responsive to need, particularly to families living in social and rural isolation, poverty and disadvantage, must be recognised and supported. The needs of parents and families for flexible all year round services is being heard at policy level but on the ground delivery is patchy. Some providers, most usually in the private sector, are offering flexible packages to parents, but many SPPA and local authority providers sustain models and patterns of delivery based on the school day and year, which may result in children accessing a number of different childcare services in a day/year. This places additional pressure on parents to coordinate and fund childcare arrangements and on their ability to return to training and/or

employment. The lack of access to all year round early years and child care service is an area that needs to be addressed and ways should be found to support voluntary and local authority providers to offer a coherent package of early education and childcare, 52 weeks a year. The possibility of utilising school premises as a basis for creating and expanding accessible and affordable all year round childcare is worthy of further exploration.

SPPA has long been concerned about the fragmentation of services in early education and childcare services. Because of this some young children are exposed to a number of transitions from one service provider to another, sometimes in the course of a day or week. SPPA would welcome initiatives to tackle this issue and urges investment in services which alleviate the need for children to move from one environment to another. SPPA services have made some progress by extending their services to include wrap around care, lunch or breakfast clubs and out of school care. Reduced and/or smoother transitions for children will be achieved by looking at ways in which early education, childcare and primary schools can work together to become more integrated. Service models, for example, neighbourhood centres, children centres and family centres, that combine early education, childcare and family support services including outreach work are worthy of further exploration and development. The community school model offers a model for embracing early years and family support services within their environments.

### **Improving Children's Health**

SPPA has been involved in a number of initiatives which have helped to inform parents and children about making healthy choices and adopting a healthy life style; these include practising baby massage, healthy eating and improving oral health and dental hygiene. Through such activities parents and children have become more aware of maintaining a healthy diet and looking after themselves.

The case for play has been made earlier. It is a key plank in the emotional as well as the intellectual development of a child's life and we need to make play a reality for our children, at home, in and after school, in the community and also in healthcare settings and practice. The therapeutic value of play helps children to begin to deal with and cope with stressful and painful experiences, and makes a major contribution to the healing process. The role of the hospital play specialist in supporting the wellbeing of children when they are in hospital or attending clinics is now seen as an essential part of paediatric care in hospitals but the potential for expansion to include working with health visitors on children's health issues in the community should be explored. The work of Action for Sick Children (Scotland) in helping children and young people meet their healthcare needs in partnership with parents and professionals should be more widely promoted as it provides an invaluable source of information, advice and support for parents on matters relating to the healthcare of their children and young people.

One of the key challenges in improving children's health is ensuring that they get off to a good start. A greater focus on working with prospective parents at the pre-conception, pre-birth stage to help them make healthier lifestyle choices that will have a positive impact on the child's life during the early years is required. Becoming a parent can be overwhelming. Starting ante-natal classes earlier, ensuring better transitions between midwives and health visitors in the post natal phase, and providing more tailored advice and support, particularly on post natal depression, would help to reduce the sense of being overwhelmed and would help prospective parents to be better prepared to make healthier choices for themselves and their children.. Also, it would help if more time was given to helping potential parents and new parents to understand better the information and advice they are being given to avoid creating

a sense of anxiety and sometimes a feeling of being pressured, for example, about breast feeding, weaning and avoiding certain foods,

SPPA welcomes measures that help the process of ensuring that parents, along with their children, are included as part of a partnership with health providers when dealing with healthcare issues. SPPA supports Healthy Future: An Action Framework for Children and Young People's Health in Scotland, which specified that all NHS Boards 'should review their provision of children's hospital services with reference to the European Association for Children in Hospital (EACH) Charter and put in place any plans to address any issues identified.' The Charter is in line with corresponding and binding rights stipulated in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

## References

### <sup>1</sup>**Article 29**

1. States Parties agree that the education of the child shall be directed to:

(a) The development of the child's personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential; (e) The development of respect for the natural environment.

### <sup>1</sup>**Article 31**

1. States Parties recognise the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.

2. States Parties shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity.