

How the Plowden Report (1967) sent Early Childhood Care and Education in Britain down the wrong path, and why we have never found our way since ^[1]

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Abstract

The 1967 report of the Central Advisory Council for Education, chaired by Lady (Bridget) Plowden, was hailed as a breakthrough at the time. It was the first official recognition that the state has a role in the care and education of children before the compulsory school starting age of five. The key recommendation in relation to early years provision was that local authorities should offer part-time nursery education for nearly all four-year-olds and 'a good many' three-year-olds. Part time attendance should be the normal form of nursery education because 'young children should not be separated for long from their mothers'. The report was untouched by the second wave of feminism or by notions of equality and inclusion which informed early years policy in the Nordic countries and to a lesser extent in France and Italy. The pattern of short morning or afternoon sessions except for children in acute social need persists in the UK to this day. It ignores the needs of full-time working mothers, single parents and different forms of family organisation, especially among black and minority ethnic communities. Childminding, the major form of early years care outside the home, rated only half a sentence in the report. The crucial mistake was the failure to integrate early years provision with the statutory national education system, leaving it fatally vulnerable to political changes and economic downturns and making it the first candidate for cuts when local authorities fall on hard times.

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