

Creative, nurturing staff key to positive early experience ^[1]

Author: Hayes, Noirin

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EXCERPTS:

These last few days have seen the spotlight turned on early years practice in Ireland. The 'Prime Time' programme last night showed examples of worryingly poor practice. No one could support the behaviour observed nor the management styles used.

More young children are now spending increased time in a range of settings outside the home. We know that the adults caring for them, and their style of engagement, have a profound impact on children's learning experiences and set the scene for their sense of belonging, wellbeing and engagement with the world. Early childhood experiences are crucial to their day-to-day development and on into their future.

Children develop in the midst of many different and interacting systems. Whilst the family is recognised as the central space for early development, for many reasons an increasing number of families share the early care and education of their children with various types of services.

Children are the social group most affected by the quality of early childhood services. While this seems like a truism, there is a relative complacency about what actually happens children in their everyday experiences and an assumption that by just attending early years settings they will develop and progress positively.

In fact, the quality of everyday experiences in the early years - wherever children are - has a profound influence on them. They are not merely recipients or consumers but are deeply influenced, individually and collectively, by their early years environments.

Children trust adults and look to them for protection and guidance. They are motivated to learn, to seek meaning in their world and they expect that the adults they meet will assist them in this endeavour.

It is at this stage in their development that children come to understand their world. Their curiosity and desire for knowledge is evident in their play, their exploration, their questions and their behaviour - and the adult has a critical role to play.

Children need to be surrounded by adults who like them, trust them, care for them as individuals; adults who are excited and challenged by them.

The challenges of providing such quality practice are recognised and the dynamic and interactive nature of development requires that practitioners are responsive and reflective throughout their engagement with children. The design, organisation and resourcing of early years settings is central to the early learning process.

Settings, both indoor and outdoor, should be safe whilst also providing rich and varied opportunities for exploration, play and risk-taking. Children thrive where they feel they belong and adults need to make settings welcoming and familiar for all children, irrespective of their background.

Central to quality and dependable early education and care is staff quality.

We are fortunate that in Ireland we already have the basis for improving the quality of early years practice and creating and supporting high quality early years settings.

In 2006 a national quality framework for the early years was published (Siolta) and, in 2009, a national curriculum framework (Aistear).

However, neither of these excellent practice documents have been implemented nationally or mainstreamed into the early years sector.

These frameworks provide an excellent context within which to train staff and support practice at both initial and continuing professional development. While we do not need all staff to have degrees we do need minimum standards of training and a graduate-led workforce which can mentor and support staff so that they and the children in their care enjoy and gain from their daily experiences.

Work is under way in the Department of Children and Youth Affairs to publish an Early Years Strategy later this year and I have no doubt it will make valuable recommendations.

However, recommendations are not enough. There also needs to be full governmental support for the implementation of the strategy and a realisation that the inevitable cost will reap rewards immediately and into the future. Staff need to be trained and supported, services need to be registered, funding mechanisms found.

The Department of Finance will need to work creatively with other departments to unlock realistic funding so that parents and early years

staff can work together to ensure high quality early learning experiences for all young children irrespective of where they spend these important early years.

-reprinted from the Independent

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