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**OMEP**

## UK UPDATES

June 2011

### *Experiences in Childhood*

In this edition of OMEP  
UK Updates we focus on  
**Experiences in childhood**

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This edition of the OMEP Updates, whilst not having a particular theme, has five very interesting articles. In four of the articles, the overall emphasis is the care and welfare of the child/children and the developmental aspects they are able to gain from their environment and the adults they come in contact with. There is also an emphasis on the resilience which children have. However, the article on 'baby room practice' by Powell and Gooch does show the negative effects which can disadvantage the development of very young children if the staff are unaware or unable to satisfy the needs of the child.

In the article about childhood in Poland, the writer is giving a description of her grandfather's childhood; happy times on the family farm until at the age of 11 years her grandfather is deported to Siberia. On both the journey and in the prison camps children were treated as adults. Even though her grandfather's siblings were 3 and 4 years old they did not get any special treatment. This article is a very good example of the resilience of young children who were not only deported via a very long journey to a labour camp but had to contend with extreme circumstances such as outbreaks of dysentery, death and forced removal to other camps.

The article on 'Challenges introducing Forest School/Nursery' offers an insight into the differences in attitude relating to young children between the Scandinavian countries and the UK. It is interesting to read the challenges which occur when comparing the Norwegian model with that of Forest Schools in Kent. The essay clearly states the cultural differences the approaches of the two countries and an argument is put forward that these differences are deeply embedded in the culture of the countries involved. For example, in Norway teachers gave responsibility to the children, whilst in England the teachers were very protective towards the children. This is an interesting essay that is able, in some way, to focus upon and challenge particular concepts and attitudes which underpin the rationale of childcare in the UK.

'There's no place like home' offers the reader a very interesting insight into the debate of 'home schooling' versus pre-schooling. Most people see the pre-school as offering particular advantages to children that cannot be offered to them in their own home. However, the small scale study described offers a unique and informative insight into 'home schooling'. It was also interesting to note that the parents who wanted to home school their child had to undergo a great deal of pressure to 'prove' to others that their children were not missing out on education.

The article by Powell and Gooch which examines the profile and status of baby room practice is an ongoing piece of research. Attention was drawn to this area of early childhood care when a piece of research evidence showed that staff in many baby rooms were young women who had few academic or professional qualifications, often worked long hours with little support and few opportunities for in-service training. Many of these people cared for a number of different babies over the week and were often working in isolated conditions. The continuing research from Powell and Gooch on this area is not only going to expose the situation in baby rooms but also the concern that the most vulnerable children appear to be cared for by the least qualified staff. The report makes interesting but very worrying reading and has very important implications for staffing numbers, training and in-service training.

Finally, Multi-disciplinary Role in Encouraging Parental Attachment is an article about a children's centre which decides to run a session for babies 'from new born to cruising'. The underpinning rationale for this was to give due consideration for the brain development of babies and very young children. The sessions were also very useful to parents as they involved a health visitor. This was a major boost to parents as many of them had health visitors who were overworked and therefore did not have time to spend talking at length to parents. The sessions also enabled staff to pick upon certain issues and advise parents on how to deal with specific problems. Most importantly this contact with parents of very young children enabled the centre to have early positive relationships with the centre staff and other professionals.

## Nº 140 The Childhood Narrative of a Polish Deportee to Siberia: A Lesson From My Grandfather About Survival

By Paulina Krok [NEW LEADERS IN EARLY YEARS]

This essay focuses on my grandfather's childhood experiences in pre-war Poland and in the forced labour prison camps of the Soviet Union. The story is situated in the context of World War II, my grandfather's emerging identity, and the political economy of the Soviet Union at the time. According to the Historical Commission of the Siberian Deportees Association (2010) about two million civilians were deported from Poland to Siberia in 1940 and 1941. It also points out that the few who survived could not testify about these tragic events during the subsequent forty four years of the Soviet Communist dominance in Poland.

My grandfather Jan is eighty two years old today and can remember a lot of details from the past, but still, this is an attempt to revive events many decades after they occurred. Past events get interpreted and re-interpreted and with each repeated telling, a certain version seems to become engraved in one's memory and turns into the reality shared with others (Climo and Cattell, 2002). The aim of this interview is to explore my grandfather's perception of his childhood and what this tells us about childhood at that time and place. It is a reconstruction of my grandfather's story, initially told in Polish, then reshaped through my translation, interpretation and historical contextualisation.

### *Jan's Story*

Jan was born in 1929 in the little town of Dębe, but grew up on his family farm situated near the city of Luts'k, which is currently in Ukraine, but in the years 1918-1939 was part of the Second Polish Republic. His family consisted of four children (including himself), two parents, and two grandparents, who lived together in the three bedroom house surrounded by forty five acres of land, with stables, apiary, orchards, vegetables patches, fruit bushes and pastures to allow cows and calves to feed. Every family member had a role within the farm, even the youngest children had to help as much as they could.

He really likes to recall the memories from when he was about five years old and his responsibility was to run with the colts in the designated area to allow them to mature physically. He giggles like a little boy while recalling being told off for leading the horses to the area, where animals were not allowed because it was the kingdom of the grandfather and the bees ("królestwo dziadka, bo on tam pilnował swojej pasieki, i tam pszczoły urzędowały"). A child's life was not easy back then in the agrarian Polish society, as they had to fulfil their physical responsibilities on the farm, but at the same time they were closer to their family

than today. This was definitely a happy time for my grandfather, especially in comparison to his later years during the imprisonment of the Second World War.

### **Deportation**

The Soviet invasion of Poland started without a formal declaration of war on 17th September 1939, and my grandfather's family was to be deported to Siberia, because of the forty five acres of land they had. My grandfather was only eleven years old when the whole family was captured and transported a distance of 3,000 miles in a cattle train, along with approximately 1300 other prisoners. Their expatriation began on 10th February 1940 and took about two months, during which many prisoners starved or froze to death. The family managed to take on the train with them the feather duvets, saddlecloths and some hay. Jan firmly believes that these items saved their lives, as his younger siblings were "still little kids" He emphasises that the duvet had been kept guarded as the family sacred item ("bo to była świętość pierzyna",) during all 6 years of deportation.

This horrifying journey indicates that Soviet Army invaders did not care much for the youngest children, who were treated in the same way as adult prisoners. It did not matter that Jan's siblings were only three and four years old; they did not get any special treatment. They would have died, just as many others did, if their father had not managed to take a warm feather duvet with them. It seems that children at the time were of no value to the invaders, who saw them only as enemies.

### **The Forced Labour Camp, Novosibirsk, Siberia**

When they reached the Novosibirsk Oblast region at the end of March, they were taken on sleighs up the frozen river Ob, to the forced labour camp. Jan recalls that they spent three months there, and during that time about one thousand prisoners died due to an epidemic of dysentery. He recalls that infected people were dying within a couple of days, as they were left without any medical help. It was a real miracle that the whole family, including the youngest children managed to survive. When the ice on the river Ob melted in June, allowing for a barge to float down the river, all those who were still alive were taken to the Ural Mountains to another camp.

### **The Forced Labour Camp, Ural Mountains, Soviet Union**

The Soviet Forced Labour camp in the Ural Mountains was more bearable than the one in Siberia. Jan's family consisted of six people, so they were given three bunk beds covered in bed bugs in the long barrack with several wood burning stoves in the middle. They were lucky to be allowed to leave the camp to pick blackberries and mushrooms. The wild fruit was weighed and if the amount was large enough, they would get a piece of bread. Jan says they "were over the moon, when mum cooked the mushrooms and we got a slice of this bread. We loved every moment of it." My grandfather's job was to go to the hot spring with a barrel, fill it with water using a wooden bucket, and bring it back to the kitchen's camp. It was a dangerous task as the water burst high up in the sky, and those who fell into that spring were never to be found again. While he was going to work along with his older sister and parents, younger siblings had to stay in the barrack at all times. Every day when Jan was going to work he could see men digging the ground and burying corpses, behind the camp's fence.

### **Bringing the Past into the Present**

Remembered lives are moral documents and their function is salvific, inevitably implying, 'all this has not been for nothing.' — Myerhoff, 1992: 240

My grandfather's childhood is marked by the horrific crimes of war. He was forced to travel to the distant, cold, and dirty barracks of Soviet labour prison camps to work. Only the youngest children, under the age of ten, were not forced to work and if both their parents died, they were given a new identity through an



*Jan in air force uniform on his eventual return*

upbringing in the barracks for the prisoners' orphans (called Детдом). They were taught how to read and write in Russian and those who survived the war were given Soviet citizenship. This must have been inspired by Locke's empirical philosophy of a child's mind being a 'blank slate' (Locke, 1690/1952) so that even the children of prisoners could start a new life as a member of Soviet society.

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## Nº 141 **Entrusting babies to “the lowest of the low”? Raising the profile and status of baby room practice.**

Dr Sacha Powell and Dr Kathy Gouch

In 2002, we were privileged to work with Professors Tricia David and Lesley Abbott to develop a literature review that accompanied the Birth to Three Matters Framework (David et al, 2003). During the course of this substantial review about children from birth to three years, it emerged that there was comparatively little research evidence about what happens in formal day care settings for babies aged 12 months and younger. This was despite a growing body of evidence - including recent neuroscience findings (e.g. Shore, 1997; Gopnik, 2009; Sunderland, 2008) - which accentuates the hugely important roles that babies'



and children's carers play in their earliest years both for their well-being and development throughout their early childhood years and for later in life.

A few years later, having been commissioned to write case studies of early years practice for the Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC, 2006), we visited a number of "baby rooms". This sparked 3 years of discussions and funding applications until "The Baby Room Project" was born thanks to the generous support of the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation. In September 2009, we began the first phase of our research and development activities with a small sample and a big ambition: ten daycare settings in south-east England and an overarching aim to document and improve the experiences of babies in baby rooms.

The anecdotal and research evidence we had gathered as background for the project suggested that the staff of many baby rooms (a) were young women - often recent school leavers; (b) had few academic or professional qualifications or opportunities for training or professional development once they were employed; and (c) often worked long hours in fairly isolated conditions with little chance for professional dialogue or support.

Meanwhile, statistical data (OECD, 2004; Speight et al, 2008) suggested that more than 40% of babies and children under 2 years of age in the UK were being cared for by people who were not members of their immediate or extended families. Although childminders could account for some of this professional care, we knew that there were babies who spent as many as 40 hours a week in the baby rooms of daycare settings (Goouch and Powell, forthcoming). We set out with questions that included:

- What are babies' everyday experiences in the baby rooms?
- Who cares for them?
- How do these professionals describe their role(s)?
- Who / what shapes their practice?

The project design encompassed a multi-method 'mosaic approach' to collecting research evidence (Clark and Moss, 2001). Our research enquiries and professional development activities were deliberately integrated and interdependent. Group sessions known as 'Development Days' allowed practitioners to come together to hear about and discuss research findings in relation to their own work with babies. We also created an online networking tool (The Baby Room NING) so that the practitioners could continue to chat, debate, enquire, challenge and support each other in between our six-weekly Development Days. Although we also carried out semi-structured interviews and direct, naturalistic observations in the baby rooms (Rolfe, 2001; Mukherji and Albon, 2010), we gained the practitioners' permissions to document the unstructured group discussions and NING entries for the purposes of our research enquiries. The evidence suggested that our initial concerns were largely supported by our small sample of participants, namely, that indeed these were often young women who worked very long hours caring for many different babies over the course of a week, frequently feeling isolated and overlooked, and rarely if ever accessing any training or professional development. They described the routine practices of their days, the regularity with which they fulfilled their duties as they saw them. Written accounts were closely aligned to Peter Elfer's (2004, p.116-8) dual concerns that practitioners' written observations about babies (and in our case their work with them) may lack the emotion and excitement of what they can tell us orally; and that care which is often 'routine and repetitious' may lead to a busy-ness to counteract boredom. We were aware this may mean they were potentially missing the minutiae or "intersubjectivity" (Trevarthen and Aitken, 2001) of interactions so clearly documented in photographic detail by Lynne Murray and Liz Andrews (2000) and in the vignettes of "companionable learning" interpreted by Rosemary Roberts (2010), for example. In our project, we have zoomed in on the fine details of talk, environments and relationships. Although the seemingly straightforward routines of everyday processes are regularly voiced, the practitioners have also exposed 'complexity, multiplicity, contradictory, contingent and shifting' views about their practice (MacNaughton, 2005, p.135). Their voices reveal an array of underlying sophistication encountered in moments where they try to articulate their own instinctive / professional judgements about the babies' needs with accountability to a wide range of (more) powerful 'stakeholders'. In spite of an overriding assurance – perhaps directed as much to themselves as to one another and us – of being 'in tune' with the babies, they have as a group repeatedly asserted how little they feel positioned to influence key decisions in the setting. As the project has moved into its second phase (January 2011 to January 2012) with an



expanded group of 25 settings in two local authorities, this theme has continued:

“In education, early years is at the bottom, isn’t it? And in early years, we’re the lowest of the low aren’t we...” (Practitioner “Sian”, Development Day Discussion, Feb 2011)

In view of the findings emerging from the project’s first phase, we now seek not only to improve daycare for the babies, but also to champion the work of those who care for them in the baby rooms: to ensure that their voices are heard; their professional needs are addressed; their expertise and breadth of professional duties are recognised and the enormity of their responsibility is acknowledged.

#### Annual Baby Room Conference

With colleagues committed to a similar mission, the Annual Baby Room Conference (the second of which will be held on 15 July 2011) is one of the ways in which the project is trying to help raise the profile and status of this first phase of early childhood education and care and to provide a supportive network for people involved or interested in babies’ daycare. Please visit [www.canterbury.ac.uk/education/conferences](http://www.canterbury.ac.uk/education/conferences) for further details and a booking form.

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## Nº 142 Challenges with introducing Forest School/Nursery to the Garden of England: a comparative study of Forest Nursery in England and Norway

By Torill Hindmarch

Hi Mamma!

A child of four has just built a small pile of wood surrounded by stones, she is talking in a low voice to herself. Another child (three years old) approaches from in between two trees, “Hi Mamma”, she calls out, to which the other replies – “take your hat off” (although it is May and no hat is worn). “Aaah!” she exclaims as she “lights” the fire and the younger child approaches and sits in front of the pile of wood stretching out her hands with a playful “Oooh! Ooh!”. “I live here” states the older child to which the other child replies, “can I not touch anything here?” She proceeds to tease the older child by getting closer to the “fire” and almost “burning herself”. There is a lot of nonverbal communication and risky behaviour (approaching the “fire” and disobeying “mamma”) accompanied by squeals of delight. Apart from the atmosphere of great exhilaration and excitement as they developed risky play, (Sandseter, 2009), what I found interesting was the subtle negotiating of roles at the beginning of this play. The younger child through her initial greeting already denoted her role in the game and the older child took on her part with the reply “take off your hat” which denoted that she was the decision maker and that the younger child had entered a “house”. To me this signified a well developed social understanding. I was to see more such ex-

amples of complex child initiated play in Norway during my Masters study on forest school/nursery.

With my background from Norwegian ECE, where I had worked with outdoor and forest activities it was natural to compare English and Norwegian forest activities in the nursery. I visited two nurseries in Kent, England and two in Akershus, Norway from January to June 2010.

Forest school in England and Norway has given a new dimension to the class room and the ideas have filtered down to the nursery environment. Norwegian nursery has a



strong tradition for unstructured play, while my observations revealed a more structured approach in England. These two approaches were also evident when they moved out of the nursery gates.

The arguments for moving the class room outside are many, but one of the main benefits is the promotion of physical activity and the possibility for child initiated play, with the resulting developmental rewards (Maynard, 2007; Tovey, 2007; Waters, and Begley 2007). Overcoming challenges also strengthens emotional development and builds self confidence (Swarbrick, et al. 2004). Self assurance is vital in enabling a child to speak out in a group; be it a conflict situation or in cooperative play negotiations (Broadhead, P. et al., 2010). The benefits of regular outdoor activity appear to cover several areas of development that are important for learning, which is why so many nurseries are creating outdoor opportunities.




More space encourages children to be more active, the form of the environment shaping the child's activities (Fjørtoft 2004). Undulating topography makes demands on balance skills, while wooded areas encourage climbing. Fjørtoft did her research in Norway where the landscape is rocky and uneven. The large areas of forest are, unlike the indigenous English Forest, mostly free of thick bushes, vines and brambles but are mossy with springy heather and rounded rock formations. It is quite another thing to deliver Forest school on the mainly flat fields and parks lands of Kent where I did my research. But there were several instances of Forest School/Nursery, for example in the wooded parklands where local projects, with trained forest workers, encouraged nurseries to come and enjoy the experience and then transfer their learning to their own local environment.

Unfortunately one of my first visits to one of these projects coincided with snow fall and freezing temperatures. The lack of adequate clothing made it a tough trip, though the practitioners armed with cocoa and snacks did a great job keeping up moral. Later visits revealed more activity and excitement, as much on the part of the adult as the children but with sometimes unfortunate results. I observed a group of four boys digging in a tree stump, first attracted by the ants and then, looking for treasure. This game, with much verbal discussion and activity, might have developed into an exciting adventure but was interrupted by an eager practitioner who tried to encourage the boys to come and climb on the huge fallen tree, where most of the other children were. They broke off their game and wandered off, the spark of enthusiasm gone.

Much of the literature on forest school emphasises the opportunities to climb and balance and do risky things (Swarbrick et al. 2004; Tovey, 2007) which the teaching staff, in the English nurseries that I observed, took seriously, seeking out these opportunities for the children. These were very much adult led activities. On finding a large tree trunk, adults encouraged all the children to walk along it with arms outstretched, resulting in a queue for the chance to balance on the trunk. In the Norwegian woods adults let the children explore, and in one observation four boys (5 years) sat on such a fallen tree, the tree became a motor bike racing though the woods. It was their shouts of glee that attracted other children to join in. Only then did the adults come over and join in too.

### **Cultural differences**

The two Frameworks for England and Norway have many similarities but interpretation of the policies therein combined with pressures from regulatory bodies resulted in variations in practice that in England



sometimes inhibited children from engaging in child initiated activities. I would also argue that differences in the cultural view of the child also had an impact on practice. Each country had its own interpretation of the term “child participation”. Interviews revealed that English teachers based their planning on earlier observations of individual interests and placed the suitable resources in the environment the following day. In these situations the child was not always aware of its own impact or participation in the choice of resources or topics engaged in. In Norway the children daily had the opportunity to collaborate in planning activities. In one nursery I observed children eagerly assembling for a morning meeting with their teacher who wrote down ideas or feedback from their discussion and acted upon it.

While the English teachers were protective and kept the children close by; (afraid the children might run off or be kidnapped), (Maynard, 2007), the Norwegian teachers gave responsibility to the children, trusting them to respect the boundaries and to always keep sight of an adult.

My familiarity with both cultures suggests to me that while the English fostered a culture of protectiveness and consideration for the group, the Norwegians fostered a culture for individuality and self responsibility. The result seemed to be that the Norwegian children discussed with the adults as if they were on equal standing with an openness which might, in England, be regarded as rude.

The English teachers focused on imparting knowledge to the group as a whole. This took up a lot of the time, not so much the imparting of knowledge but the gathering around of children. This contrasted with the almost laissez- faire attitude of the Norwegian practitioners, who trusted in the nature of the child to be inquisitive. They let the children alone for at least half an hour to find their own interests and activities. When the children became very absorbed in something they let them get on with it, observing from a distance but later, for example during lunch, sometimes discussed with the children what they had been doing. If the children called they came over and took up the child’s initiative. For it seemed to me that not only did the Norwegian Teachers have more time for letting play develop, they also gave more time for the children to express themselves, reading the nonverbal signs, and in doing so ensured that each child knew they were heard (Fisher, 2008; Nyland et al.; 2008, Payler; 2007). This way of communicating creates a greater democratic balance between adult and child and a two way respect as equals is established (Bae, 2009; Cousins, 1999; O'Brien 2009). In England a lot of the observed interactions were control questions from adults to the children. The children seemed to be acutely aware of balance in power relationships both in England and Norway, reflecting this in their behaviour and play. Finally, Norwegians have a close relationship to the forest; using it in their leisure time; teachers and children were at ease in the woods, while in England this was not always the case.

### **What’s the point?**

Although a very small ethnographic study, it did highlight some of the pitfalls that can occur in the transference of ideas from one culture to the next. The expectations of increased activity, play and learning were not always realised although they were planned for. In the Norwegian nurseries the strong traditions “of letting the children be children” (Christjansson, 2006), enabled them to feel at ease with taking a back seat in the directing of activities. But for the English nursery teachers, with specific goals in all subject areas and Ofsted at the door, this may seem like not doing the job. Norwegian nursery staff will agree that it is important to have learning goals but they see an alternative way of achieving them. They place greater value on the social and emotional development of young children; this is the learning they plan for by the time a child leaves nursery at the age of six. Literacy and numeracy come into it along the way if the child is motivated (Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research, 2006). They have plenty of time compared to English nursery staff and Foundation Stage teachers. I felt these differences in perspectives were essential to the success or not of Forest Nursery.

In one English nursery, however, dialogue and risk tolerance, gradually changed over time. My influence on behaviour and the activity became apparent as my interactions with the children, as I got to know them, did not go unnoticed. The practitioners took up on some of my cues, giving increased opportunities for experimental child initiated play and there was a marked difference between the first and last trip out to the woods. Such is the effect of an ethnographic study where one becomes a part of the environment. Letting the children lead the way and engaging in things they found interesting was in the long run a less “risky” activity. When children collaborated in the planning of the trip, they were more engaged in what

they were doing and where they were going (Massey, 2009). What was happening was a gradual change in the teacher's approach where they considered not "what" one could be doing in Forest Nursery but the "how" one might do it.

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## Nº 143 'There's no place like home': a study of 'home' families in the pre-school years

By Nicola Kemp

The vast majority of young children in England now attend some form of early years setting before they start school (Bennett & Taylor, 2006) and early years education remains a political priority. Current policy debate centres on issues of 'high quality' and 'effective provision' (concepts which were investigated by the influential Effective Provision of Preschool Education (EPPE) project by DfES, 2003, Sylva et al, 2004). Equally for most parents the question is not whether to send their child to preschool, but which preschool to choose. This was something I knew to be true both from my study and also as a parent of three young children. However, when a close friend, Rebecca, decided that she was going to keep her daughter Katherine at home and not send her to preschool, I had questions. Why are some families choosing not to take advantage of the free provision of a preschool place for their child? What are the perceived (dis)benefits of this decision? What about school? Is the expectation that 'home' children will enter mainstream school? The EPPE study had identified a group of 'home' children – that is children with no or minimal preschool experience – which it compared with children attending different kinds of pre-schools. This provided valuable context, but I wanted to know more about the decision-making process that these families had gone through to keep their child at home. So I decided to conduct a small-scale study.

Starting with Rebecca and her network of contacts, I was able to find another three families (Sarah, Jenny and Kelly) who were keeping their child at home during their preschool years and who agreed to take part in the research. Each family was asked to keep a reflective diary for a week and then I went to see them in their homes to conduct an in-depth interview. The results were fascinating.



On the one hand, the decision not to send their child to a preschool or nursery seemed to be based on socio-emotional factors and the desire to nurture the parent/child relationship. This was expressed in a number of different ways but all the parents shared a confidence that they could best provide what their child needed and that the best place for a child was with its parents. As Rebecca argued "I know her better than anyone." This was particularly emphasized with respect to understanding their child's speech and non-verbal communication. Children's poor communication in preschool settings is an issue Flewitt (2005) has identified and these parents had concerns about whether their child would be understood away from the home. They also voiced genuine concerns about whether their child was ready to separate from them and the potential damage to their child's social and emotional well-being of being away from home. "She's not happy to go to anyone and never has been...when she's ready to be left, then we'll leave her. Until then, if she needs us around, that's fine by us" (Sarah)

However, equally important to their decision-making were educational factors. Giving their child a good education was a priority for all the parents I spoke to. The idea of instilling a love of learning was

something which was repeated during all the interviews and it was presented as a contrast to the philosophy of the existing (pre-school system). As Sarah articulated "I just want her to have a passion for learning which I think can be stifled by school sometimes." Concerns were raised about the "increasing drive to teach children younger and younger." as well as the formalisation of the early years curriculum "I don't believe in the EYFS. I mean I have to do it as a childminder, it's a requirement of my registration but I, I really object to pushing goals and developmental milestones on children" (Jenny). There was also concern over the adult/child ratios and the perceived need for children to conform at such an early age. As Sarah explained "Ruby has such a big personality and I'm not saying she's any different, but I think that going into preschool and then school would just crush her." Interestingly all parents referred to the early age at which children start compulsory education as being a factor in their decision to keep their child at home during the preschool years. "They start school so young, I want to make the most of it at the moment" (Kelly).

All the parents were very positive about their decision to keep their child at home, but they had found that other people could be critical particularly around the issue of socialization - "the first question everybody asks." However, as a group, these parents were very motivated to give their children access to a wide range of social experiences and opportunities. Formal activities such as gym, music, ballet and trampolining played an important role for some children. Friends and family were also vital parts of their everyday lives with many respondents referring to particular people they would meet up with on a regular basis. The parents also referred to the pressure to 'prove' to others that their children were not missing out educationally, for example, by adopting a structured approach and teaching reading and writing.

Thinking about the future, three of the four families were planning to home school their child, at least during the infant stage while Kelly was planning to send her daughter to school. Nine months have passed since I first started this research and I am still curious. Have the families stuck to their plans? Has it been like they thought it would be? Are there any regrets? My plan is to go back and revisit these families and to find out more about these families for whom there is "no place like home."



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As Astley and Buckshaw Children's Centre is a reasonably young establishment and is rapidly expanding its commodity as a stimulating place to be, it has had to expand on its already flourishing sessions. Up until August 2009, there were sessions on Stay and Play, Messy Play, Bounce and Rhyme and Baby Massage for the adults and children. However, it was decided to run a session specifically for babies – from new born to cruising and their parents / carers. We decided to name the session “Tiny Toes”.

Schore, (1994:78) states, “For the developing infant the mother essentially is the environment.” In recognition of this, part of the remit of the Children's Centre is to encourage parents' attachment with their children. This is essentially important during the first six months. The development of the brain is incomparable during the first six months of life to any other period. The most important areas of development during this stage are vision, linguistics, and emotional development. Owing to the fact that the areas of development of vision and emotion have a very short opening, it is of vital importance to capture this at a very early stage. During the next six months, baby's connections are primarily established for sight. However, the areas of short openings are speech and emotional development. Therefore, the capacity for language grows staggeringly during this period. The Tiny Toes group appeared to be the perfect opportunity to take advantage of these developmental stages. Balbernie (2009) reasons that optimal growth and development occurs within nurturing relationships

Fliers were produced and given to parents at other sessions and on baby visits that outreach workers attended. Every Children's Centre receives “Red Book” referrals. The Health Visitor makes the “Red Book Referral” to the centre by sending information regarding new babies which require visits in the area. These are otherwise known as “Baby Visits”.

The first session was attended by five mums and their babies. The EYFS states that we should “Establish and sustain a safe, welcoming, purposeful, stimulating and encouraging environment where children feel confident and secure and are able to develop and learn”, therefore, it was important that the room was warm and friendly when the parents and babies attended. We made a time-table of events for the following weeks, including a session on baby signing. As laid out in the EYFS, we should respect... “The individual and diverse ways in which children develop and learn from birth to the end of the foundation stage and thereafter” and the Tiny Toes sessions were going to be diverse and stimulating for both parent and baby. Practitioners also need to be prepared to be flexible to accommodate the needs and requests of individual parents and babies. Most importantly, we arranged for the Health Visitor to attend the session monthly to carry out a weighing clinic and drop-in advice session.

The Health Visitor attending the session monthly was a huge boost for the centre but more significantly, for the parents. The parents expressed a concern that they could not get to see their Health Visitor as often as they would like. They also complained that the weighing clinics at the doctors' surgeries were overcrowded and unfriendly.

*“There has been a sharp decline in the number of Health Visitors in many areas and the latest official report .... from the CPHVA (Community Practitioners and Health Visitors Association) shows it clearly:*

- *Health Visitors now have a far higher number of families to care for.  
85% report a rise in case loads in the past year alone*
- *In fact in the latest Health Visitor report out today, we find that 60% of Health Visitors have over 500 children to look after (the maximum recommended is 400)*

- *70% of Health Visitors said they don't have the time to help even the families that are the most in need."*

(Netmums:2009 - 18/10/2009)

Practitioners at the Children's Centre identified these needs and the last time the Health Visitor attended the Tiny Toes session, nineteen families attended, thus indicating strongly that the Health Visitor is still an invaluable resource to young families. Unfortunately, the lack of visits from health professionals in the post natal period for parents can be distressing and can lead the parent to feel isolated. Research shows that over 60% of new parents do not live near their extended families. (Netmums: 2009 – 18/10/2009) The Children's Centre can therefore pick up these cases and work with the parents to help promote a healthy mental and physical outcome for the family.

One week, we arranged for an Oral Health professional to attend the session. All of the mums were given toothbrushes for their babies, whilst watching a humorous, but practical and informative, show on oral hygiene.

*"Oral health promotion can be defined as public health actions to protect or improve oral health and promote oral well-being through behavioural, educational and enabling socio-economic, legal, fiscal, environmental, and social measures."*

(The National Health Promotion Strategy – Oral Health – 18/10/2009)

There is a high prevalence of problems with oral health and the impact on society and individuals can be immense. The pain and discomfort, never mind the expenditure is profound. Dental diseases can be more expensive to treat than heart disease or cancer. (The National Health Promotion Strategy – Oral Health – 18/10/2009) The causes of poor dental health are known to be poor diet, hygiene and smoking, which are all preventable and controllable.

Above all, Tiny Toes sessions encourage parents to socialise with their baby. Practitioners encourage adults to "Communicate sensitively and effectively with children from birth to the end of the Foundation Stage" as set out in the EYFS. Touch is fervently encouraged, along with making eye contact, listening to baby, talking with baby, responding to baby, and playing with a newborn baby. According to Nicholson (16/10/2009) "Helping baby develop by creating a strong bond with parents is a key component of attachment theory."

Practitioners at Astley and Buckshaw Children's Centre place great importance on developing positive relationships between children, parents/carers, practitioners, other professionals and the wider community. Our aim is to provide stimulating and attractive environments in which children can play and grow, enabling them to reach their full potential. We use the EYFS guidance to specifically help us in all aspects of the children's learning and development. The vital principles of these encompass inclusion and diversity. Through the formation of the Tiny Toes sessions, we can show that quality improvement has taken place.

*".... when both parent and child reap benefits, programme effectiveness is extended to the community as a whole, in economic as well as in quality of life terms."*

Shonkoff and Meisels (2000:Forward xiii)

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