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**The Well-Connected
Child: Developing a
relational approach for
practice with young
children.**

FINAL REPORT

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The Well-Connected Child: Developing a relational approach for practice with young children

Main Objectives & Context

In the first 5 or 6 years, before paying attention to lessons in conventional symbolic skills of reading, writing and mathematics, children move with imagination in a natural world, with loving relationships. The Russian poet Kornei Chukovsky calls them 'linguistic geniuses', talking creatively, without lessons, learning with companions of all ages. As Comenius said, with affectionate education by teachers who share the child's gifts in a small place that belongs to them as a community of learners, "all will go well".

In 2007 the Child's Curriculum group was set up by retired nursery head teachers, early years scholars and concerned parents, following the closure of a number of nursery schools in Edinburgh. The Child's Curriculum network has since grown continuously and developed a series of activities with the aim to support and improve practices in early years agencies in Scotland.

In September 2010, a Conference on *The Child's Curriculum: What is the Value of Early Childhood Education and Care* in the Royal College of Physicians in Edinburgh, heard experts review needs of children under school age, and of their parents, recognising well-informed policies of the Scottish Government, such as Getting It Right for Every Child, which were undermined by nursery closures. An evening event with over 100 delegates in the City Chambers of Edinburgh, *The Well-Connected Child*, was held on 7th November 2012 as part of the Economic and Social Research Council's Festival of Social Science addressing, from a multi-disciplinary perspective, the importance of relations for children's development and learning. A second one-day conference on 20th April 2013, *The Child's Curriculum II: From Ideas to Action*, again in the Royal College of Physicians, invited experts from other countries to compare how universal needs of children are met in different ways. These events, with presentations by distinguished speakers, are on our website -- <http://www.childscurriculum.org.uk/>

Stimulated by the success of these meetings, we applied to the Scottish Universities Insight Institute for a five seminars entitled *The Well-Connected Child*, to develop philosophical, scientific, and practical understanding of how young children can share life and learning confidently with their families and communities. With excellent support, four meetings were held in Spring and Summer 2013 at the SUll in Glasgow, and the fifth in October was hosted by the Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh. The aim of the seminar series was to bring together a multi-disciplinary academic scholarship with a multi-agency early years effort in Scotland with the focus of improving the lives and opportunities of our youngest children. By engaging experts from different disciplines and agencies in dialogue, we aimed to initiate developments towards a shared understanding of the ethics and approaches to children and childhood in everyday and professional practice that support children's development and well-being.

Knowledge and Understanding Resulting from the Programme

Experts from a range of disciplinary backgrounds were invited to advance and develop our understanding of the needs and virtues of babies and young children in their families and communities. A theme that linked the varied, rich and insightful contributions was an emphasis on the importance of relations between young children and their social, artificial and natural environments.

The first seminar on *The Child's Ecology of Relations* on 22 May 2013 was led by a philosopher, **Dr Pauline Phemister** of the University of Edinburgh. She spoke on *The Importance of Relations and their Social, Natural and Artificial Environments*. Philosophical understanding supports scientific knowledge that creative relationships are the source of meaning in life. How a young child acts in their social, natural and man-made environments in a web of connectedness determines their wellbeing, self-confidence and learning. **Prof. Colwyn Trevarthen**, a child psychologist at the University of Edinburgh, focused on the *Innate Values of Self-in-Relation*. Shared love and play guide the growing vitality and learning of infants and toddlers. These human impulses anticipate a happy and productive life in a community. **Patricia Santelices**, of the Mental Health and Wellbeing Team, City of Edinburgh Council described *Supporting Children's Vitality and Mental Health at Home, at School, at Play*. Changes in policy affirm that affectionate care is essential for a child's coping with life changes. To relate positively to their feelings and for confidence and a sense of belonging they need secure relationships with adults they trust.

Seminar 2, on 10 June 2013, entitled *The Child's Social Environment*, further defined sensitive emotional support. **Prof. Joshua Sparrow**, from Psychiatry at Harvard University, described *Patterns in Children's Early Social and Emotional Development and Working with Touchpoints*, a programme developed by Dr. T. Berry Brazelton. Parents regain confidence in caring for children, not by a focus on treatment of medical or psychological problems, but by re-humanising health care, shifting from 'child rescuing' to trust in parents' capacities, strengthening the family as part of the community. Guidance that anticipates how a child develops helps caregivers share the changes. **Dr Jonathan Delafield-Butt**, Early Years, University of Strathclyde spoke of *Attuning Feelings for Work with Children*. New work studying 'mirror neurons' in the brain confirms we perceive each other's intentions and feelings directly by sensing how bodies move. Effective use of this sympathy forms the foundation for good relationships in professional practice of any kind. **Kenny Spence** of the Gilmerton Child & Family Centre in Edinburgh and manager of Men in Childcare works on *Improving Children's Future by Providing Inclusive Services at the Earliest Opportunity*. A policy for child development must support inclusive access, meeting expectations of mothers, fathers, and other caregivers for lasting affectionate relationships with their children. These regulate the remarkable brain development before four years. Early years care must catch all cases needing our professional support. **Dr Suzanne Zeedyk**, from Psychology, University of Dundee confirmed the importance of *Real Understanding of Attachment for Early Years Staff*. Videos of infants in loving communication with caregivers helps train staff to appreciate Bowlby's theory of a baby's emotional attachment with the mother, and its interpretation by clinicians. Emotional sensitivity is needed when presenting staff evidence of inadequate parenting, which may arouse echoes of personal sadness.

Seminar 3, on 4 July 2013, directed attention to *The Child's Natural and Built Environments*. **Prof. Catharine Ward-Thompson** of the OPENspace Research Centre, University of Edinburgh, demonstrated *Engagement with the Natural and Built Environment for Children at Home, at School, and into their Teenage and Adult Years*. Natural spaces offer learning not available in homes or classrooms, and childhood habits of outdoor play remain through the lifespan, freeing imagination and confidence for exploring new places. Access to measured risk outdoors benefits both learning and lifelong health. **Dr Jenny Roe** from the School of the Built Environment, Heriot Watt University, confirmed the benefits of *Terrain-Led Support for Children and Teenagers with Special Needs*, demonstrating that education in forest schools can improve pedagogical practice, enabling reduction of formalities and improved child-teacher relations. Exposure to natural 'blue' light outdoors helps some pathologies, such as autism spectrum disorder. **Robin Duckett** and **Catherine Reding** of the Sightlines Initiative, Newcastle, practice *Developing Environments of Enquiry: Outdoor Learning in Nature*. Teaching that is sensitive to children's agency releases their creativity and confidence. Encounters outdoors invite exploration and discovery with classmates and teachers, and bringing ideas back to the classroom animates learning of more sedentary and focused interests.

Seminar 4 on 22 August 2013, addressed *The Child's Moral Environment*. **Prof. Darcia Narvaez** University of Notre Dame, Indiana, USA studies *The Development of Moral Feelings and the Generation of Community*. Unresponsive caregiving in early life with high levels of stress can lead to long-term physical and mental problems - greater aggressiveness in some individuals and submissiveness in others. The Family Life study shows benefits for both infant and mother of natural birth, breastfeeding, positive touch, responsiveness, free play, and shared childrearing. It demonstrates how loving attachment and companionship shapes the child's morality. **Dr Desmond Ryan** Honorary Fellow at School of Health in Social Science, University of Edinburgh spoke of *Love as a Moral System: The Relational Space of Self-Confident Children*. Teenagers in parts of Scotland show consistently low levels of self-esteem, which leads to suffering in young people and in society. In contrast, confident 12-14-year-old children in Valencia, Spain, were organised by, valued by, and well-connected to their family, friends and school. A well-rounded sense of being loved, rather than developing 'self-confidence', created 'co-confidence' or co- production of wellbeing for self, family and community. **Mark Smith**, Senior Lecturer and Head of Social Work, University of Edinburgh defined *Upbringing*, a concept of the pedagogical theorist Klaus Mollenhauer that enables a better understanding of 'parenting'. Most educational and 'child care' language is individualistic, legalistic and scientific, neglecting the cultural nature of child care. Human communities are moral, inter-dependent and inter-generational; they pass on a valued cultural heritage to eager learners so they may confidently face the future.

Seminar 5 on the 21 October 2013, entitled *Children's Early Learning Experiences: Policy & Practice*, held in the Scottish Parliament, Holyrood, Edinburgh, focussed on policy and practice, and the settings made for young children's education and care. The quality of a child's experiences depends not primarily on delivery of any specific programme or protection, but on the trusting and creative connections they make with other children, with adults who offer them attention, and in all environments. Speakers described different systems in Europe with respect to their underlying ethics and principles, their potential for creating democratic and caring learning spaces for children, and what can be learned for the future of Scottish early childhood education and care in policy and practice on the basis of

the ecological relational approach developed in this series. **Prof. Gunilla Dahlberg**, Professor Emerita of Education at Stockholm University and a leading international scholar of social policy for young children and their families, gave her views on *Ethics and Politics in Early Childhood Education*. Gunilla is a principal architect of Sweden's national policy concerning early childhood education and care. She believes that support for a 'knowledge and learning society' has led to a reductionist and negative way of understanding children's meaning-making and learning. So called "problem-children" are observed, and the concept of measurable 'quality' has become a powerful tool for normalising and taming children's desires, as well as for governing at a distance. We can make other ethical and political choices that change the way we describe and evaluate children's lives, and how we respond to their desires. **Dr Ingela Naumann**, Senior Lecturer in Social Policy at the University of Edinburgh and a member of the RSE Young Academy of Scotland expressed her concerns about *Children's Access to Education and Learning Spaces in- International Perspective*. The multiple benefits of access to good quality early childhood education and care (ECEC) provision for young children, particularly for those from disadvantaged backgrounds, have been widely acknowledged by researchers and policy-makers. But are the national systems at the beginning of the 21st century fit for the purpose? If the complex issues around 'access' and 'quality' are not taken seriously, the new policy-emphasis on ECEC across Europe may actually lead to increasing the gaps between children from different backgrounds and deepen inequalities rather than creating opportunities and well-being for all. **Dr Jukka Mäkelä**, a child psychiatrist, is a Senior Advisor at the National Institute for Health and Welfare (THL), Department for Children, Adolescents and Families in Finland. Currently he is developing multi-sector work with children who have been victims of abuse. He is a member of the research group on Children's Stress Regulation and Learning at the University of Helsinki, Department of Teacher Education. His talk presented *How Knowledge About the Developing Child Supports Inclusion in Early Childhood Education and Care*. In our society, the two main communities for the child are the (extended) family and groups organized for age-related levels of education and care, in which the offer of inclusion is a value in itself. Primary prevention of stressful social exclusion depends on meeting the different developmental needs of individual children, offering the attuned adult presence they need to regulate inner stress to a level that supports exploration, learning, and prosocial behaviour. Sensitive responsiveness can be learned with reflective observation of the ways in which children express their feelings. When engaged, a child is by nature interested in others, in being a part of a group and active creators of their own learning. When the level of stress is high, their impulses shift to fight or flight, and both prosocial behaviour and learning cease. Bringing children back to social engagement requires signals of adult responsiveness oriented to individuals and to the group. This pedagogical sensitivity is, itself, a method of inclusion. **Prof. Aline-Wendy Dunlop**, Emeritus Professor in the School of Education, University of Strathclyde, is the Scottish Co-ordinator for a European funded International Research Staff Exchange Project on Educational Transitions and she chairs Autism Network Scotland. She was awarded an MBE in June this year. In her talk on *Scottish Early Years: Values and Culture - Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow* she reflected on trends in Scottish early years policies and practices, the values that have proved to withstand times of social and political change, and what still makes for a distinctively Scottish approach that draws on our history and culture but is potentially dynamic, forward looking and puts children and their families first. Aline-Wendy believes passionately in the importance of the Early Years in Scotland.

After fruitful questions and answers with the speakers, a Panel Discussion to place on *Early Childhood Education and Care Futures in Scotland - Policy and Practice*, chaired by **Prof. Bronwen Cohen** (Social Policy, University of Edinburgh), heard views from **Tam Baillie** (Commissioner for Children and Young People, Scotland); **Susan Bolt** (Scottish Government, Early Years Team); **Heather Douglas** (Glasgow Council); **Chris Miles** (Past Pre School Education Coordinator for Fife Council; Chair Forest Schools Group, Forestry Commission); **Prof. Helen Penn** (Early Childhood, University of East London) and **Julie Wild** (National Parent Forum of Scotland).

These seminars have proved a valuable opportunity for policy makers and practitioners to engage with internationally leading research in a lively, accessible, and dynamic format that equally has informed the direction of future research. This seminar series developed a continuous thread on the nature of children's learning as affectively engaging adventures that require co-participation – not just instruction – reflected from the philosophy of social understanding through best practice, including clinical practice and neuropsychological research, and toward informing policy-making at local, regional and at national levels.

Key Recommendations for End User / Policy Communities

1. Children's learning is first affective, i.e. felt and emotional, and engaging, requiring professional participation that engages with the whole child – her interests, ambitions, and intentions in the rich tapestry of life.
2. Supporting parents is the best way to support their children. Feelings underpin all children's experiences and behaviours and are significantly formed in child-parent relations. These must be nurtured to generate positive ones by supporting parents to allow them resources of time and space to engage with and participate meaningfully in their children's lives.
3. Children require stable relations with adults and other children. Professional early years care and education must work to enable stable, meaningful relations between teachers/caregivers and children, for e.g. by reducing staff turnover in nurseries and by assigning a single Public Health Nurse/Health Visitor to each child.
4. The nature and quality of children's environments are reflected in the development of the children. Outdoor play, learning, and adventure is equally important as indoor play, learning, and adventure and the two can, in fact, complement each other with sensitive guidance from engaging early years professionals.
5. Early years policy must adapt itself to treat children's relations with people and places as the first organising principle around which the pragmatics of provision can grow.
6. There is widespread agreement the Nordic model of early years policy and practice, with its enabling support for parents, focus on integrated outdoor-indoor learning through play and creative interpersonal interaction, and attention to meaningful personal relations is the direction Scotland wishes to pursue. (And their school achievement scores prove its later-life effectiveness).

Main outputs and impact

This programme has informed and developed debate on the direction of travel for Scotland's early years policy and practice with world-leading expertise from both academic research and professional early years practice. It has contributed important perspective on the nature of children not only as active, participatory learners, but as persons constituted by their relations with other persons, especially with their parents, friends, and carers. We have also seen how both the built and the natural environment contributes to their well-being and development.

These seminars have proved excellent opportunity for practitioners, researchers, and policy makers to share best practice and to discuss new evidence for best practice with given internationally-leading examples. Policy makers have become engaged with new research and dialogue between policy makers, practitioners, and academics. This multidisciplinary, multiagency dialogue has been both stimulating and fruitful, covering a broad range of concerns, beginning with philosophical foundations and extending through scientific research and examples of best practice that reflected these to arrive at new, informed policy discussion, notably held at the Scottish Parliament. This was a creative and worthwhile adventure.

The opportunity to bring key research to a Scottish context and support the dissemination of this has been a major benefit. Further, it was agreed that it is important that practitioners, academics and policy makers meet together regularly to be able to understand each other. We all tend to have different ways of communicating and through discussion in forums and general networking, we were able to get to know, and respect, each other's points of view, experience and working practices. This has helped generate informed multi-agency discussion and dialogue on key areas within Early Years and allowed for networking (both internationally and equally important, nationally) between these specialisms. It has also been an opportunity to bring research to life, presenting research in an informative and manageable way accessible to a multidisciplinary and multiagency audience.

The challenge now lies ahead to turn agreed upon direction into practice, given economic constraints. This will be the topic of our next work.

Follow-up Activities e.g. papers produced; dissemination events etc.

A Briefing from the Centre for Research on Families and Relationships summarising the material presented here will be made available and distributed nationally in the New Year.

Selected papers from this series will be published in the forthcoming "The Child's Curriculum: Working with the natural values of young children" (OUP, 2015).