

Speech to the FPI's ELPP conference

London, 25 June 2008

Parents as partners in early years learning

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

I'm delighted to be here, and grateful to Mary, Honor and her team at the Family and Parenting Institute for organising it – and, of course, for leading the consortium of agencies that took part in the Early Learning Partnership Project.

It's fantastic to see so many people here - it reflects the importance of the role of parents, the difference that can make and what we want to achieve for children.

This was a bold project we wanted to deepen our understanding of how we can get vulnerable parents more involved in their child's early learning.

Having this insight and evidence is, of course, absolutely crucial as we look to get the most out of the growing infrastructure of early years support in this country.

It's an exciting time for the sector – a time of real growth and big opportunity.

- By 2010, there will be a Sure Start Children's Centre for every community – already we have nearly 3,000 up and running.
- There's also the entitlement to free nursery care, which we have pledged to expand to 15 hours for every three and four year old by 2010.
- And we're investing £100m over three years to give free nursery education to more than 20,000 two-year old children in the very poorest parts of the country.

The evidence for making early years support an essential part of a child's development – another universal service if you like – is now incontrovertible.

We know – from Professor Feinstein's authoritative studies – that the formative years represent our biggest chance to sever the link between disadvantage and low achievement.

Research tells us that by the age of 22 months children from disadvantaged backgrounds can start to slip back behind other children from more advantaged backgrounds in their learning development.

From this point, a deepening gulf in their development and achievement sets in during every subsequent year.

So if we want to make real progress on social mobility, we must strike early, and we must strike effectively.

For my generation of the 1940s and 50s, the circumstance of your birth was not such a disadvantage. By the 1970s it was. We now have an opportunity with a new generation to break the link between circumstances at birth and future prospects.

And that means working in close partnership with parents.

The ongoing EPPSE study shows that high quality parental engagement in early years learning is key, having a positive effect on a child's attainment and behaviour at every stage up to the age of 10 and beyond 10 as well.

So it's absolutely vital that we get the interface right between early years settings and families, and that we get an accurate picture of what's stopping some parents from supporting their child's development.

[Beyond 'Shameless']

One of the most important things that this evaluation does – and, by the way, let me also thank the team at Oxford University for doing a first class job on this – is to challenge the misconceptions around vulnerable parents.

It encourages us to 'think again' in the light of real evidence, not supposition or prejudice.

And I think this is a report, first and foremost, that perhaps Chris Grayling should read very carefully.

Contrary to his deeply unhelpful – not to say ignorant – depiction of ‘Shameless’-style parents, many of the vulnerable families taking part in this Project already had satisfactory or good parenting skills.

They showed real emotional warmth and support for their child’s learning – they really wanted to do well and have a real commitment to do more for their children. So we’re not generally dealing with ‘negligent’ or ‘bad’ parenting here.

In a lot of cases, these parents need just a little help, but help of a particular kind, to build up their motivation for supporting their children – instead, they need practical ideas, advice and confidence to do the right things at the right time.

[Being more ambitious for parents]

Often it’s simple things – getting parents to sing nursery rhymes with the children, read with them, play with letters and numbers – indeed, just talking expressively most of the time, that have the biggest effect. Many don’t realise this kind of play and communication is what’s needed.

Many parents reported a new confidence in their parenting abilities, greater appreciation for the skills of the professionals involved, and fresh ideas for playing and talking with their children.

The report is full of anecdotes showing the difference this makes to parent and child.

One parent writes that she's now more positive with her child, and more encouraging.

Another says that they now try to encourage their child to do things himself, so he realises what he's capable of.

Parents also said the experience improved their relationship with the child, with better understanding and stronger emotional and physical bonds – more cuddles, more shows of affection, more attachment and frankly, in many cases, more fun.

This is great to hear, and chimes with what we know Sure Start Children's Centres are already doing around the country.

The national evaluation, published in March, shows Children's Centres are improving children's social development, behaviour and independence, while also encouraging developing better parenting skills.

Today's evaluation shows that ELPP techniques can achieve the same results for the most vulnerable families – providing we look beyond exultation and awareness-raising to real, practical advice for parents.

Just as we need to be more ambitious for children, this report shows we need to be equally ambitious with parents: giving them

more credit, and thinking about what we can do to help them stretch their children, rather than just covering the basics.

I accept there isn't a one-size-fits-all solution, of course.

As the report makes clear, vulnerable families have different needs – from poor literacy to mental health problems to social exclusion.

And this is the essential challenge facing local authorities and managers of settings, too:

How do we establish a flexible model to help parents in such a variety of different circumstances?

And how do we upskill early years parenting practitioners particularly to meet this challenge?

[Improving outreach]

It's important, first, that we have the capacity in the system to spot issues and diagnose problems early on.

It's encouraging to hear that the early years professionals in the Project demonstrated a real knack for identifying family needs once they were engaged with the relevant services.

That gives us a really solid foundation for an effective preventative approach to possible learning delay amongst children.

But I agree we also need to do more to improve how we deal with what some call ‘hard to reach’ families – those who can’t or won’t access help and who we can’t reach easily, for whatever reason.

That’s why we announced in the Children’s Plan that we’ll invest in more outreach services to work alongside every Sure Start Children’s Centre.

We’ll also be establishing core principles and standards for outreach – supported by training and additional funding enabling up to 5,000 practitioners to improve their skills and establish a more consistent understanding of what we mean by outreach.

[Partnership]

The second important dimension is strong multi-agency support.

Again, it’s very encouraging that effective partnership working was one of the key strengths of the Project.

We need ‘a coalition of all the talents’ to achieve better results for vulnerable families – and that absolutely must include voluntary and community organisations, like those involved in the ELPP.

They have unique skills and experiences, and local authorities must get them involved and working effectively alongside them.

The briefing document on ELPP which we prepared for local authorities – and which we’ll now update in light of this evaluation

– emphasises the VCS role and also stresses the key role local authorities have in communicating and making the links between the different agencies – at both strategic level and on the ground, taking the ring and forging multi-agency relationships.

This is crucial for smoothing out the tensions between VCS and statutory services picked up in the report.

It's important that local authorities help to make inter-agency partnerships work smoothly and effectively.

Of course, this deep culture change takes time.

But it requires strong leadership at the local level to get everyone to leave aside institutional boundaries and work to a shared mission.

[Workforce reform]

Third and finally, there's a lot we can draw from the Project as we develop our Children's Workforce Reform strategy.

The report talks of 'a major shift in focus', with services starting to see adults as parents rather than clients, for whatever specialist adult service they may be seeking, and putting a renewed emphasis on their role as supporters of their children's learning.

And it finds this was an enduring influence, with efforts to sustain the interventions or new ways of working continuing after the programme ended, suggesting the start to a shift in culture.

This appetite to go further in future is presented as a challenge in the report.

Maybe I could press on this point: yes, it is a challenge but it's also a massive opportunity that we should capitalise on.

For instance, the popularity of the PEAL training – for which I must thank the NCB – shows the importance of continued professional development in raising standards in parental engagement.

Quite simply, we need a world class early years workforce that can respond appropriately to the whole family context including - and I'm very passionate about this – fathers and grandparents, as well as mothers.

The mother should not be the default family member. The father and the grandparents should be remembered and addressed, too.

Improving parental engagement in early years is actually part of a much bigger piece of work the Children's Workforce Development Council is undertaking with key partners.

Together they're mapping all professionals who work with parents and families – looking at the core tasks and skills to develop a

clear career framework supported by appropriate training and development.

This work will sit inside the Integrated Qualification Framework and will take centre stage in our efforts to make sure all relevant practitioners have the appropriate skills for working with parents and families.

[Conclusion]

It's obvious that we have to capitalise on the success of the Project.

This evaluation really throws the gauntlet down to local authorities and to me and my Department.

For local authorities, it puts a strong argument forward for mainstreaming these programmes into their Children and Young People Plans.

They should now see that effective partnership with parents in early years will help them meet their statutory duty to 'narrow the gap' in outcomes between disadvantaged children and their peers.

But more than this, the evaluation shows the social and moral imperative – the need to prioritise activity that can make such a radical difference both to the child and the most vulnerable parents.

It's my Department's job, meanwhile, to help local authorities put these approaches into practice.

We'll be distilling the evaluation report into revised guidance on ELPP, taking on board the key lessons that we've learnt and helping local authorities to make it happen in their area.

And we'll take on board the challenges identified in these findings, as we refine our workforce strategy and as we develop the pilots of the new two-year-old free early years entitlement – which already, but we will emphasise and include a very strong parental engagement aspect.

So let me end by thanking again everyone who took part in the Project, and the Oxford University team who conducted the evaluation.

This extremely valuable piece of work takes us another step forward in making sure all children – not some – get a fair and equal and absolutely the best start in life.

And I'm confident, and will make sure myself, that all this good work will feed through into mainstream practice very soon – helping many more parents get the confidence and skills they need to support their child's learning.

This is an important goal – one we're really committed to for children being born now and with us in their early years – to break

the link between the circumstances of their birth and their future prospects.

And these new insights and perspectives will help us achieve it. Changing the prospects of a whole generation – what could be better than that?