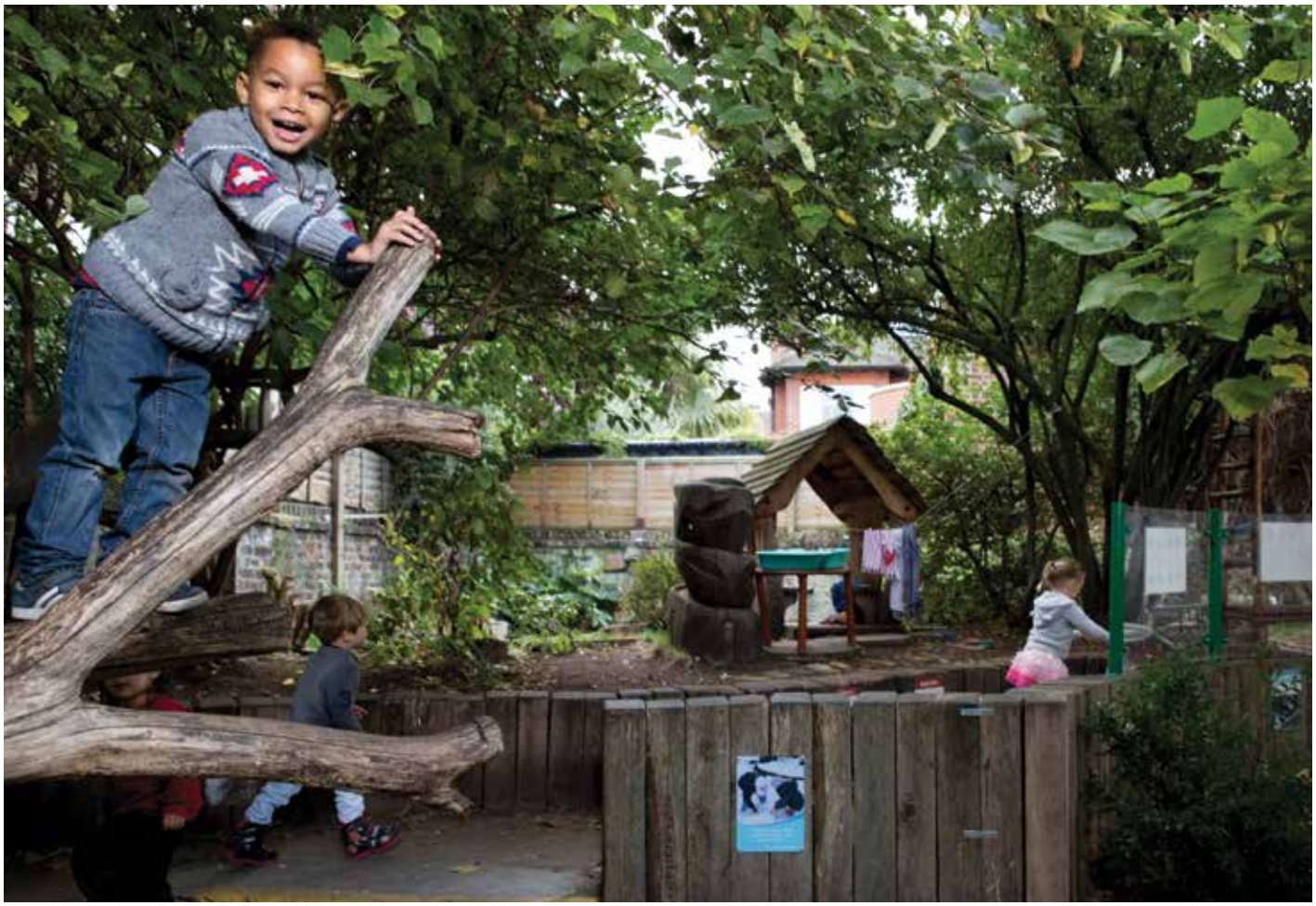


All about... trust

Trust and respect – both between children and practitioners, and parents and practitioners – are central to effective early years practice and pedagogy, explains *Kathryn Solly*

PHOTOGRAPHS AT CHELSEA OPEN AIR NURSERY SCHOOL AND CHILDREN'S CENTRE, LONDON BY TERI PENGILLEY

Trust is central to high-quality early years practice and pedagogy. 'Trust children,' urged American author and educator John Holt, adding, knowingly, 'Nothing could be more simple, or more difficult' (1967).

Only by trusting a child, can they learn to become trusting. Only by trusting children's innate curiosity to direct their own learning can we provide them with the freedom to follow their own interests and embark on new challenges. And only by trusting children's judgement can we support their ability to assess and take risks.

Trust within the early years is not limited to that between practitioner and child. As an early years workforce, we need the trust of Government to deliver best practice with confidence. And we need to trust parents – and they us – to build a holistic picture of the child and their needs, and pass on key messages about early learning and development.

Trust can be defined as a 'firm belief in the reliability, truth, or ability of someone or something', and allied to that is respect – the 'feeling of deep admiration for someone or something elicited by their abilities, qualities, or achievements'. Recently, I have questioned the strength of both within the early years sector, and when I asked members of Keeping Early Years Unique (KEYU) for their views, I found I was not alone.

One response encapsulates perfectly the importance of trust – and the hurt when it is broken: 'I personally find it hard to trust anyone over four foot tall as I've been hurt by so many. We take these children into our care at the most important time. It's a privilege and the first sign of trust is when a child holds your hand. If we don't have trust we have nothing.

'Parents trust us to keep their child safe; trust our judgement and professionalism to enable their child to flourish; trust us to support their child and their family when needs be and trust us to ready their child for the next step in their education. Each child has different needs and they need to trust in order to experience new things and take risks. Without it we cannot fulfil what the EYFS should be about.' ➤

Other KEYU members highlight elements of distrust and disapproval between practitioners and parents:

'I think trust from parents is lacking due to the media only ever reporting bad news, tarring everyone with the same brush, thinking we have some ulterior motive in wanting to work with children.'

'Parents wrap children up in cotton wool and don't allow risk-taking.'

Importantly, another notes, 'Building trust is a continual process.'

The EYFS is framed around children's need to be safe, nurtured, connected to others and motivated to learn by risk-taking, with trust and respect the cornerstones in meeting those needs. So, any reflection on trust and best practice needs to consider three main elements:

- Providing a safe and secure environment
- Promoting Positive Relationships
- Supporting positive interactions.

TRUST AND THE CHILD

The bottom line is that humans – whether adults or children – don't learn if they don't trust or feel trusted. Trusting children's innate drive to learn lies at the heart of early years pedagogy. Friedrich Froebel gave natural play educational status because of its potential to lift children to a higher level of functioning. This view is also evident in Susan Isaacs' work, in which real education maximised the child's inner motivation to develop their own learning further if supported appropriately.

Brain research is reinforcing the need for trust in early learning as 'cognitive neuroscience findings suggest that the neural mechanisms underlying emotion regulation may be the same as those underlying cognitive processes' (Bell and Wolfe 2004). 'Together, emotion and cognition contribute to paying attention, decision-making, and learning' (Cacioppo and Berntson 1999).

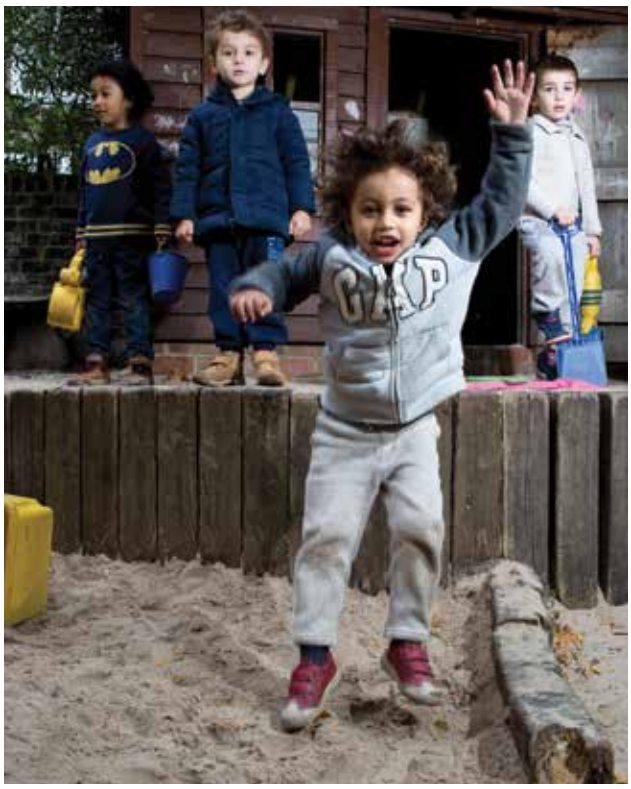
With most learning in the early years occurring in the context of emotional support, children, therefore, need to experience trust in situations that link with their own ideas, their capacity to play a pivotal role in their learning and their innate ability to assess hazard and risk.

Critical to achieving this is viewing children not as fragile but as amazing learners who can self-regulate their behaviour and use their limitless potential. Vital too are constant relationships, consistent expectations of children's behaviour and a 'secure' learning environment. In such a safe and trusting space, the adult will allow children the freedom and choice to pursue their interests, while the child will embark on the new and challenging without fear.

Doing something for the first time is crucial in child development. Experiencing the new and unfamiliar is happening almost all the time to babies and such challenges continue for young children. If they are rushed into

Trust enables adults and children to learn

If we don't have trust we have nothing. Without it, we cannot fulfil what the EYFS should be about



EARNING RESPECT

If children don't have respect for peers, authority or themselves, it's almost impossible for them to succeed.

Respect is not the same as obedience. Children can obey adults because they are afraid and know it is the safest option. The best way to teach respect is to show it, and through such experiences, children start to know what respect feels like, to understand its importance and to give it to others. This is as important as love.

Thus, children need to be understood and valued as unique individuals. If they are talked down to or wrapped up in cotton wool and their wishes and interests disregarded, they learn not to respect adults.

While early years teams can show and teach children about respect, parents have the most influence on how respectful children become.

It is crucial, therefore, that practitioners demonstrate respect to families. Children are quick to perceive any lack of respect between adults and aren't blind to the hypocrisy of an adult telling them to trust their teachers and peers while disrespecting the child's family.

an experience, a new place or opportunity and told not to be silly or scared, they will begin to doubt the adult, and so trust is damaged. Conversely, being given time to observe and approach something new at their individual pace will be far more successful.

Our trust of children has to be genuine too. One KEYU member notes, 'I never forget I have parents' most treasured gifts and the children themselves seem to know innately if you genuinely care or not.' And that trust needs to be visible. Children naturally scan adults' faces in search of approval, to please and for a sense of belonging. Any signs of disapproval may be interpreted as failure, causing the child to retreat from learning or become stressed and anxious.

The result is the same when practitioners' lack of trust causes them to over-control children – often due to current pressures to deliver narrow learning outcomes and produce performance data. As well as eroding children's ability to learn for themselves, over-control also insidiously creates a culture that undermines children's confidence and trust in adults.

The key person system

Central to building trust in an early years setting is the key person approach. The key person is a meticulous professional with a pedagogical responsibility to create and ensure a secure emotional base for the child. Through it, the child learns about trust and feels secure in their play and routines. It is 'a way of working in which the whole focus and organisation is aimed at enabling and supporting close attachments between individual children and individual practitioners' (Elfer, Goldschmied and Selleck 2003).

The approach recognises that a child is distressed by differences and comforted by the familiar. Thus a key person, whose role embodies 'an emotional relationship as well as an organisational strategy' (2003) builds trust and respect like a parent and creates 'islands of intimacy' for small groups of children to receive undivided adult attention. It also recognises the importance of creating and maintaining a strong 'triangle of trust' between child, parent and practitioner.

TRUST AND PARENTS

Without trust and respect between practitioners and parents, a child's emotional and learning needs will neither be fully understood nor, ultimately, met. As a KEYU member points out, 'If parents don't trust us by talking openly, then we may never know what they are going through and subsequently why a child is behaving as they are.'

Where parents are judged ineffective, strategies to help families are less effective, the whole environment becomes less nurturing and practitioners may limit a child's potential.

Parents are 'children's first and most enduring educators' (*Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage*, QCA 2000), and by working in genuine partnership with them, involving them in essential everyday practice within a learning community, practitioners can:

- gain an in-depth understanding of a child's culture and background
- build a holistic picture of and provide more effectively for each child's learning
- explain to families the importance of their child enjoying developmentally appropriate experiences that involve freedom, choice, challenge and risk
- empower parents and leave them feeling more confident in enjoying their child's company and taking them out into the wider world. (Their increased confidence rubs off on children, so boosting their healthy development.)

Building trusting relationships with families should start at the initial contact meeting. Here, it should be made clear that staff value their knowledge and understanding of their own child and that their child's key person will provide the vital link between home and nursery.

For relationships to build and strengthen, practitioners should:

- aim to create a culture of voluntary association, so nurturing an expectation of choice for all. When there is real choice, trust deepens
- be clear about personal obligations and expectations of others
- be a genuine listener, prepared to take others' views into account
- be alert and respond to any challenges in building relationships with families – for example, when a setting serves a very mobile or diverse community of families. Initial training and ongoing CPD to support professional confidence and ➤

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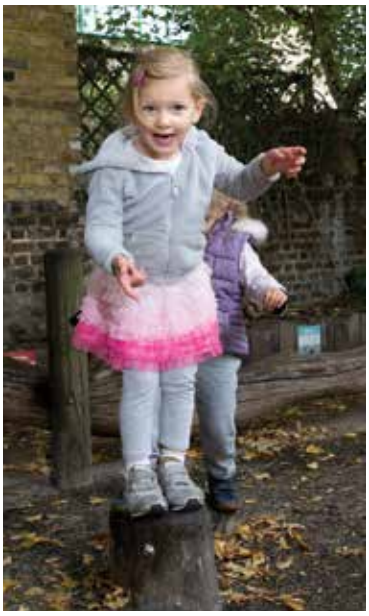

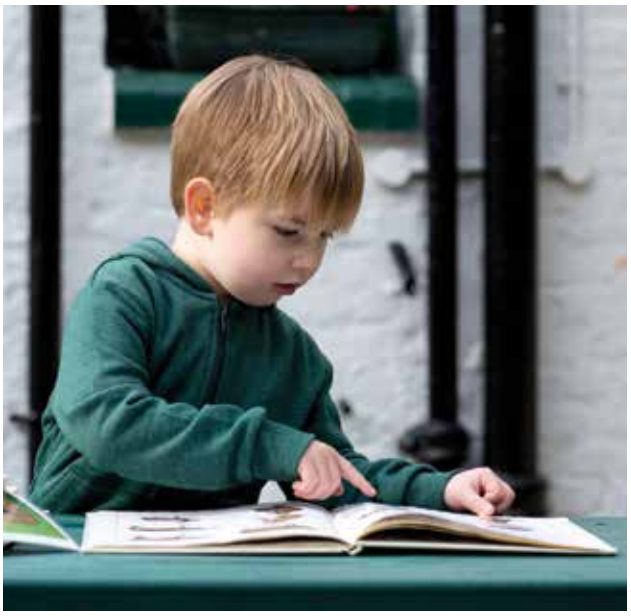

competence is particularly important where there are differences in staff and families' background, ethnicity, culture, life experience and religion. A lack of knowledge often leads to misunderstanding, distrust and lower expectations. Inexperienced practitioners may, for example, misinterpret a child's poor language skills and take a deficit approach to their learning.

The scale of the task in working with families can sometimes be daunting, if not overwhelming. One KEYU member says, 'There are so many parent internet pages and a shocking number of parents who raise issues with Ofsted. These issues are passed onto children who hear parents talking and say things like, "Tell me if X touches you"'.

Practitioners can be verbally or physically threatened or attacked by parents overwhelmed by their emotions or mental health problems. Ultimately, maintaining – or rebuilding – trust with families rests with high levels of trust within the staff team.

BUILDING TRUST: KEY POINTS

General

- Keep in mind that best practice hinges on good communication – spoken and unspoken.
- Be confident, calm and open.
- Admit your mistakes and accept responsibility.
- Be genuine, as children and adults sense insincerity very easily.
- Do not take criticism personally, be it from a child, parent or colleague.
- Be reliable, and if you cannot deliver, explain why.
- Don't confuse being liked with being trusted.
- Remember: 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.'

Children

- Treasure each child as your own. Smile!
- Be fair and equitable.
- Accept children's word as true; give them the benefit of the doubt.
- Learn with and from children, giving them plenty of time, attention and opportunity to follow their interests and ideas.
- Trust and support children's judgement and capacity to take risks.
- Discuss with parents the importance of appropriate expectations of children, and high-quality and child-initiated learning experiences.
- Ask rather than expect children to try new experiences, and if they find it challenging provide different approaches to support them.
- Encourage, empathise and foster exploration and creativity.
- Listen non-judgementally, take joint decisions and compromise.
- Act calmly and eliminate anything that is causing stress to children.
- Limit demands on children and prioritise trust, respect and responsibility – key to becoming a responsible member of society.
- Focus on relationships, friendships, creativity and what 'builds' learning and well-being, rather than what deconstructs them.

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TRUST AND THE TEAM

Mutual trust and support within an early years team builds staff confidence and rubs off on parents and children, so practitioners:

- can talk honestly about what is working well and what needs to change. Without trust, no-one is willing to be 'vulnerable' and engage in genuine conversations
- feel safe to try new ideas
- can rise to challenges and work outside their comfort zone
- stand up for what is right and best for children, while continuing to nurture trust
- take positive risks within the climate of frequent inspections and external judgements.

Here, settings should reflect on:

Relational trust, which is based upon the interdependent relationships of all parties understanding each other's roles, responsibilities and obligations. Relational trust has been found to flourish in smaller settings because of more face-to-face interactions and less bureaucracy creating stronger ties and less complex social networks.

Personal regard, which is important as to how individuals discern trust. For example, the personal style of the leader or manager, their openness and willingness to reach out to others in the community, can create a strong ethos of trust regardless of diverse backgrounds.

Personal integrity, which shapes how everyone discerns that trust exists. This requires a culture of transparency, with clear policies, procedures and induction processes that are implemented consistently, so all staff know the process for improvement, expectations of them and the non-negotiables. Within such a culture, any incidents of negligence or incompetence are not allowed to persist and are dealt with fairly.

Professional competence – here, being consistent and nurturing are two of the most important qualities practitioners can offer to help a child and their family to develop trust, and these in turn cultivate respect. ■

With thanks to members of Keeping the Early Years Unique, http://keyu.co.uk