

## NEW WRITING

### *Families look to their preschool for support. But who will support preschool staff?*

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Carolyn Blackburn was employed by Worcestershire Pre-School Learning Alliance as a Parent and Toddler Visitor until January 2008, providing advice and support to preschool staff, and practical and emotional support to

families. Previously she worked in early years settings across Worcestershire in a support and management capacity and has also worked in an LEA reception class supporting children on the Autistic Spectrum as well as children with complex communication needs and general learning difficulties. She is currently employed by Sunfield Research Institute\* as a Research Assistant looking at Foetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorders. She also acts in advisory capacity to a local preschool and is now on the voluntary management committee for the Pre-School Learning Alliance, a national educational charity.

\*[www.sunfield.org.uk/research\\_department.htm](http://www.sunfield.org.uk/research_department.htm)

#### **Summary**

The Pre-School Learning Alliance (PLA), as a national educational charity offering professional support to over 15,000 preschools, has a positive impact on the care and education of around 800,000 young children and their families every year. The charity actively promotes parental involvement in all aspects of its work. In November 2007 Worcestershire Pre-School Learning Alliance undertook a Practitioner-Led Research Project funded by the Children's Workforce Development Council to discover what support parents need when their child is diagnosed with an illness or disability.

The research project also looked at how preschool staff support children with Special Educational Needs (SEN) attending their settings and their families. Questionnaires were sent to 30 families and 100 preschools. A total of 8 families and 44 preschools responded. In addition 7 families and 10 preschools provided face-to-face interviews. The following report draws on that research to discuss the services available to preschools from other agencies to facilitate them in supporting children with SEN and their families.

## Introduction

With an increasing number of children attending pre-school settings presenting unidentified and emerging Special Educational Needs (SEN), the opportunity and necessity for preschool staff to provide support to vulnerable families is immense. With the ever changing dynamics of family structure such staff could in some cases be the only support available to families who have a range of practical and emotional support needs.

Partly because of an increasing number of children benefiting from advances in medical science, the number of children attending preschools with undiagnosed and emerging SEN is set to increase in the future, to the extent that:

*Improved diagnosis, better survival rates, and a growing incidence of complex disabilities such as autism have resulted in a 62% increase in the number of disabled children living in the UK.*

(Carpenter 2005, p18).

Professor Barry Carpenter, Chief Executive of Sunfield School in Clent in the West Midlands and father of a daughter with Down Syndrome, talks about families of children with a disability/SEN being in a state of 'chronic vulnerability' (Carpenter 1998, p77). In my work with families, I have supported parents for whom I am certain that description is a reality, including a single father whose baby son leaves each visit to his Paediatrician with yet another

'label' implying further complications in his young life. This parent wore his 'chronic vulnerability' on his shirtsleeve, and he was able to voice his anguish and share his tears with me. Other parents do not find it easy to talk about emotions and feelings, making it more difficult for staff to identify what their support needs are.

It is essential, therefore, that preschool staff feel confident and able to identify and meet such needs, and that they are supported in these endeavours by other agencies, including statutory and voluntary organisations. It is also important that training to support their role is accessible and affordable.

## Support from other agencies

As the Table below shows, less than half of the 44 preschools who responded to the PLA's questionnaire were 'very confident' in supporting families of children with SEN. Specific factors affecting this lack of confidence include:

- difficulty in accessing statutory services when support is required to meet an individual child's needs
- lack of information about who to contact and when
- not being included in report circulation from other agencies
- feeling undervalued by other educational establishments such as Local Authority (LA) nurseries and reception classes on transition from preschool to nursery or school.

Area of support provided by preschool staff to families	Staff confidence in meeting need		
	Not Confident	Confident	Very Confident
Signposting parents to other services	19%	50%	31%
Providing Practical Support	10%	55%	35%
Providing Emotional Support	0%	55%	45%

**Table 1: Levels of confidence amongst preschool staff to meet families' needs**

The main point of contact for preschool staff when supporting children with SEN is the Area Special Educational Needs Co-ordinator (SENCo) employed by the Local Authority Early Years and

Childcare Service (EYCS). Their role is to ensure children have access to a broad and balanced curriculum and to support staff in understanding the learning needs of children

with SEN and the importance of raising their achievement. In Worcestershire there are just five Area SENCos to cover the whole of the county. With 83% of preschools attempting to access support from this service in the academic year 2006 - 2007 and with 40% of those preschools stating that the service was difficult to access, it is not difficult to see why the Team

Manager for Inclusion at Worcestershire's EYCS would like to see the number of Area SENCos doubled.

Other agencies can be equally difficult for preschools to access in their endeavours to provide the best possible service for children and families, as the following table shows:

Name of Agency	Accessibility and Ease of Use for Preschool Staff		
	Number of preschools who have accessed support % of 44	Number of preschools who found the agency easy to access	Number of preschools who found the agency difficult to access
Area SENCo	83%	60%	40%
Mentor Teacher	81%	79%	21%
Speech and Language Therapist	78%	70%	30%
Pre-School Learning Alliance staff	69%	100%	0%
WCC Development Officer	62%	100%	0%
Portage Service	31%	30%	70%
Educational Psychologist	23%	60%	40%
Social Worker	19%	63%	37%
Occupational Therapist	19%	62%	38%
Specialist Support Centre	12%	40%	60%
Physical Disability Outreach Service	7%	66%	33%
Home Start	5%	100%	0%
ICAN Centre	2%	100%	0%

**Table 2: Ease of accessibility of external agencies for preschool staff in meeting the needs of families**

Sometimes the only way to meet a child's needs safely and adequately within a pre-school setting is to provide one-to-one adult support. The funding for such support would ideally be available from the EYCS, but preschools have reported that this is not always the case. This leaves preschools with little choice but to fund such support themselves, leaving them financially drained and putting undue pressure on staff time and resources. This demoralises staff and further undermines their confidence.

### **The VIP Special Needs Scheme**

Since 1991 the PLA Worcestershire County Sub-Committee has managed the VIP (Very Important Person) Special Needs Scheme which has successfully supported children under five years of age who have a disability/illness to be fully included in all pre-school activities. This scheme, with six staff employed for the purpose of early childhood intervention and family support and a vital support network of volunteers providing one-to-one adult support for children, has helped many children attending Worcestershire preschools in the private, voluntary and independent sector (PVI) to be fully included in all pre-school activities.

The majority of early years settings across Worcestershire are members of the PLA and referrals to the VIP Scheme have come mainly through staff in settings. After an initial discussion with the PLA Project Manager or VIP Special Needs Development Officer, a visit from an Assessment Officer (from VIP) is arranged to objectively observe a child at play and assess their specific needs. In response to the child's needs, the Special Needs Support Officer will suggest co-ordinated strategies with staff at preschool and with parents to ensure consistency and parental involvement. A volunteer (where available) is assigned to support a child where their needs indicate that one-to-one support is necessary. Family support will be offered. This can include signposting to other services, being a listening ear, assisting with choosing schools, offering support at child development reviews, and helping plan strategies for managing such everyday tasks as shopping and maintaining healthy relationships with other family members.

One family, whose child had been born 10 weeks early and now had global developmental delay, described their support from the VIP Scheme as 'a lifeline'. The family were struggling with a child living in a world of his own who, at 2 years of age, did not walk, talk or sleep. He also smeared and had started to head-bang. His developmental age was assessed at around a 1 year level and his parents were struggling to maintain a loving relationship whilst meeting their son's multiple and complex needs.

Upon meeting the family the VIP Scheme signposted immediately to the local Portage and Homestart services, informed the family about funding available from EYCS for children aged 2 years with SEN, urged health professionals to provide a more co-ordinated speedy service to the family and provided a constant and empathetic listening ear. In addition, strategies were provided to the preschool he attended to ensure that his needs were fully met. Now that their son has passed his third birthday, his developmental delay has been vastly reduced in all areas to the extent that he is working at the same age developmentally as his chronological age in all areas apart from speech and language. The family can see a brighter, less complicated future for him and their relationship has improved to the extent that their second child is expected later in the year.

For many years the VIP Scheme has bridged the gap between the service that preschools require to support children with SEN and the support available from statutory services. When the Scheme was forced to close in January 2008 due to lack of funding, many preschools and families felt so strongly about the loss of the service that they wrote to MPs and Worcestershire County Council EYCS to voice their concern. Many families and preschools still contact staff previously employed within the scheme for advice, and practical and emotional support simply because they do not feel supported in the same way by other agencies.

### **Training**

In order for any training that is offered to preschool staff to be accessible, it needs to be affordable both in terms of cost and in terms of staff cover, the latter because ratios must be maintained to ensure safety of children and to

Initiative	Staff Knowledge of Initiative		
	Heard of initiative % of 44	Aware of implications % of 44	Attended training % of 44
10 Year Childcare Strategy	74%	33%	0%
Early Support Programme (ESP)	55%	24%	5%
Common Assessment Framework (CAF)	50%	21%	5%

**Table 3: Preschool staff knowledge of early childhood intervention initiatives and training to support families**

meet Ofsted requirements (Ofsted is the official body for inspecting schools in England). The majority of preschool staff (88%) in Worcestershire have undertaken specific training to meet the needs of individual children. However, some preschools (19%) have identified training needs within their workforce which they were subsequently unable to address for a variety of reasons. These include training only being available during the day when staff cover is difficult to arrange and the location of training being inaccessible due to distance and lack of transport.

Amongst preschool staff, knowledge of government initiatives which would support their ability to provide suitable and appropriate family support is not high. Although roughly half of preschools questioned had heard of the Early Support Programme and the Common Assessment Framework (see Appendix), only 5% had attended relevant training.

Both of these initiatives support the role of a Lead Professional/Key Worker for parents (see Appendix) and both encourage co-ordinated multi-agency working with the objective of families receiving unified support at their point of need. The requirement for a Lead Professional/Key Worker was identified by 90% of families involved in PLA's research project and the frustration, stress and emotional trauma caused by a lack of joined up statutory services was highlighted by all families.

### Conclusion

Worcestershire County Council has in the last year recruited 6 Special Support Assistants to work collaboratively with early years settings in the private/voluntary/independent sector to promote the development and education of children with SEN. They will work with the Area SENCos and act as a resource of specialist skills to support identified children. Their overall objective is to increase the skills of staff working in settings for the benefit of all children.

Given that preschool staff confidence is clearly in need of improvement such initiatives can only help. However, there are further steps the Local Authority and Early Years and Childcare Service could take to improve confidence and skills in the pre-school workforce, including:

- Improved access to funding for one-to-one support when a child attends a setting with multiple and complex needs
- Improved information about whom to contact, and when, for support within the LA
- Improved availability of Area SENCos and other services to support children, families and staff
- Improved communication links between preschool staff and nursery and reception

teachers. (This could include scheduling meetings at times suitable for preschool staff, and teachers valuing the opinions of preschool staff about children's developmental progress.)

As a Local Authority it is the responsibility of Worcestershire County Council to ensure the supply of relevant training, and to ensure that support from other agencies is easily accessible, joined-up and of the highest quality. These measures will support preschool staff in their endeavours to provide appropriate support to families at their point of need.

## References

Carpenter, B., *Talking to Families; Listening to Families*, 2005, Sunfield Publications

Carpenter, B., Egerton, J., (Eds), *Early Childhood Intervention*, 2005, West Midlands SEN Regional Partnership

Blackburn., C., 2008, *Making a Difference*, Worcestershire Pre-School Learning Alliance

Every Child Matters: [www.ecm.gov.uk](http://www.ecm.gov.uk)

Worcestershire County Council: [www.worcestershire.gov.uk](http://www.worcestershire.gov.uk)

Pre-School Learning Alliance: [www.pre-school.org.uk](http://www.pre-school.org.uk)

## Appendix

**The Every Child Matters (ECM): Change for Children Framework**, published in November 2004 following a government green paper in 2003 after the tragic death of Victoria Climbié, seeks to improve the outcomes for all children. The objectives for Government are to provide an increase in the number and diversity of affordable childcare places and extended activities. The emphasis is on better integration of services through shared information and all services, including the Voluntary Sector, working together. The Government's aim is for every child, whatever their background or

circumstances, to have the support they need to:

- Be healthy
- Stay safe
- Enjoy and achieve
- Make a positive contribution
- Achieve economic wellbeing

## Common Assessment Framework (CAF)

The Common Assessment Framework is a key component in the ECM programme. The aim is to 'identify, at the earliest opportunity, children's additional needs that are not being met by the universal services they are receiving, and provide timely and co-ordinated support to meet those needs.' The key components are a simple pre-assessment checklist, a unified process for undertaking a common assessment and a standard form to help practitioners record and share information about a child. ([www.ecm.gov.uk](http://www.ecm.gov.uk) fact sheet). Implementation is to take place between 2006 and 2008.

## Early Support Programme (ESP)

Early Support is the central government mechanism for achieving better co-ordinated family-focused services for very young disabled children and their families. It is the Government's means of achieving the objectives set out within the Every Child Matters Green Paper and the National Service Framework for Children, Young People and Maternity Services for this particular population. The role of Early Support is to raise expectations about the way agencies and services work, encourage change, and provide practical tools to support multi-agency service development at local level. The objective of integrated services is that families get the information, advice and support they need earlier and in a way that responds to their situation more effectively.

A key feature of the Early Support Programme is the provision of a **Lead Professional or Key Worker**. 'A Lead Professional is someone who acts as a single point of contact that families and children can trust, can support families in making choices and navigating their way through the system and can help them get

appropriate interventions and services that are well planned, regularly reviewed and effectively delivered'.

Such a person would have 'a particular responsibility to co-ordinate provision and can be a single point of contact when a range of services are involved and an integrated response is required to provide effective support'. (DfES, Early Support, Introduction to the Background Information Booklets, 2007)

The Early Support Programme material is already in use for sensory impairment in Worcestershire. Training for general implementation commenced in February 2008 with a mixed cohort of parents, preschools and agency representatives. Training for the Common Assessment Framework in Worcestershire commenced in November 2007 (to June 2008). Further information can be found at [www.worcestershire.gov.uk](http://www.worcestershire.gov.uk)