

## Early years Leadership

**What impact does the quality of leadership learning have on children's early years education? And how can the evidence be gathered to prove it?**

Annie Clouston and Sue Webster of the Children's Centre Leader Network (CCLN) have carried out a study examining whether it is possible to show that leadership learning contributes to positive outcomes for the children they work with. They discussed the issues with school and children's centre leaders in a recent NCSL in Dialogue session in talk2learn.

Key points to emerge included:

- establishing a link between leadership learning and improved outcomes is difficult because children naturally progress at different rates
- statistics and other quantitative data cannot tell the whole story
- early years has often been viewed as poor relation in children's services but that is changing now
- participants in NPQICL report positive effect on services to children and families derived from clearer vision, new found confidence, improving staffing structures and increased autonomy

Catherine Williams, a children's centre co-ordinator in Bedfordshire, wondered whether using children's progress as a measure of leadership quality was the right connection to focus on:

"We discussed the ideas in our National Professional Qualification in Integrated Centre Leadership (NPQICL) learning group and as early years practitioners and children's centre leaders we believe that you cannot use the measure of children's progress to evaluate leadership. *Children's learning and progress goes up, it plateaus and dips. Sometimes the learning has been made but we will not see the evidence of it for a time. [And] some areas of learning are not measurable but are extremely valuable.*"

Most other contributors felt the link was there, but agreed that identifying the evidence to prove it was a big challenge.



Anne Peck, a children's centre manager in Hertfordshire, was nervous about how figures and statistics could be manipulated:

*"I feel some of our best evidence for impact on outcomes comes from case studies, from the impact we have made on the families we have worked with and not on broad targets, some of which I have virtually no control over."*

Ian Duckmanton, a project manager for children's charity NCH in Norfolk, said children's centres and their leaders had often been viewed as lower in status compared with other professionals in children's services but that was changing.

"We are starting to see a growing professional credibility, based on both anecdotal and empirical evidence, and an emerging recognition of the value of high quality early years provision. *There is evidence of a direct link between the quality of leadership and the quality of outcomes for children. We just haven't found a consistent way of capturing it yet, not least because every children's centre, leader and child is different.*"

Annie Clouston said the research had revealed some examples of a link between early years leadership and improvement in children's learning, though the link is indirect.

"The point about children's progress not being linear is a very important one, particularly when you consider the diversity of children's social and cultural circumstances. The Early Years Foundation Stage is thankfully concerned with children's wellbeing and not just their learning as measured by SATs," she said.

*"What colleagues' contributions in this debate seem to be telling us is that there needs to be more dialogue between integrated early years settings and schools about what and how to measure children's progress."*

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