

Policy OVERLOAD

Over-reliance on prescriptive documentation can prove detrimental to the care that baby room professionals can offer our youngest children, say **Dr Sacha Powell, Dr Kathy Goouch** and **Heather Cobb**...

Over the course of The Baby Room Project (2009-2012) we held professional development sessions, during which we discussed research, practice and policy issues. Responses to policy became a regular feature of our discussions and in written exchanges on the Internet-based network created for the Project, the 'NING'. Several themes emerged from this ongoing dialogue:

- Policy feels ubiquitous, inescapable and allied to accountability;
- The hidden sub-text of a policy may reveal its real beneficiary, rather than those it overtly claims to serve;
- National policy is filtered and, like 'Chinese

Whispers', its original intent may be lost in transmission or reinterpreted to suit individuals' vested interests;

- Emphasis and reliance on policy documentation deters professional dialogue, diminishes trust and detracts from responding to situations on a personalised basis;
- Policies can acquire a mystical power of their own, meaning that they can be used as leverage in difficult situations.

Policy documents come from a range of sources: some are created centrally by national government bodies or their representatives, such as the Department for Education or Ofsted. Others are created regionally in local authorities, and many

represent a response to these by individual settings (e.g. a safeguarding policy). We have argued in our book that policy is not just evident as text, but is also represented through social action. The epidemic of national early years policy development since 1997 appears to have been mirrored in many local contexts through the introduction of policies and often with associated training to ensure they are interpreted and implemented 'correctly'. This situation prompted our Project participants to ask:

"Do we need half of the policies we have? And who are some of them really serving? With a few of them, I have to ask, do we have them in place for the good of the children, or just to tick a box when Ofsted or early years advisers walk through the door?"

Creating tensions

Despite the raft of policy documentation, babies (in particular) and young children often seem to be invisible or become obscured through the indiscriminate and wholesale application of a policy to every real-life situation. A policy can be a source of tension as we discovered during a discussion about affectionate behaviour: in an attempt to be sensitive to one parent's anxiety about her baby's developing intimacy with her key person, one setting had implemented a 'no kissing the children' policy that applied across the board. Others reported policies that precluded male members of staff from changing nappies after some parents had expressed unease about this. None of this sat well with the Project participants who believed such policies were not in the best interests of all babies and felt belittled by the underlying implications about their professional worth and trustworthiness.

"I feel saddened that practitioners are, in my view, wasting their time ensuring that they write children's names on the 'correct' corner of a piece of paper and





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Kathy Gooch and Sacha Powell's *The Baby Room* offers expert insight into good practice and the latest research for early years practitioners working with the very youngest children. To get a 25% discount on the cost of purchasing your copy, or for more information, visit www.mcgraw-hill.co.uk/openup/teachnursery or use the code TEACHNURSERY at checkout by 28/02/14.

feeling worried about putting capital letters on the wall. Unquestionably, there are more important policies practitioners should be spending their time reading and adhering to, and surely more constructive ways in which they could be utilising their time. The problem being, with so many policies, how is a practitioner to determine which are most significant?"

Education policy scholars Bowe and Ball commented that policy writers cannot control the meanings of their documents because practitioners bring their own experiences and values to the interpretation of a policy. Indeed, arguably the most effective policies within settings are those that are co-constructed by all those involved in enacting policy and emerge from the context. This seems far removed from a baby room where practitioners face many challenges to acquiring the power and confidence to resist the wholesale adoption of a response that has been decreed by someone else - someone who may also have felt disempowered to voice an opinion, to resist or modify a policy.

Policies are often created to resolve a problem or to prevent it from happening. When this happens centrally, with national policies, it may represent a politics of mistrust. By removing any power from professionals to make their own responsive, informed judgements and devolving them of responsibility to think through a problem if and when it arises, the implication is that they are not trusted or considered capable of resolving issues independently. It might equally be argued this represents a politics of control that attempts to standardise behaviours.

Policy versus trust

"I reminisce of a time when a practitioner could confidently give a parent advice without worrying that their professional opinion might differ from their organisation's policy. I feel that pressures - nationally, locally, and ultimately within individual organisations - have

hampered practitioners' abilities to do so, for fear of crossing boundaries, receiving disciplinary action or being sued. I am frustrated that experienced professionals are agonising over these situations rather than feeling empowered to tackle them."

There are unspoken tensions that can arise around policy and trust, as articulated in the above vignette from practice. Where policy is in opposition to or violates professionals' beliefs, values and norms, without opportunities for discussion, its wholesale implementation can be undermining, can affect trusting relationships between professionals and may not necessarily benefit babies or young children.

The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child makes provision, as does the Children Act, for children to have a say in decisions that affect them. Yet babies and young children and those caring for them seem to be regularly unseen and unheard in policy development and enactment. Where is the trust in professionals' knowledge, expertise and judgement that allows greater degrees of professional autonomy and avoids the creation of a fearful workforce operating within a draconian culture of accountability?

"I advocate the idea of managers having the self-assurance to know their own

practice enough to deal with challenges for themselves, rather than referring back to a document, and most importantly, stepping away from the folder and putting more faith in the educated, knowledgeable, professional practitioners in their settings. I would like to see practitioners being encouraged and empowered to carry out the role they're paid to do: to care for, safeguard, have fun with and educate the children and babies in their care."

Having listened to the participants in our project, we now believe that opportunities for critical dialogue are imperative to enable all professionals to:

- question the relevance of any 'policy' to their interactions with each and every child in day to day situations;
- develop and/or sustain the knowledge and confidence to resist turning to the policy folder, and;
- develop their own expertise and ability to articulate, support and defend practice.

Heather Cobb MA, is a deputy nursery manager. Dr Kathy Gooch and Dr Sacha Powell are both Readers at Canterbury Christ Church University. In their next article they will examine the role of dialogue in the development of baby room professionals.

ENSURING ACCOUNTABILITY

ANY LOOSENING OF THE SHACKLES OF POLICY MUST NOT COME AT THE COST OF QUALITY...

It should be noted that accountability is, of course, important; resistance to policy overload is not the same as devolving oneself of responsibility. Professional autonomy does not in itself guarantee that a policy or approach to practice will be more beneficial for the children. In a piece entitled 'Education not training: The challenge of developing professional

autonomy' (*Occupational Therapy International*, 7(3), p150), Esdaile and Roth suggest that, "if autonomy is not based on altruism and governed by high ethical standards, an autonomous profession may become self-seeking and focus its regulations and control on the promotion of its own interests". They also argue that a focus on training, rather than professional education, is likely only to help staff to have a narrow understanding and to accept proscribed policies and procedures without question.