

Nurseries and children's centres should be at the heart of strong communities, says **June O'Sullivan**...

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June O'Sullivan is the CEO of the London Early Years Foundation. Visit leyf.org.uk or June's blog at juneosullivan.wordpress.com

A pivotal role

Many years ago when I trained as a social worker, one of the most important principles that shaped my thinking was the importance of community. It has remained a significant influence on me both personally and professionally.

Many words are overused and community is one of them. Often what people are describing are neighbourhoods and that is not the same thing. To have a community, people of all ages and experiences need to be able to talk to each other and be familiar with the local streets and parks. I'm particularly keen on multi-generational communities where people of all ages have a shared and vested interest in creating a shared safe neighbourhood. Fundamentally, we all want to feel safe when we walk home late, get in the lift or send our children to the shops. We want to feel that people will look out for each other. Some time ago (a reminder to myself to do this again) we took some children with disposable cameras to photograph their local community and tell us what they disliked about where they lived. They concluded they disliked litter, rubbish bags and dogs and bird guano. I wrote to the council and asked that their views be considered in their city strategy.

This summer we had riots which challenged us on many levels. We observed behaviour that frightened us to our core, but we also saw positive responses. Neighbours came out to clean-up together, people looked to see if they could help each other; we had a conversation, however temporary, about what makes a community where all the members

feel they have a part to play.

Nurseries and children centres are well-placed to offer a central role to many people looking to start reaching out to others. It has irritated me for a long time that many children's centres focus only on those under five. I've always insisted on engaging with teenagers and older people, because if we want to have a community for our small children they need to know the history of where they live. We do simple things like walk along a street where lots of older people live; now we know them and they know us. We invited some scallywags who were getting into trouble to become our buddies and mentors for the small children in the nurseries. We've got involved in local festivals and arts events, and made floats and walked the streets. We walk the children everywhere and get them to map where they live so they are familiar with the local area.

Becoming more community focused is a natural way of operating, and I suspect lots

of nurseries already do this but just don't articulate it in terms of community support. Please do, and insist that the local children's centre opens its doors to those who are over five.

One of the most powerful messages for me from the riots confirmed my fears that we've abdicated our communal responsibility to be parents. When I was growing up, neighbours and adults would tell you off for your misdemeanors. You'd respond with a sulky apology, but ultimately they kept you in line. Nowadays, we avoid this, but nurseries can reignite that sense of community parenting by being visible, engaged and supportive of parents struggling to take control in their communities. We invited parents and children into one of our nurseries on a Saturday to clean it up with us after we found their children vandalising the garden. It was the most useful experience, not least in the way it gave them back the confidence to correct their children and take a stand. They are our greatest advocates now.

Nurseries can foster friendships across generations which will reduce isolation and help create successful communities for everyone. Like the African proverb, we have to remember that 'it takes a village to rear a child', and the nursery is right at the heart of the village.



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