

The parents of our children appreciate the job we're doing, but society still needs to recognise the importance of early years, says **June O'Sullivan...**

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explaining the benefits

Recently, the nursery market was described by a leading early years economist as 'mature with a greater focus on quality and service innovation'. How uplifting to hear, especially in light of other research which has confirmed the importance of early years to the overall wellbeing of society. In reality, this means nurseries are now more likely to be developing new and better ways of enhancing children's learning, from risky play to more empathetic relationship building, from within the sector than previously. What a great indicator of growth and progress!

At a recent conference I attended, I was accompanied by two LEYF nursery staff. Both of them came away feeling both proud and delighted to be part of the sector, which is now better able to prove the positive difference it makes to children, their families and society as a whole. They commented, "It feels like we are moving to a place where parents will take us as seriously as they do school."

They may be right, but I think we have some way to go to yet before we achieve that goal. Many settings have very positive

partnerships with their parents – much better than many schools have with their parents – but that alone has not raised the stakes in terms of the value parents consistently apply to nurseries in the longer term. While their children are with us, parents are our biggest fans, but despite that fact the central importance of early years is still not embedded into our cultural psyche. We need parents to be more active in getting this message across.

This struck me forcibly as I was listening to Professor James Heckman recently. For 40 years he has led the High Scope research in the U.S. His findings confirm that investing in early years is the only sensible option. Among

the many facts he shared, one which I thought it would be particularly useful for all parents to be made aware of went as follows:

A child from a 'welfare family' will have acquired 500 words by the time they are three; a child from a 'working class' family will have acquired 700; but a child from a 'professional family' will have acquired 1,100.

Given all we know about the importance of language, about how critical it is for young children's general cognitive development, the ability to think, problem-solve and conquer abstract ideas – on which our society is built – this is a truly staggering gap.

I suggest that we ensure parents realise what this means in all its graphic detail, and explain how together we can ameliorate such horrors. To do this, parents must be prepared to engage with and advocate for the importance of early years, not just while their children are at nursery but way after they have left too. We need parents to become our Hermes and to get people to understand that the only way is Essex... early years!



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