

Agents of change



Deslynne Roberts examines the central role Early Years Professionals

have to play in improving standards in early years settings...

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The early years workforce is no stranger to change – and, as we contemplate possible amendments to the EYFS and face up to the current economic difficulties, it's sensible that we prepare ourselves for more to come. Understandably, change is not always readily received (after all, there can be both positive and negative effects for the individuals or group of individuals involved), but in the case of the early years workforce, which is constantly evolving, assimilating new ideas, research findings, legislation and guidelines, we have to approach it objectively.

In reality, many of the changes that have occurred within the early years sector have had a positive impact on the workforce – and none more so than the introduction of Early Years Professional Status. This leadership role has done much to raise the profile of the profession and continues to transform practice on the ground. It has created a range of exciting careers for graduates in the early years, and key findings from the recent survey conducted by Wolverhampton University for the CWDC (*discussed in more detail on p53 – Ed.*) shows for the first time the positive impact of graduate-level training on the skills of Early Years Professionals in leadership roles.

However, it is interesting to ask whether it is the skills of EYPs that have made this positive impact, or whether it is down to the changes that have resulted from having 'hands-on' lead professionals in early years settings.

find out more

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Motivating change

Enabling practitioners to make improvements is a key role for the Early Years Professional, and it should come as no surprise, therefore, that being able to motivate others is a crucial skill to have. A positive outlook coupled with praise and encouragement will spur practitioners on to try something new.

Having a vision and being able to communicate what that looks like is important. People naturally respond to what they can see and will be inspired based on how a vision for change is shared. It won't be long before they come round to your way of thinking, which is what is needed to affect change.



Raising standards

It is important to recognise that a key aspect of the role of EYPs is to be an initiator of change. This is more commonly referred to as raising quality standards or 'quality improvement'. But it doesn't really matter which term you choose to use to describe the process; what's important is to recognise that these individuals are going to be the driving force behind areas for improvement in early years settings and will instigate any changes that are needed. They may carry out this role in a variety of ways, but in essence they are required to be creative and motivated in order to shape an environment in which positive changes can occur and which will enhance the quality of care and education for children.

I've spoken to several EYPs who have noted that since gaining their Early Years Professional Status their confidence has increased – an improvement that, coupled with a greater passion to develop leadership skills, added professionalism and the ability to foster good practice, is at the heart of their value to the children in their care and their colleagues in their settings.

On the ground, EYPs are better able to respond to change, and to support practitioners to respond positively to new ideas that can enhance their practice. It goes without saying that how the process of change is initiated will determine how practitioners react, respond and engage in the process. Thus, a sensitive approach when dealing with practitioners' fears, coupled with the ability to take into account your own leadership style, is

going to be the key to making changes in your setting. Once this has been established, the positive effects on the quality of care and education will be clear to see.

With such a huge investment for the sector, Early Years Professional Status has been a fundamental step forward for the workforce. EYPs in settings are not only key members of early years teams, they are also powerful 'change agents'. Their role in early years settings is pivotal to developing good practice. Not only do they build on and extend settings' existing strengths, they transform practice and enhance quality within them too.

If you want to consider the impact that an EYP will have in your setting, consider what

needs to be improved and how you intend to achieve this. As they say, "a change is as good as a rest", so why stand still when you could improve with the support of an Early Years Professional?

Communicating change

Exquisite communication skills are vital when introducing change, but this is often an area that lacks the necessary attention. I say 'exquisite' in an attempt to define the high-level communication skills needed to initiate such a process. These include not only non-verbal and verbal communication skills, but also strong interpersonal skills.

Being able to demonstrate active listening skills when communicating with colleagues, for example, will help your colleagues to feel valued. This will sustain everyone's enthusiasm for the projects as they develop.

Being able to communicate effectively will also afford you the respect of your colleagues, and by consulting with, and involving them in, the decision making process, you can ensure that your ideas are well-received. This should create a 'win-win' situation that will help build trust and a level commitment to change.