

What About The Children?

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'Raising awareness of the never-changing emotional needs of children in our ever-changing society'

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What about the children? a critical question in a time of change

Speakers: Dr Anna Machin, Dr Sebastian Kraemer, Mandy Cuttler LEYF, Prof. Sonia Jackson.

Webinars Series , September 2020

Conference Summary

When the trustees of What About the Children? picked the theme and strapline of their 2020 conference, they could not have guessed how apposite it would be. The changes that COVID-19 has brought to our world have been as profound for babies, children, their parents and carers as for anyone. Yet the emotional needs of these children are unchanged now, as they have been for millennia. The speakers at the conference, which was postponed from March to September, underlined both that continuity and that change.

The first change was to the nature of the conference itself. With face-to-face events postponed for an unknown period, the organisers took the brave step of holding it online using the justifiably popular Zoom platform, on four successive Wednesday mornings in September. All four of the originally invited speakers were able to give their presentations, the technology ran smoothly, and the online audiences were large and appreciative with a lively discussion after each session.

Webinar 1: Dr Anna Machin. Becoming Dad: The Science of Fatherhood

Anna Machin is an evolutionary anthropologist and writer who has made a lifetime study of human social and intimate relationships, focusing particularly on love and parenthood. Her first book, The Life of Dad, represents over a decade's work.

Anna began her talk by explaining that human fathers are almost unique in biology. 'Investing fathers' – that is, fathers who play a key role in raising their offspring – are found in only 5% of all mammals and no other primates. There are good evolutionary reasons for this in our species. We have large heads and narrow birth canals, so babies are born at an earlier developmental stage than other mammals' young and much brain development takes place after birth. If a man is to stand a good chance of passing his genes on to healthy offspring, it makes sense for him to be involved in that development.

Studies all over the world have shown that levels of the male hormone testosterone drop when men become fathers. High testosterone is associated with competitive and mate-seeking behaviour, and on the physiological level testosterone blocks two hormones that are associated with reward and bonding relationships, dopamine and oxytocin. Levels of this latter hormone also fluctuate in men living with pregnant partners in tune with those of their partners. Taken together, these changes suggest that men are biochemically primed to focus inwards on their families when they become fathers. This is also reflected in changes to brain structure that are similar to those seen when women become mothers.

This is not to say that fathers and mothers play the same role in their children's development, however. The attachment relationship between babies and their mothers is an exclusive, nurturing one; an attached father adds a sense of challenge to nurturing, providing a secure base from which the child can begin to explore the world. This means that mum gets a 'head start' in forming a bond with her tiny baby. Fathers only come into their own when the child is old enough to play, say at about six months. From that age, rough and tumble play is incredibly important for both boys and girls, helping them to learn about the world around them and to understand risk, empathy and reciprocity.

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Young children who develop intimate, playful relationships with their dads will find social relationships easier as they grow.

A father's role in his child's development is important throughout childhood, but particularly so at two ages where change is particularly rapid: toddlerhood and adolescence. In the preschool years, an engaged father will naturally help his child develop language and executive (higher brain) function. A father's role with his teenage offspring is more emotional than physical, with the quality of the relationship between a youngster and his or her dad being more predictive of mental health than that with mum. And, throughout childhood, that role also depends on circumstances: dads in poor societies and where there is high risk of physical danger naturally focus more on physical and, perhaps, economic protection and less on forming engaged relationships.

Anna ended by stressing a further, interesting difference between dad and mum. While the mother's role is chiefly defined by biology, the father's is defined by being there. In today's complex families, stepdads, foster fathers, grandfathers, much-older brothers and even teachers and close family friends can take a father's role successfully. If we look across the world and back through history, similar patterns have been seen many times.

Reference

Machin, A. (2018). *The Life of Dad: The Making of the Modern Father*. Simon & Schuster, 2018.

Webinar 2: Dr Sebastian Kraemer. Our historical neglect of children... and our collective impulse to care for them

Sebastian Kraemer must be one of the few doctors with a degree in philosophy. He trained in medicine as a graduate, and then in both psychiatry and paediatrics. He joined the Tavistock Clinic in London as a consultant psychiatrist in 1980, retired from there in 2015 but continues to work with the NHS and children's services.

Sebastian took a historical and evolutionary perspective on the development of social systems, explaining how the status of children and those who care for them diminished and how they stand today. He began by focusing on the cooperative care that evolved with human hunter-gatherers and still exists in similar societies. These societies are small groups in which childcare, like all other responsibilities, is shared within the tribe. They couldn't be more different from the exclusive mother-child pairings seen in other primates. Humans evolved to be hyper-social, and early humans lived all aspects of their lives in tight-knit communities.

The first of our ancestors became farmers about 10,000 years ago, and this led to dramatic changes in social life and, specifically, in the care of children. Farming communities were strict compared to the almost anarchic, child-centred hunter-gatherers, and when farming began the status of women and children dropped dramatically compared to that of men. Childcare, as 'something principally done by women', also lost its status. In various forms, this hierarchy has continued until the present day, perhaps particularly so in 'Western' societies.

At least some of the low esteem in which many European societies have held children can be laid at the feet of the brilliant fourth-century scholar we now know as St. Augustine of Hippo. He taught that they were intrinsically rebellious and needed to be taught to obey. Variants of this philosophy were held strongly in Christian-dominated Western societies until only a couple of generations ago. In the early eighteenth-century Susannah Wesley, mother of the founder of Methodism and by all accounts a good and virtuous woman, taught that children as young as a year old should be taught to 'fear the rod'. We now rightly regard such opinions as barbaric.

Throughout most of British history, children were punished to teach them to develop self-control, obedience and respect for authority: traits that were considered particularly important in the leaders of the British Empire. It is not surprising that public schools – including Eton, where over twenty of the 55 Prime Ministers of the UK were educated – were, and continue to be, unhealthy places for many of the boys taught there. At the other end of the social spectrum, of course, children were sent up chimneys and down coal mines.

The idea that children were worthy of respect in their own right began to emerge with modern science in the 19th century, when the likes of Darwin and Freud made careful observations of children in their own families. Such observations of child evacuees during the Second World War led John Bowlby to formulate the attachment theory that lies behind much of What About The Children?'s work. After the war, Bowlby began work in the new disciplines of child psychotherapy and family therapy at the Tavistock Clinic. His observations in the early 50s of distressed child patients left alone in hospital led to a change in policy so that, by the 80s, visiting parents had become 'part of the furniture' on paediatric wards.

In the last half-century, the theory of child and infant wellbeing has progressed by leaps and bounds, as exemplified, perhaps, in the publication of Penelope Leach's acclaimed book, *Children First*, in 1994. In the UK, the Sure Start centres set up by New Labour in 1998 – sited mainly in deprived areas but open to all – have provided a good example of child-centred 'shared care' in practice, but it has proved shamefully difficult to keep this up. Investment in these and other initiatives to support young children and those who care for them in the UK dropped significantly in the last decade, and, not surprisingly, many indicators of wellbeing are now heading in the wrong direction.

References

Penelope Leach, *Children First*. Alfred A. Knopf (1994)

James Robertson. *A Two-Year-Old Goes to Hospital* (film). Robertson Films (1952)

Webinar 3: Ms Mandy Cuttler. Changing the world one child at a time: the LEYF approach to caring for babies.

Mandy Cuttler is a pedagogy mentor at London Early Years Foundation (LEYF), a social enterprise that runs 39 nurseries and pre-schools across London including some in deprived areas. LEYF is underpinned by a unique child-centred pedagogy and attended What About The Children? conferences for a number of years.

Mandy's talk focused on how the LEYF pedagogy, which was developed with all pre-school children in mind, is used in the care of the very youngest of their charges: the babies in their baby rooms. She began by introducing the pedagogy, which is described as a 'rope' of seven interleaved strands that combine to give each child a rich cultural and social experience. The nurseries are rooted in their local communities; their children, from babyhood up, are often seen out and about and many have links with local secondary schools or care homes.

Practice in nursery baby rooms has risen in importance in the last 20 years. Not only are there more babies to care for, but we are becoming more aware of what babies need. The publication of the Birth to Three Matters guidelines in 2002 alongside the Foundation Stage materials for older pre-school children led to an improvement in commitment to and training of the staff involved.

Mandy described research into the best practice for baby rooms. A well-run baby room should have a small number of children altogether and a high ratio of carers to babies. Babies need tactile, physical affection – cuddles – and this has not changed with the need for social distancing. Crucially, they also need consistency in their carers. Every baby should have a key worker (if possible, with another to back-up) who can get to know and bond with the baby well and who is responsible for most of his or her care. That key worker should also develop a relationship with the child's parents and find out about the home environment, experiences and preferences. In attachment theory, key workers become secondary attachment figures for the children in their care. Consistency, and reducing staff turnover, is therefore considered very important: LEYF is fortunate in that respect with a very low staff turnover, and some 'old hands' are now working with a second generation of local families.

The environment of the baby room is also important. Babies and toddlers need a secure, well-structured and consistent environment and, as far as possible, to use the routines that their parents have established. When babies are introduced into LEYF nurseries the staff will ask how they are settled to sleep and if they have favourite toys, foods or songs. If a baby is being weaned, for example, the key worker will find out how the parents are going about it and use the same techniques. Parents are always encouraged to stay until the baby is settled, however long it takes; separation can sometimes be harder for the parent than the child. Staff will always be available to answer any questions parents may have.

The LEYF approach to baby care can perhaps be summed up in the idea that each baby is as much of a person in his or her own right as any boisterous and strong-willed four-year-old. LEYF key workers eat with the babies and toddlers, get down on the floor to play with them and talk with them constantly. Baby rooms in LEYF nurseries are painted in restful, pastel colours – not the bright primary colours often seen in nurseries, which can over-stimulate young children – with toys, including 'treasure boxes' and sensory toys for babies to explore on their own. There is always time and space for all children, even the youngest, to be outside and play outdoors.

Mandy ended by commenting on training. The key point to she stressed is the difference between the needs and care of 0-2 age group and preschool children. People who aim to care for babies need to learn about their physical, neurological and emotional development, but knowledge is not the only important attribute. Excellent carers in excellent baby rooms, such as those in LEYF nurseries, will also need empathy, patience, a calm nature, and a sense of fun. And, most important of all, they will love babies and want to spend their working life with them.

References

LEYF Pedagogy: <https://leyf.org.uk/pedagogy/>

Birth to Three Matters <https://www.foundationyears.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/04/Birth-to-Three-Matters-Booklet.pdf>

Webinar 4: Professor Sonia Jackson OBE, Babies and Toddlers in Foster Care

Sonia Jackson is an emeritus professor at the Thomas Coram Research Unit in the Institute of Education, University of London. She has made an extensive study of the educational opportunities and life chances of children in the care system and has co-authored three books on this subject.

In 2019, there were almost 80,000 so-called 'looked-after children' in England, about three-quarters in foster care. Sonia's talk focused on the experiences of and outcomes for the youngest of these. And this is not a small number: about a quarter of fostered children in England are under four years old, and 5% are babies under one. There has recently been a steep rise in babies being removed from their mothers into the care system at birth, with teenage mothers and those who have had previous children fostered most at risk. Only one in ten of these ever return to the care of their mother or other relatives. Official Government policy is for all fostered children to return to their birth family or to be adopted, but up to half are never adopted and those who return home often come back into care. There is also a cycle between generations, with looked-after children themselves becoming the parents of children in care.

Sonia illustrated her account with the stories of two fictional fostered children, which she had put together from the real-life experiences of those she had studied. 'Aisha', born to a teenage mother of Pakistani origin, suffered severe neglect when her birth father left and was placed, as a baby, with an experienced carer, Pat. She had three older children and little time to spend with Aisha, who had her physical needs met but spent much of the time watching TV. 'Kevin' was born to an alcoholic mother and an ex-prisoner father and removed at birth into the care of Eileen. She determined to give him all the experiences he would have missed out on in his birth family, including books, music and outdoor play. At eighteen months, Kevin was physically and intellectually well ahead of Aisha.

Little research has been done into the experiences of young children in foster care, and almost none has focused on the key issue of attachment. The attachment needs of these children are not seen as a high priority in the care system in England. This is obvious from the fact that children are often moved from one foster family to another, often for administrative reasons. Not surprisingly, therefore, a high proportion of them develop an attachment disorder.

Sonia and her colleagues at the Thomas Coram Research Unit are examining the lives of fostered children and their carers through two current projects. One is an ethnographic study of these families' everyday lives that has highlighted problems with the physical environment of the children: babies are often placed with families living in cramped conditions, where there is little space for their equipment or play. Foster families also have difficulty accessing playgroups and nursery schools. It is, therefore, all the more important for them to help the children develop through everyday interactions and appropriate play. The second project, a training programme to increase foster parents' confidence in 'educational' activities, was designed to address this need.

So, what needs to change to improve the experience and life chances of the youngest looked-after children? Firstly, they simply need to matter more and, therefore, we need to learn more about them. Many questions remain unanswered: who are the carers? What are their ages, ethnic backgrounds, incomes and education levels? What training and support have they had, and what more do they need? And do they feel and express love for the children in their care? Many foster carers seem wary of forming close attachments because they know the children may be moved on at any time. We also need to know much more about the later experiences of these children and the result of any interventions. Sonia concluded by suggesting that the care system in England is a 'rotten' one but with very good people working in it. We will do well if we learn from the experiences of more successful countries, as well as from this much needed research.

References

Claire Cameron and Peter Moss (eds.), *Transforming Early Childhood in England*. UCL Press (2020)
Claire Cameron, Graham Connelly and Sonia Jackson. *Educating Children and Young People in Care*. Jessica Kingsley, London (2015).