

# Children in Scotland magazine

**Scotland's  
early years  
conundrum**

**(and how to  
crack it)**

By Sue Palmer  
Suzanne Zeedyk  
Alan Sinclair  
Tam Baillie  
Ingela Naumann  
SallyAnn Kelly  
Jackie Brock  
and many more





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# Welcome...



Caitlin Logan  
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In Call 17 of our 25 Calls campaign, launched last October, Sally Cavers and Anthony O'Malley argued that we must 'Prioritise integration, support for families and participation to give children the best start'. Since then, many of our members and readers have been in touch and spoke with us at our

annual conference in November about the Call. They wanted to share their own perspectives on the issue and add to the debate – a sign of a strong network in Scotland which wants to move conversations about early years policy forward. In response to that demand, this edition of *Children in Scotland Magazine* brings together a range of expert voices on the early years.

In our lead feature, we are pleased to share a thought-provoking conversation between Aberlour CEO SallyAnn Kelly and developmental psychologist Suzanne Zeedyk on Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), touching on some of the varying perspectives on the approach. From this discussion, through to our interview with Dr

Ingela Naumann, to Save the Children's Claire Telfer's piece on closing the attainment gap, to Alan Sinclair's (author of *Right from the Start*) piece on supporting family relationships from the earliest stage, a running theme is the need to prioritise ending poverty and inequalities for children and families.

It is apparent from the examples we highlight of innovation in the early years around Scotland that there is neither a lack of will nor knowledge about how to improve the lives of young children. But anyone who has worked in early years for any length of time will tell you that turning those ideas into a reality on a larger scale and bringing them into a single vision remains a tough problem to crack (hence our cover image).

Sue Palmer calls for a more unified approach to push for large-scale reform, while Ingela Naumann says that we all must ask ourselves what kind of society we want Scotland to be – and shape our early years policy from there. Children in Scotland is excited to provide a platform for this dialogue and a vehicle for influencing policy on the early years and beyond. To contribute to the ongoing conversation on our 25 Calls, please contact [csmall@childreninscotland.org.uk](mailto:csmall@childreninscotland.org.uk).

Caitlin Logan

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## In conversation:

Kicking off our special early years edition, Aberlour CEO SallyAnn Kelly (left) and developmental psychologist Suzanne Zeedyk (right) discuss whether the Adverse Childhood Experiences approach is too narrow – or offers the potential for real societal change

**Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)** are stressful events occurring in childhood including but not limited to domestic abuse, physical, sexual or emotional abuse, neglect, parental abandonment, or a member of the household having alcohol or drug problems, mental health conditions or being in prison.

**SallyAnn:** I believe we need societal level change not only to prevent ACEs, but to better aid recovery and healing for those who do experience childhood adversity. I am really encouraged that there has been a commitment from the Scottish Government to aim to address childhood adversity in its widest sense and that included within that frame of reference is a clear statement regarding the potential impact of structural inequality.

But there must be greater recognition that tackling childhood adversity cannot be achieved by focusing only on adversity happening within and from family interactions (as the ACE studies do) and a clear understanding that we need to focus on those structural inequalities such as poverty and discrimination.

Right now, 240,000 children in Scotland live in poverty. There is broad agreement that lifting children out of poverty acts as an effective buffer to the risk of toxic stress on families, as it serves to improve relational health between families and their children and reduces exposure to trauma. Yet, we still don't appear able to grasp that decisive action in this area is one of the single most effective preventative

measures that we have at our disposal. It concerns me that much of the discussion around ACEs misses out these important issues.

The ACEs approach categorises childhood adversity into types of abuse, neglect and household dysfunction, and then allocates an individual ACEs score. However, these categories do not cover every potentially traumatic event a child could experience. In the original ACEs study conducted in the United States during the 1990s – on which the ACEs approach is based – the participants were overwhelmingly white and college educated.

There was no consideration in the study of the impact of structural inequalities or the discrimination faced by women and refugee, BME and LGBT communities. I, in common with many others, believe this presents a significant gap in the reach of the ACEs approach. It does not, though, mean that we shouldn't use the research, but that we should display caution. If we are to address all forms of childhood adversity then we need to make sure we are inclusive of all communities in how we do that.

## Are ACEs overplayed?

**Suzanne:** I agree. Many of the pressures on families that exacerbate and cause trauma derive from societal causes: poverty; insufficient family support; pressures that prevent work-life balance; poor housing; violence; cultural ideas about gender, race, class and children's rights. We need society-level changes that place relationships at the centre of absolutely everything we do.

The film *Resilience* has had a massive impact on our thinking in Scotland. As one of the people who brought that film to Scotland in 2017, alongside Tina Hendry, that impact has been a surprise to me. An ACEs framework was not new to Scotland. Many people had been discussing it since Chief Medical Officer Harry Burns and the Violence Reduction Unit first brought it to our attention in 2005. However, once the film was available, interest in it and in ACEs exploded. Two years on, tens of thousands of Scots have seen the film. I tell this story because I now wonder if that film has been almost too impactful. It is only one hour long and can only tell a part of the ACEs story, but many people remain unaware, as yet, of that wider story. We can only get to that deeper level of awareness by having more conversations. The film *Resilience* is a conversation-starter, nothing more. We are now each responsible for getting curious about what else there is to learn about ACEs.

It is true, as SallyAnn says, that the original ACEs Study in 1998 focused on family factors, and the original triangular model that is now familiar to many people seems to emphasise those. But 20 years of scientific research have been undertaken since then, yielding hundreds of additional papers. Many have now emphasised societal factors, like poverty, violence, inequality, racism, living in a war zone. Others have highlighted family and personal factors, such as bereavement, bullying, periods of hospitalisation, household moves, and care experience. New forms of the ACEs survey have been developed, some of which contain more than the common 10 items and some that contain fewer.

So, it isn't accurate to say that ACEs studies haven't focused on contextual factors. Indeed, one of the organisations leading on public education, ACEs Too High, describes ACEs as "falling into three large categories": 'adverse childhood experiences', 'adverse community experiences' and 'adverse climate experiences'. SallyAnn sees the debate as growing from the

failure of ACEs studies themselves to sufficiently consider these contextual factors. I think the problem lies not with the ACEs research, but with the public's insufficient awareness of the wider body of scientific work. A good place to begin is the 2018 NHS Highland Report entitled *ACES, Resilience and Trauma-Informed Care*.

We have a challenge on our hands, and it is one we must find a way to tackle. As a country, we are trying to find ways to act on an area of science that is still in development. This is not unlike the challenge that society faced as evidence emerged of the impact of cigarette smoking. Should we have waited as long as we did to develop anti-smoking policies? The question we are facing as a society right now is: how long should we wait to develop new policies on the basis of evidence we currently have about toxic stress? We have decided we need to act now, on the basis of what we do know. I think that is the right decision, given that people's lives are at stake. But it means that we will need plenty of curiosity and conversation.

**SallyAnn:**

For me, the ACEs approach is useful only at a whole-population level and should not be used as a mechanism for either screening or routine enquiry of children. I believe that everyone who experiences adversity can flourish with the right support, that relationships are key and that it is possible for Scotland to become a country that recognises and responds to adversity in all its forms. For that to happen we need to see real system change and a fundamental shift to becoming focused on people and relationships across all of our systems, structures and organisations. Few people escape some form of adversity completely, and I believe we must ensure that we have the capacity and compassion as a society to support people who have experienced adversity in their lives.

This means understanding and recognising all forms of adversity that affect children, as well as the potential to experience trauma as a result of that adversity, and how we help people



# Relationships are the foundations for change

Working with the child, working with the parent, and working with the parent and child *together* are the three keys to a new direction, says *Alan Sinclair*



Alan Sinclair is author of *Right from the Start: Investing in Parents and Babies*

**W**illiam Clark is Tesco's Paisley catering manager in the staff canteen. At age 33 he is excited that his partner, a nursery worker, is pregnant. His keen sense of humour is now put to good use doing stand-up comedy; he recently won first prize in the largest "gong" competition in Scotland.

But a different William Clark existed two decades ago. This was the boy who had lost his loving, cuddling dad after a blazing row; whose mother was emotionally damaged and unequipped to look after him. He was excluded from primary school after attacking another pupil, had his stomach pumped to rid it of alcohol at age 13, and at 15 he was using cocaine.

By 26 he was married and had a child but it was "mental from the go", according to William, who remembers that he was "totally impulsive". A second child followed, along with a spell in jail for possessing 7,500 valium tablets and four police assaults. Rehab, Narcotic Anonymous and a Parenting Matters Dad's group literally saved William's life.

"I first went on the Parenting Matters course to get a tick from the social work. My kids were on the protection register", he says. "I soon found other men talking about their feelings and I wanted to break the cycle and give my kids a more balanced life, where they could make better decisions. I did not want them to be as emotionally immature as me. It is no wonder that my wife left me".

Today, a five-year-old William Clark would be defined as "vulnerable". One Scottish child in every four is vulnerable when they reach primary school, defined as being poor in social competence, emotional maturity, language and cognitive ability or physical health and wellbeing.

In the next five years, the forecast is that 250,000 babies will be born in Scotland – the equivalent of the combined populations of Aberdeen and Hamilton. Unless we change direction we will have added the equivalent of a Hamilton full of vulnerable children. To do this with our eyes open is not good enough.

We are quick to assign conditions to children. But vulnerable children are the direct consequences of an adult condition. This adult syndrome has two sets of symptoms, first, being locked into doing what we have done before, even when we know that it does not work. Secondly, there is a lack of will, skills and dedication to stick with a new sense of purpose and direction. Half in jest and half seriously, I call this the Implementation Deficit Syndrome.

The Victorians, when confronted by endemic cholera and dysentery created an infrastructure to provide clean water and a sewerage system. Babies across the population, or at least the vulnerable like William and his parents, need an investment. This time in engagement and support to help people get ready to have a child and look after themselves and the baby. Improved parenting is a practical and achievable goal. So the first bottom line is the reduction in pain and harm, the space for joy in parenthood and the opportunity for the child to flourish.

Individual and collective economic gain is the second bottom line and is less understood. By examining different datasets that trace people from the start of life to adulthood, James Heckman, an economics Nobel Laureate, has drawn the conclusion that early investment in parents and children produces an annual rate of return of between seven and 10 per cent. The returns come from the reduction in costs of crime, better physical and mental health, more people in work paying taxes, and fewer people on welfare.

Half of Scottish public revenues are now levied in Scotland. If Scotland's economic base and human capital does not grow or worse deteriorates, the pressure on the public spend will get worse. Given the factors Scotland faces, this is a crisis moment which demands a change in direction.

It is sound advice to know where you are now before taking a compass bearing and heading in a new direction. Holland is top of the UNICEF league table on child wellbeing. Parenting in Scotland and the UK is not a complete basket case; we are halfway up this global table. On returning from a visit to Holland, I asked a Dutch woman living in Scotland for her opinion: "In Holland we love children. In Scotland you tolerate children."

I am optimistic. All parents of young children are hungry for help. At the core it is about what parents do and do not do. I no longer talk about "early years"; it is too woolly and leaves out mothers and fathers. The Scottish Government has started to shift in the right direction. Health

Visitors have been saved from merging into generic Community Nurses and their numbers and pay grade increased. There is a strong need to go further and give the nurses the time to build a personal relationship.

A Baby Box has been introduced as a gift to each new baby and their parents. It is a welcome symbol and the box of goods is much appreciated, especially by financially hard-pressed parents. It is common for mothers to feel isolated during pregnancy and once they have a baby. At the moment the postman delivers the box; in future the box could be presented as part of group sessions preparing for birth and looking after a baby. Relationships are more important than more "stuff".

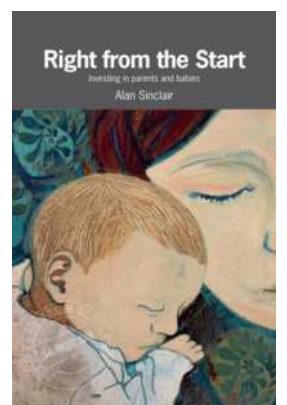
By doubling day care for vulnerable two-year-olds and all three- and four-year-olds, the Scottish Government has committed to spend close to £1 billion a year. Quality day care (quality does matter) has a number of benefits: the most at-risk children benefit the greatest from the security and stimulation of day care and it can lift low-income households out of poverty by making it easier for one or both parents to go to work without having the financial gains eaten by childcare costs. Across the board it helps parents cope and children to become socialised.

Day care is the answer to the question: how do we help parents with young children get to work and make sure that it is worth the trouble? But is this the right question? A more significant framing is: how can we best help all parents during the first 1000 days, from before conception to two years, to become better at the most demanding role they will ever face and the one with the longest lasting consequences?

William talks about how impulsive he was in his years of chaos and how he "never once got offered help on being a parent". Day care might be necessary but it is not sufficient for neglectful, vulnerable, traumatised or chaotic parents. Vulnerable parents are often isolated or scared of day care centres. Scottish children who "dog" school will most likely have dogged nursery. Like Baby Boxes, day care needs reframing. Human engagement and reaching out to vulnerable parents, building trust and empathy, tea and scones, making food together and chapping doors, walking next to parents — all of these are essential.

Multiple studies have shown that the most effective interventions have three elements: working with the child, working with the parent and working with the parent and child together. Relationships are at the core of the new direction. That is a challenge for parents *and* for government.

**"The Baby Box could be presented as part of group sessions. Relationships are more important than more 'stuff'"**



> Children in Scotland members can request a discounted copy of *Right from the Start* by emailing [contact@centreforconfidence.co.uk](mailto:contact@centreforconfidence.co.uk)



# A radical new beginning

Beginning our eight-page snapshot of best practice and innovation in the early years, *Karen Richmond* and *Jenny Pow* profile a P1 setting in Edinburgh that takes learning through play to a whole new level

**A**cross a series of bright, airy rooms, children are drawing intently or creating complex wooden cities. Others cluster in purposeful discussion with their teacher. There is no classroom. Instead the children explore a sequence of 'learning zones' spanning Creativity, STEM, Imagination, Sensory, Outdoor and Connection.

The One-ery – located in Southing Morningside Primary School in Edinburgh – is based on a set of principles that are child-centred, rights-centred and creative. The philosophy behind it grew from many roots, but perhaps the most important was dissatisfaction with the highly structured traditional P1 environment.

We wanted to draw on what we know about best practice – an understanding that learners in our nurseries are creative, collaborative and problem solving. Instead of stripping away these skills, we were keen to nurture and build on them. Looking to leading Early Educational settings (Finland, Denmark) and their approach to pedagogy, we redesigned the context in which our children would learn.

Firstly, we wanted to give practitioners autonomy to allow our children to lead their own learning, using play as a vehicle to deliver the curriculum. The Curriculum for Excellence documentation encourages us to deliver our curriculum in an inventive and creative way.

Decluttering the curriculum meant we started with the basic premise that our 105 primary ones should have play as their entitlement from the minute they come into school until the end of the day. Building on this, we wanted to ensure our learners receive teaching that is tailored to their needs and follows their own progression.

To develop our Continuous Provision, we started to group elements of play together, which then formed what we now call our zones. The teachers plan the zones based on experiences they'd like to develop but also on what the children want and what their interests are. This is all absorbed through observing their play and listening to them. To ensure our learners were receiving the breadth and depth of our curriculum, we bundled the benchmarks together and the teachers take responsibility for planning their own zone to meet the needs of our curriculum and our learners.

Understanding the impact of the environment on a child's development, concentration and engagement, we stripped back our context to a calm, bright and natural place to learn. We believe that the environment belongs to the children, rather than the teachers, and we ensure all our resources are accessible and each surface has a purpose.

The ethos of 'bringing the outside in' has meant our natural materials, natural lighting

and resources create 'real-life' experiences. By giving consideration to how materials and documentation are displayed, our goal is to create an atmosphere that fosters creative exploration and consolidation of skills. The learners take ownership of their environment and can look at the opportunities it can provide rather than, traditionally, looking at the barriers it could create.

Our learning opportunities are carefully displayed in a way that provides challenge, support and ease of access. Clear provocations and invitations to learn are displayed at each activity, which can provide stimulus for dynamic and creative work: constructing, applying skills, inventing, baking, building. We are continually on a journey to challenge closed learning tasks that provide no room for individuality and can often lead learners to becoming bored and unable to be expressive or challenged. Learners are encouraged to collect six 'targets' during 'Zone Time' throughout the week, which means they access all aspects of our provision and receive a breadth of learning opportunities.

With our Continuous Provision providing rich experiences for our learners, the teacher then has the ability to work with a maximum of six learners and focus on literacy and numeracy. Our 'Teacher Time' allows teachers to meet the needs of all our children through hands-on, practical learning opportunities. We track and monitor the children's learning and have fluid groups that allow learners to access the correct support at all times. As a team, we work closely to ensure all learners are getting the correct support and are able to learn at their own pace.

The One-ery is made up of a rich and vibrant blend of cultures, backgrounds and experiences. The unique structure of our setting allows the integration of all learners through our child-centred philosophy. The provision of high-quality play opportunities engages children regardless of their needs and abilities. Learners who require additional support can access learning that meets their individual needs and interests through our carefully planned provision that is open and accessible to all, and which is carefully considered to remove barriers to learning.

**Karen Richmond is Depute Headteacher (with responsibility for Nursery and Primary 1) and Jenny Pow is a Class Teacher at the One-ery**

> Find out more about the One-ery at [southmorningsideprimary.wordpress.com/one-ery/](http://southmorningsideprimary.wordpress.com/one-ery/)



Photographs: Children learning through play at the One-ery