



Building bridges

They say in Africa, it takes a village to raise a child, but **Dr Margy Whalley** says integrated services could well be the 21st Century village. Dr Whalley heads the Pen Green Centre for Children and Families in Corby in the UK—a unique integrated service model that has helped transform a community. She shares her journey...

centre. I worked with children aged two to seven in a squatter settlement in Arborio in northern Brazil (they start formal school at seven in Brazil) and worked with the local padre [on] community activities. What was exciting was the energy in the community and the passion of families to help their children. I became pregnant and went to Papua New Guinea with my baby and got involved in running a mobile preschool. I began to understand a lot more about community development as well as early education and care. And that is what got me hooked!

Today, I am director of the largest early years integrated centre for children and families in the UK. We have a research, training and development base as part of our campus, so we work with staff and parents as practitioner researchers. We are very interested in linking theory and practice and driving government policy.

I spend a lot of my time with the centre leadership team and the governing body of the centre, which is full of vociferous parents who challenge us. In England they have legal status as parent governors and are able to hire and fire staff and are very influential. Our centre is all about community participation and we are very committed to co-constructing services with parents.

I was interested in children with autism, which in the early 1970s was called 'early childhood schizophrenia'. I was studying drama and theatre at university and used to do a lot of work in autistic clinics and psychiatric wards seeing how drama therapy would help young children find a voice.

When I left university I decided to do a postgraduate teaching certificate at the University of London. I didn't do it in early childhood but for children aged seven to eleven years. I then taught for three years in a community school next to a children's home and got very interested in children in care of the local authority who were facing very challenging family circumstances.

Then I went to Brazil with my husband—to the Amazon—where I worked in the city of Manaus. I learned to speak Portuguese from children in the community and set up a neighbourhood



Dr Margy Whalley is Director of the Research, Development and Training Base at Pen Green Family Centre, Corby, UK. Margy is involved in research, training and consultancy work in England, Europe and Australia.



Overcoming oppression

Children and family services tend to be under-funded and under-valued and the vagaries of government funding are problematic for us in the sector. Sometimes children and family services are at the top of the agenda and sometimes they are not. Top-down initiatives rarely work and rarely embed in the community. Even when you have an enlightened government they have top-down notions about implementation of government policies. In my experience, organic community development is the only way to build things in communities where there are lots of challenges. It has to be a systemic approach where you are working with all the different agencies and that's hard to achieve. We are, however, very lucky in Corby because for a long time it's been a poor community—one that I would call a 'community of oppression'—but where people do tend to work well together.

Transforming children's chances

I think it was British paediatrician and psychologist Donald Winnicott who in the 1940s famously said, 'there is no such thing as a baby...A baby cannot exist alone, but is essentially part of a relationship'.

At Pen Green we use a similar phrase. We always say: 'there are many

important adults in a child's life' and our belief is that it is impossible to work with a child in isolation. You need to work with all the adults in their life, whether they are living in the family home or not. In my experience I have never met a parent who didn't want more for their children than they had for themselves, so we have to harness that energy and build on it.

The parents' experience may have been brilliant or poor. They may not have had a good experience in the school system but they need to become advocates for their children so they can do better and achieve in the school system. Parents love to share knowledge about how their children are learning at home, and we need to learn from them and share knowledge with them about how the children are learning in the setting.

PEN GREEN: AN INTEGRATED MODEL

For 30 years the Pen Green Research Base and Centre for Children and Families has been offering British families integrated health, education and social services all under the one roof.

The Pen Green Centre was established in 1983 in Corby in Northamptonshire, after the town experienced mass layoffs following the closure of its steelworks. With 43 per cent of the local male population unemployed, social services and the physical and mental health of the community went into sharp decline. In a unique social experiment, Pen Green opened its doors to provide early childhood education as well as a range of services to support families including adult education and training. Pen Green has been a vital agent of change with targeted services for the community's most disadvantaged.

Pen Green is based on the philosophy of working in close partnership with families. Three generations of families have used the services and volunteered in the centre. In fact, 56 per cent of Pen Green's 120 staff began first as parents and trained there. Pen Green has also spawned thousands of services across the UK based on the same integrated model and continues to bring together services in new and radical ways.

Research done by Chris Athey in the 1970s, in the Froebel project, showed that when you share information, and parents and professionals can work in a really effective partnership, it can transform children's life chances.

Building relationships

It has to be about powerful, respectful and reciprocal relationships where parents are equal and active partners, where they do not feel like the 'victims' of public services but instead they feel like they are the 'drivers' of public services.

I think that even when families are experiencing lots of challenges, they need to feel in control and they need to feel that everything is being discussed with them and that their views count. If it is an unequal relationship then there is no respect. I feel incredibly privileged

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that parents entrust their children to our services for their education and care. They know their children best and are their children’s first educators—they are the ones who will be there for their children all of their lives, so we have to respect their role.

Where parents are not living in the family home, we have to engage with the other important adults in their lives.

It is not OK if parents are living in separate homes to only work with the parent who presents day-to-day in your service.

It is vital to go out and engage with parents who are living outside the family home and who want to stay involved but often don’t get the information nor the opportunity.

I think we have to develop a trusting critical friendship with parents. We do have to advocate sometimes for the children if the child’s voice is not being heard, but generally it’s about working collaboratively to get the best possible outcomes for both the child and the family.

If we create a false duality between what parents want and what children need then it is very unhelpful.

Continuing the Conversation:
are all the voices being heard?

Early Years Conference CCSA and ECA NSW



When: **Leadership Day** – 17 October 2013
Conference – 18 & 19 October 2013

Where: Crowne Plaza, Hunter Valley

Leadership Day Ticket \$195
Conference Ticket \$495
Conference Ticket \$695 (non members)

3 reasons why you should attend

Be Inspired – learn from an impressive line-up of early childhood education experts.

Be Challenged – by different views and ways of doing things.

Be Connected – meet fellow EC workers, researchers and other inspiring people.

Register now before the conference sells out.
www.ccsaevents.org.au

Working in Partnership
CCSA & ECA NSW



A centre for the community

Our services are open morning, afternoon and evenings seven days a week. On Saturday and Sunday, fathers and their children, and parents with children with special [needs] use our services. Services are too often set up to suit the conveniences of those who work within them, and that is not what I call a 'people culture'.

If families are at work all day, we need to send video material home and have conversations with parents at times that suit them. We have built home visiting into all of our work. Sometimes it is great to visit parents on their terms, and in their space, where they can share information with us about their children's learning and development. This needs to be negotiated with them so it happens at a time that suits them.

Our experience is that no parent ever fails to engage if they know their child is going to be the subject of conversation. Parents often send us video of how they are engaging with their children at home and at weekends. They want to have conversations with staff, and it can be through phone calls, home visits or

through running groups in the evenings.

If staff believe that they need to work closely and respectfully with parents, then they will find the time to do that and families. And in my experience, have huge commitments to engaging with our services.

Creating a people culture

If people are underpaid and undervalued then they are not going to work very well together, but if they are well paid and well supported through supervision and training and have opportunities for work-based discussions with support, then they can think deeply and critically about what they do and how they engage with each other.

I think that where there are inequalities in workers' terms and conditions it is very destructive. In the 1970s, services like ours were set up where teachers were on one set of pay and conditions and childcare workers were on a different set of pay and conditions and social workers and health workers were on different conditions again and that's really difficult to manage. I think the key must be about everyone feeling that they are



a learner and everybody feeling they can lead services.

I suppose that the key must be about harnessing people's energy for change and for growth and development, but I think good food, good pay is also really helpful, along with time to reflect.

The most important thing for the children and the families is that we are reflective practitioners, so I think that making sure that staff have time for team building and time for training and time to visit other settings and services so they can be critical of their own, is important. ★



For more information about the Pen Green project and philosophy, visit: www.pengreen.org

Family Day Care Information Night

Earn an income for caring for children from your home



Find out how you can become a Family Day Care Educator.

Add to your income without leaving your home, gain new skills, network with other Educators and be supported by Council's experienced development unit staff.

Family Day Care is a community-based, quality childcare service that offers professional and supervised care for children up to 12 years of age in the private homes of approved, registered Family Day Care Educators. Services are supported by Council's development unit staff to provide the highest standard of care for children in a secure and stimulating home environment.

Attend the Merrylands Children's Centre - Family Day Care Educators Information Night on Wednesday 19 June, 6pm – 8pm, at The Holroyd Centre, 17 Miller Street, Merrylands.

RSVP Essential:

Wednesday 12 June
Merrylands Children's Centre -
Family Day Care
P 9681 6511
E mhfdc@holroyd.nsw.gov.au

Free Entry

