

Setting a new childhood agenda

Dr Nick Waggett reports on an event at which author and former children's commissioner Sir Al Aynsley-Green spoke powerfully about the need to place children at the heart of policy.



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Nelson Mandela once said, 'There can be no keener revelation of a society's soul than the way in which it treats its children.' This is how the former Children's Commissioner Sir Al Aynsley-Green started his talk at an event hosted by the Association of Child Psychotherapists.

Sir Aynsley-Green was in dialogue with ACP Psychotherapist Graham Music on how systemic and social issues, such as poverty and inequality, can have profound and long-lasting effects on the mental and physical health of children and young people.

Music showed how adverse early experiences such as stress, trauma and abuse impact both the brain and body and nervous system, leaving children to suffer often long-term consequences in their development, and mental and physical health. It was an impassioned discussion, emphasising how important it is that society supports the good quality attuned relationships in childhood and adulthood that make all the difference to future mental and physical health outcomes.

Some of the key areas that were flagged up included:

Need for comfort and warmth

Over a certain threshold, stress and trauma are not easy to recover from. The general belief among many is that if you give children access to health treatment they'll get better. But this is not always the case. Better loving care – at home, at school, in relationships – are needed to make a difference to a person's life history long-term. This can require support for the whole family and beyond, and a supportive societal context. Sir Al Aynsley-Green talked about Helsinki and why it is so good for children. He claims that there is trust in health and education professionals, that strong systems have led to high quality services and their principles have led to strong nurturing of children. In Helsinki, there is stress-free schooling, and children can play in the rain! He criticised England's approach, which can result in schools feeling they can't allow children to get wet at play time.

Useful resources

- *The British Betrayal of Childhood* by Sir Al Aynsley-Green (Routledge)
- Association of Child Psychotherapists <https://childpsychotherapy.org.uk/>
- London Early Years Foundation <https://www.leyf.org.uk/news/>

Failure of political advocacy

Aynsley-Green said that the 'Every Child Matters' policy framework of the 1990s provided a sense of hope. People came together across governments departments determined to address what we were doing for children. Unfortunately, this approach was disbanded under the coalition government and while this government is prioritising funding for mental health services for children and young people, there is now a lack of joined-up thinking. We need a paradigm shift to building local communities with resilient children at their hearts.

He described how, in his view, political attitudes affect the way the public sees children and young people. A report by charity Barnardo's found that 50 per cent of adults believe children 'behave like animals'. He pointed to Vancouver as a city setting a positive agenda with children at its heart. A geographic database has been created, identifying where children live, so that assets of nurture, such as children's centres, can be located where they are needed, and accessed easily by parents and caregivers.

'We must listen to children'

In the discussion that followed, a strong message emerged that space needs to be created for adults to listen to children. Technology can be part of the problem. Parents and carers need breaks, but both parents and children need to make time where they get off their devices and communicate: children need to express and be listened to. There was widespread agreement that there are adverse childhood experiences that we don't know about because children are not expected to know what's wrong with them. Children need to be assessed not tested – across physical, psychological, language, interpersonal and relationship skills.

The resounding message from the event was the need for health, social care and education professionals to stand together with parents and carers and build a movement, which puts the child back into the centre of policy-making.

This has been re-iterated at many speeches subsequently made by Sir Aynsley Green this year. Most recently he addressed delegates at an Early Years conference at the University of Wolverhampton, where he gave his support to the development of a new Early Childhood Studies degree under development by the university and the London Early Years Foundation (LEYF). **eye**