



# Too Much Too Soon: Making the case for the 'Open EYE (Early Years Education)' Campaign

By **Margaret Edgington**, Early Years Consultant and member  
of the Open EYE steering group

### The background

With so much recent debate about Early Years education, it is easy to forget that before 1996 there was little interest shown by policy-makers in England. There existed a mixture of maintained, private, independent and voluntary provision for 3-5 year olds, with many children having access to little or no local provision. Quality was variable, too.

Since 1996 there has been a barrage of new initiatives on birth-to-five provision, including:

- Desirable learning outcomes
- Day Care standards
- Baseline Assessment
- Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage
- Foundation Stage Profile
- Birth to Three Matters
- Early Excellence, Sure Start and Children's Centres
- New qualifications and training

**At the same time, the sector has had to deal with the requirements of:**

- The Code of Practice for children with special educational needs
- Every Child Matters
- OFSTED inspection

### Why the Open EYE Campaign?

We all recognise the importance of accountability and quality-control, and welcome the sector being taken seriously by Government. However, many professionals are concerned that initiatives are subtly becoming more and more prescriptive. The Campaign for an Open Early Years Education (Open EYE) was launched in November 2007 because of concerns over the introduction of what appears to be a new level of government control.

The Open EYE steering group shared fears that elements of the EYFS (Early Years Foundation Stage) would be:

- overly prescriptive
- potentially harmful to the development of children
- a breach of the human right of parents to have their children educated in accordance with their own philosophies

The campaign quickly gained momentum, with many early-years practitioners and parents expressing relief that someone was taking action to protect children from expectations which several years of Foundation Stage Profile data have shown to be developmentally inappropriate.

### What are our concerns about the Early Years Foundation Stage?

We believe the EYFS to be based upon a number of arguable assumptions and misunderstandings about early development, together with self-contradictions that make it incoherent in principle and unworkable in practice. The 'unique child' principle, for example, is fundamentally undermined by the expectation that children 'should have acquired [the early learning goals] by the end of the academic year in which they reach five' (p.11, para. 2.3 of the EYFS Statutory Framework).

'Age-related learning' and 'development grids' also interpret child development in ways unrecognised by most specialists. Though intended merely as 'guidance', the grids will have a negative effect on work with babies and toddlers just because they are there, intruding on the quality of responsive awareness that practitioners should bring to their work. The grids also give a false view of the development of 3 and 4 year olds. Only in England would the words 'literacy' and 'numeracy' feature in an overview of development of children aged between 30 and 50 months. We are also increasingly concerned at the intrusion of the 'audit culture', which has been so damaging in primary schools, into early years settings. This year, nursery and reception teachers are expressing concern at being given targets for their class to meet before the teacher has even met the children. We know all too well about the stress that a targeting-and-testing culture causes to older children, so why risk damaging the self-esteem and motivation of our youngest children in this way?

Unfortunately, England still has a high number of poorly-trained early-years practitioners, many with a limited understanding of child development. Many nursery and reception teachers have not



received specialist Early Years training. Through no fault of their own, they are ill-equipped to view the EYFS materials in a critical way. As a result, these (often young) people are likely to interpret the new framework rigidly. The more they struggle to 'deliver' and assess outcomes, the less they will engage fully with the children. We know already that some practitioners are using the grids as an assessment tool and ticking off children's achievements, even though the document states that they should not be used as a checklist. There is a danger that experienced and effective practitioners are the most likely to become dispirited and leave the field.

Literacy goals in the EYFS are also highly problematic. They are highly aspirational, if not totally unrealistic for many 5 year olds-especially for boys. There is growing evidence that children in other European countries, who are taught to read and write at 6 or 7, achieve literacy quickly and easily, and with greater enjoyment, and then go on to achieve more than children given an 'early start'. The recent Progress in International Reading Study reports that English children have dropped to 15th place (from 3rd), despite having an extra year in school and despite the drive to ever-earlier literacy. In the light of this evidence, the Government should surely be removing, or substantially diluting, the EYFS literacy goals or even transferring them to the end of year 1 or 2.

The Government has tried to reassure us that the EYFS simply pulls together documents already in use but, on close inspection, the EYFS is much more prescriptive. On page 11 of the Statutory Guidance, for example, it makes it clear that all providers 'regardless of type, size or funding' 'must by law deliver' the learning and development requirements. This is particularly sinister for parents who choose to send their children to settings that have consciously developed a different approach. For example, according to the legal framework, Steiner Kindergartens could be closed for not accepting requirements that are incompatible with their own educational philosophy. This unprecedented degree of central compulsion does not exist in any other sector; it is incompatible with the idea of diversity in educational provision and, in our view, it must be robustly challenged.

### **Misrepresentation of the Open EYE campaign**

It is interesting how quickly those supporting the EYFS, and involved in its development, began to publish myths about the Open EYE campaign and to misrepresent our intentions. One accusation is that Open EYE is anti-EYFS. Untrue: we are not



against the EYFS – we agree on a need for some national standards for early years provision. Our campaign focuses on the Learning and Development requirements. We believe that the EYFS in its current form will put unnecessary pressure on children and will condemn some children to failure.

Another slur is that campaigners are confused about which sections of EYFS are statutory. Open EYE understands very well that the age-related Learning and Development grids in the non-statutory framework are supposed to be for guidance. However,

the Government's real agenda was made clear in a speech in November 2007 by Beverley Hughes, Minister for Children and Families. She talked about 'using data both within settings and across the local authority..., to drill down and identify when children need extra support to improve their developmental progress'. This makes it clear that the grids are seen as a representation of normal development and as a tool for tracking progress. Headteachers will undoubtedly already be aware of the local authority outcomes duty for Foundation Stage pupils.

Supporters claim that the EYFS is play-based and flexible. However, statements about play in the framework (for example that 'all the areas must be delivered through planned, purposeful play'), demonstrate a lack of understanding of authentic child-led play. 'Play' planned by an adult is not play – it is an adult led experience. There is evidence that authentic child-led play is vital to human development and mental health and is more beneficial in early years than direct teaching

Another claim is that campaigners had the chance to make their case earlier. Untrue: many of us participated fully in the consultation process but the final documents contained some unforeseen changes. Our campaign also started when it did because, in spite of assurances during the consultation period, it became clear that no setting would be exempted from the EYFS requirements. This removed the parents choice on how their children are cared for and educated. The Government has now said that parents can ask for their child to be exempted, but it is obvious that this would be an organisational nightmare for any school or setting.

Open EYE campaigners have been accused of being a small, fringe group and therefore unrepresentative. In fact, the Open EYE steering group and supporters include people from mainstream education, the independent, private and voluntary sectors, childminders and many parents. We have support from across the political and educational field; our Downing Street petition launched in late December 2007 has achieved over 6,500 signatures already and an Early Day Motion has attracted cross party support in the House of Commons.

Primary school leaders need to inform themselves fully about the EYFS and its implications for practice. If you share our concerns and wish to know more about the Open EYE campaign, or would like to sign the petition, please visit our website [www.savechildhood.org](http://www.savechildhood.org).

### In a nutshell

The Campaign for an Open Early Years Education (Open EYE) was launched in November 2007 as a result of concerns about the introduction of the EYFS (Early Years Foundation Stage). The campaigners feel that the EYFS represent a new level of government control and is in fact developmentally inappropriate. There is concern about the reference to age-related learning and development grids and how these might get in the way of the instinctive response that good practitioners demonstrate.

The use of targets is also of great concern, particularly considering the negative effect which these and testing have had upon the primary curriculum. The delivery of and assessing of outcomes could lead to early-years practitioners having less time to engage fully with the children.

The Open EYE campaigners feel that they have been unfairly criticised for their concerns and that parental choice in how their children are cared for and educated is now negligible.

### Editors Comment

It is interesting how in this issue of PLT we have reference to the importance of 'play' and 'free-time' appearing in several of the articles. It reminds me of when we first set up our after-school childcare facility. We debated at length about the types of activities that should be offered and the degree to which children should have to participate in them. We concluded that when they came in from school they did not want to be organised. They wanted some form of choice in what they did and to be able to be free to do as little or as much as they wanted.

I certainly do not want my child minder to be involved in delivering the EYFS to my child. So what does it matter if they learn to read at 3,4,5,6 or even 7? We spend far too much time wanting to control everything that our children do and everything that happens to them. We compare and compete and lose sight of what really matters. Is it 'Every Child' or 'Every Target'?

### Profile

Margaret Edginton is a specialist in work with young children, having worked as an early years teacher, advisory teacher, and nursery school head-teacher. She now offers a training, advice and consultancy service across the UK (and sometimes abroad), and writes on the subject of early childhood education (including her books *The Foundation Stage Teacher in Action*, (3rd edition 2004) and *The Great Outdoors* (2002). Over the last few years she has worked as a mentor/consultant to a number of nursery and primary schools and Children's Centres. She is also a Vice President of Early Education and of the National Campaign for real Nursery Education.