



Together and Committed to Young Children

Advocacy Toolkit



Foreword: Dr Viki Veale (Chair of TACTYC)

TACTYC was established in 1967 and has a long history of advocacy. As a grassroots organisation created by and for those concerned with early childhood education and care (ECEC) we have been a consistent voice calling for high-quality professional development across the sector.

This toolkit, created by Nathan Archer especially for **TACTYC**, has been designed to help YOU advocate for yourself and the children and families you work with.

Whether you read this toolkit from cover to cover or skip straight to the section which best meets your needs at this moment, we hope you will find it a useful and empowering resource because, as our president, Wendy Scott, so often reminds us, nothing matters more than what happens for young children and their families.





Introduction

“I am no longer accepting the things I cannot change. I am changing the things I cannot accept.” - Angela Davis

Advocates in early childhood education and care (ECEC) are people who stand up for and speak out for (and with) children and families, themselves and the wider profession. They are individuals who take a proactive stance in response to particular issues or situations that concern them.

Advocacy work is often collective, public and visible through engaging policy makers and politicians. But just as often, advocacy can be quiet and local, such as working with an individual child and their family. However, often these ‘small acts’ are not perceived as advocacy, but they make a huge difference in context. When all these individual actions are seen together, advocacy makes a significant impact.

Landscape

The landscape of ECEC in the UK has changed inordinately over the past thirty years. Early childhood education entitlements have developed exponentially, and there is a wider understanding of the importance of early experiences in shaping young children’s brain architecture, learning, behaviour, and health.

However, in recent years, this awareness of the importance of education and care has not been matched by policy commitments. Changes to national policy have resulted in reduced services, limited access to provision for some families, funding challenges and a lack of investment in the workforce. As a result, there is significant work to do in realising children’s rights, in improving access to services for all, and in securing the resources which children and those who educate and care for them rightly deserve.

There is much advocacy work happening at a national level, and it can also be discerned in the work of individual educators in practice. Research conducted with early educators in the UK who identify as advocates (Archer 2020), had a number of shared commitments:

1. They serve as proactive **advocates for children and families** working with authenticity and conviction
2. They continue to develop critical literacy or **critical awareness to consider, evaluate and respond to policy development.**
3. They listen to colleagues, children and families and use these insights to **disrupt misperceptions and injustices.**
4. They challenge, mediate or negotiate creatively (where possible) **unfair or unreasonable policy expectations.**
5. They connect with other professionals, building **solidarity and collective action**



Rationale for the Toolkit

Advocacy has not always been a significant element of ECEC pre-service education or professional development, and yet the work of education and care is both profoundly ethical and deeply political. Work with young children is shaped both by national and local policies but also by the values, motivations, and choices of early childhood educators. Indeed, early childhood professionals are in a unique position of trust and influence in their relationships with children, families, colleagues and the community, and therefore speaking out or taking action about unjust or inappropriate policies or developments is a professional responsibility.

This guide has been compiled to highlight some contemporary issues in ECEC and focus on actions which can be taken to advocate for change. The following pages include a wide range of activities so that students of ECEC and practising early childhood educators can not only identify themselves as advocates but further develop the confidence and skills to be effective in their advocacy work.

How to use the guide

The organisation of this resource has been inspired by The Power Project from the Sheila McKechnie Foundation (2025). This project perceives power in 'nested systems' and the way power flows through and between each of the systems (micro, meso, macro). Building out from individuals' power to create change, it reveals how power is grown when we join forces with others. The following six chapters reflect this nested systems approach:

1. Advocacy for children and families at setting level
2. Advocacy for children and families at local level
3. Advocacy for children and families at systems level
4. Advocacy for self as educator and the ECEC profession at setting level
5. Advocacy for self as educator and the ECEC profession at local level
6. Advocacy for self as educator and the ECEC profession at systems level

You may choose to focus on your work with children and families at a setting level – but think about how local and systems level policies interact with this work. Or you may choose to focus on advocacy for the profession at a systems level – but how might you use local knowledge to influence this work?

Are you trying to bring together a critical mass of invested parents and community members to support an ECEC system that works for everyone? Are you devoted to improving wages, working conditions, and quality of life for early childhood educators? Are you striving for a more inclusive, equitable system? Are you looking to ensure that systems changes and public investment are sufficient? It is hoped this guide will provide ideas, resources and motivation.

We all have the power and responsibility to make a difference for children, families and the profession.

Best wishes - Your advocacy work matters!

1. ADVOCACY FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES AT A SETTING LEVEL

INTRODUCTION

“WHAT YOU DO MAKES A DIFFERENCE AND YOU HAVE TO DECIDE WHAT KIND OF DIFFERENCE YOU WANT TO MAKE” JANE GOODALL

Advocacy for children and families at a setting level is about standing up for children and their families in the context of our daily work.

Early education and care is important work - work in which social justice can be enacted. Central to this is a focus on challenging imbalances of power and creating more equitable and ethical spaces where all children can participate, and where they can relate to each other and to their communities in thoughtful and compassionate ways.

An important aspect of advocacy at this level is reflecting on the power of language and the words we choose with and about children and their communities. Language can reinforce or challenge perceptions of individuals and communities. For example, deficit terminology such as ‘at risk’, ‘lower ability’, ‘vulnerable’ carries profound weight in shaping perceptions. It is up to each of us to consciously shape our language to reflect our beliefs about social justice for all children.

An awareness of and the realisation of children’s rights are also acts of advocacy at the level of a setting. Children’s right to play is outlined in Article 31 of the UNCRC (OHCHR, 1989). However, play can be marginalised in everyday practice as educators feel the pull of outcomes-led and formalised approaches that foreground passive forms of learning. Unfortunately for some children their opportunities for play can become squeezed out and seen of less valuable than adult led activities. Educators are well placed to be advocates and activists for children’s rights’ agendas and actively resist inappropriate formalisation demands.

ECEC is a critical period for rights to be realised and involves seeing children as beings rather than becomings (Cameron and Moss, 2020). Subsequently, the profession can do important work in positioning young children and their early education as a vital period of life, and not solely a preparatory stage for their next phase of education.

Advocacy also takes the form of words and actions to support children and families in daily practice. Much of this work might not be perceived as advocacy (see Section 2), but when early childhood educators centre the needs of all young children and their communities, they are advocates for those they support. [Ma1]

What do we know?

In the UK, a number of issues are at the forefront of advocacy work at a setting level.

- Recently, there has been a reinvigorated debate about the centrality of play in early childhood education and care. Notably, there are concerns from some within the ECEC community that play is being marginalised as formalisation agendas come to the fore in policy and practice. Sector advocates are galvanising around guidance such as [Play Matters](#) to champion children’s right to play.

- Coupled with this are ongoing debates about what constitutes ‘school readiness’ (TACTYC/ECSDN/RCTN 2025) and how appropriate some of these understandings are. Whilst the Good Level of Development as a measure of school readiness is now central to the Government’s Opportunity Mission, questions remain about the impact of this and the resulting downward pressure on daily opportunities for children in their earliest years.

- We also know from reports ([Dingley’s Promise 2025](#)) about inadequate levels of funding and resources for children with SEND. Coram’s annual childcare survey in 2024 found that only 6% of local authority areas felt they have enough early years provision for children with SEND. Early childhood settings report a lack of SEND training and the complicated funding processes is leading to rising rates of exclusion in the sector.

CASE STUDY

This case study is taken from a research project on the advocacy and activism of early childhood educators.

Amy worked as an early educator in a day nursery in the East of England. She has worked in the sector for twelve years, is Montessori qualified and has recently completed an MA in Early Childhood Education. She was concerned about what she describes as ‘box-ticking’ and the limitations of current formative and summative assessments:

‘I think I have resisted from the second I went into it. Actively resisted it in terms of the two-year-old check. So, every parent I met I would say ‘we have to do this and we are supposed to use this criteria, so I have written a report which reflects where they are in the prime areas, but actually I want you to understand that this is not your child and that this is a very narrow way of[7] assessing who your child is and can and cannot do and where they are in their life journey. And for everything I write, you will undoubtedly say ‘but my child can do this at home or they do it differently.

Because otherwise, parents might go along with the labelling. So, in a way, I am a disruptor. I was disrupting certain views by parents of their children, the views that education tells them about their children. I want them to have confidence that they know their children because there is all this guff about parents being children’s first educators but that is absolutely undermined at every level of education.

Amy’s advocacy for children involved thinking and working outside of prescribed frameworks as she offered parents and carers a richer pictures of their child’s holistic learning and development.

Reflective Questions: What do you make of Amy’s actions? To what extent do you think of her actions as advocacy? Are there other ways in which Amy’s views on assessment might become an act of advocacy?



What can I do?

- ✓. Revisit the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) (OHCHR, 1989) and consider how these rights are realised in the context you work in.
- ✓. Engage with and share with colleagues the [Early Education Code of Ethics](#) (Early Education 2011). This code of ethics should be used to guide professional behaviour and as principles to inform individual and collective decision making.
- ✓. Consider how teaching for social justice involves meaningfully understanding children, their identities, and the lives they lead. This includes recognition of children's cultures and engaging in culturally responsive pedagogies. Consider the language you and your team use when discussing children's backgrounds, their abilities, and their interests[1] and challenge any deficit terminology.
- ✓. Develop your intentional, inclusive practice as an ongoing commitment. [Birth to Five Matters](#) (Early Education 2021) includes guidance on equalities and inclusion:
 - Equity requires more than treating everyone the same.
 - Talking about race is a first step in countering racism.
 - Building awareness through first-hand experiences has lasting impact.
 - Ensure children can see themselves and their families reflected in the environment.
 - Focus on the child at the centre.
 - Practitioners working with children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) acknowledge and value each child, emphasising what they can do through a strengths-based perspective on disability.
- ✓. Approach research in early childhood education and care with – 'respectful reading and critical caution' (Fennimore 2014 p.83). There are many ideas and assumptions which warrant further interrogation. For example, to what extent might the idea of 'the achievement gap' generate labels and actions based on deficit thinking focussed on what a child cannot do? How does this translate to perceptions of and interactions with young children?
- ✓. Reflect on the idea of 'cultural capital' and how this has come to feature in frameworks. Ofsted's definition of cultural capital is '...the essential knowledge that pupils need to be educated citizens, introducing them to the best that has been thought and said...'. An alternative concept is the 'funds of knowledge' perspective (Moll et al 1992) which highlights and values the resources embedded in children, families, and communities, thus countering deficit perspectives.



2. ADVOCACY FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES AT A LOCAL LEVEL

INTRODUCTION

***“THEY ALWAYS SAY TIME CHANGES THINGS, BUT YOU ACTUALLY HAVE TO CHANGE THEM YOURSELF.”
— ANDY WARHOL***

Effective advocacy often starts from grassroots movements in local communities. This might mean advocacy within your immediate community but also a wider local authority area in which decisions are taken which affect ECEC services. Whilst much ECEC policy making in the UK happens at a national level, there will be a number of local decisions that local authority elected members are accountable for, and which local authority officers implement. This means it is important to know these professionals and be ready to contact them to express your views and any concerns.

Some decisions about the provision and location of services, the nature of ECEC funding (such as deprivation supplements for entitlement funding), support for children with SEND and some discretionary grants will be made at a local level.

Advocating at this level is not only about identifying and challenging problems—it is also about showcasing and celebrating successes, achievements and the impacts and outcomes of ECEC provision and practice. Sharing stories of successful initiatives, innovative practices, and their positive effects is hugely powerful.

What do we know?

- We know there are issues of inequity of access to early education and care services. Data from the Office for National Statistics/[Ofsted](#) highlights ‘childcare deserts’ as areas with persistently low access to childcare. These areas are disproportionately socio-economically deprived and families have lower than average incomes. Additionally, policies which focus on childcare for working parents and the cost of some provision also create barriers to access to provision for some families.
- The reduction in children’s centre services in many areas means families have fewer points of contact with statutory services. In a post-pandemic and high cost-of-living period, we know many families look to their early years settings as ‘brokers of support in times of crisis’ (Benckroun & Cameron 2023 p1446). At the same time, these additional services are not generally resourced and often go unrecognised by local and national policy makers. [Ma5]

Case Study

This case study is taken from a BERA blog in which a Nursery Manager shares a story of daily advocacy from her work with children and parents/carers.

‘Small things that no one sees’: acts of advocacy in early childhood education and care.

- Coupled with this are ongoing debates about what constitutes ‘school readiness’ (TACTYC/ECSDN/RCTN 2025) and how appropriate some of these understandings are. Whilst the Good Level of Development as a measure of school readiness is now central to the Government’s Opportunity Mission, questions remain about the impact of this and the resulting downward pressure on daily opportunities for children in their earliest years.

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‘I think I have resisted from the second I went into it. Actively resisted it in terms of the two-year-old check. So, every parent I met I would say ‘we have to do this and we are supposed to use this criteria, so I have written a report which reflects where they are in the prime areas, but actually I want you to understand that this is not your child and that this is a very narrow way of assessing who your child is and can and cannot do and where they are in their life journey. And for everything I write you will undoubtedly say ‘but my child can do this at home or they do it differently.

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Amy’s advocacy for children involved thinking and working outside of prescribed frameworks as she offered parents and carers a richer picture of their child’s holistic learning and development.

Reflective Questions: What do you make of Amy’s actions? To what extent do you think of her actions as advocacy? Are there other ways in which Amy’s views on assessment might become an act of advocacy?

It’s a cold morning in West Yorkshire. The nursery’s modest entrance welcomes families seeking respite. A parent, visibly overwhelmed, arrives with a child in pyjamas. The staff greet them with understanding smiles, initiating a chat at the door to get a sense of the children’s morning and the night before. The stories often echo the same struggles—no hot water for baths, and no time to visit the laundrette.



One staff member tenderly leads a little girl to the bathroom, gently bathing away the remnants of a challenging night. She brushes and plaits the child's hair, crafting an 'Elsa plait' that brings a shy smile to the girl's face. Afterward, the child chooses from the nursery's collection of spare clothing, the educator ensuring she feels involved and cared for. A bag is quickly packed with essentials for the family to take home at the end of the session. Pyjamas are washed and dried ready for tonight.

Meanwhile, another staff member prepares for a meeting focused on an early help plan for the family. Mental health support has been recommended for the parent, and additional nursery sessions for the baby are funded by early intervention funding from the local authority, giving the parent the time they need to access support. A referral to the nursery's sister Community Interest Company ensures the family will have financial support for winter fuel, a small yet significant relief in the challenging months ahead.

Reflective Questions: To what extent do you think of these actions as daily advocacies? To what extent do you think of your daily work in terms of 'ethics' and 'social justice'?

What can I do?

- ✓ Direct correspondence with elected officials remains a powerful advocacy tool. A well-crafted letter or email can educate and persuade decision makers to support critical education policies. When communicating, be concise, factual, and personal. Share anecdotes and data that illustrate the impact of policies in real contexts. Additionally, encourage your colleagues, and their parents to do the same - strength lies in numbers.
- ✓ Share your stories (see case study): Personal narratives are powerful tools. Share your own experience or those of families you know (anonymised) who may struggle with access to early childhood education and care services. Use social media, local media outlets, and community events to spread the word.
- ✓ Get involved in decision-making processes: Your local authority will have a Cabinet Member and/or a Portfolio Holder for Children's Services with a brief for ECEC and they are likely to have a publicly available email address via which to make contact. Share this [film](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d5NT4YF9CV4) (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d5NT4YF9CV4>) by the Early Education and Childcare Coalition which is a powerful introduction to the importance of ECEC.
- ✓ Attend public hearings, participate in council meetings, and join advisory groups related to early childhood in your area. You will be ensuring your community's needs are represented.
- ✓ Arrange a network meeting with other local schools and settings to address issues of concern (e.g. local funding decisions or the lack of playground provision in an area), identify allies and plan how to mobilize as a collective. In advocacy, collective action is key to influencing change. There is an example advocacy kit at <https://dey.org/activists-tool-kit/>
- ✓ Lobby your local authority to ensure that financial resources are reaching the front line. National Day Nurseries Association research found that some local authorities underspend [3] on their ECEC funding.
- ✓ Advocate for further support for ECEC settings to enable them to offer the kind of family support which currently happens in an uncoordinated and unfunded way (see case study).

3. ADVOCACY FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES AT A SYSTEMS LEVEL

INTRODUCTION

“THERE CAN BE NO KEENER REVELATION OF A SOCIETY’S SOUL THAN THE WAY IN WHICH IT TREATS ITS CHILDREN.” – NELSON MANDELA

When people work to change what happens for a whole group or community of people, it is called systems advocacy. Changing systems and policies that prevent individuals from accessing services or entitlements can require extensive work, effort, and resources. However, it is an effective way to make lasting change for a large number of people rather than addressing barriers on an individual basis. Systems advocates encourage changes to the law, national and local and service policies and community attitudes.

In ECEC there is a rich history of advocacy for systems change. One example is the birth of the parent-led pre-school movement in the UK. This has its roots in the shortage of maintained sector provision in some areas and the desire of (predominantly) mothers for involvement in young children’s education. Belle Tutaev[1] (1929-2019) is widely acknowledged as the founder of the UK Pre School Playgroups Association (PPA), now the Early Years Alliance. Tutaev’s influence and advocacy work was instrumental in the development and growth of the PPA which Bruce (2011) describes as amongst ‘Britain’s most extensive exercise[s] in social co-operation since World War Two’ (p.1).

There continue to be numerous campaigns, associations and collectives as well as individuals campaigning for systems change on issues including the availability of ECEC provision, adequate support for children with SEND and the appropriateness of early childhood assessments.

Advocating for (and with) children and families for systems change means thinking beyond individual experience and local conditions to consider wider change – thinking with a systems mindset.

- Who are the different players to include in systems change efforts, and what are their relationships and power dynamics?
- What are the reasons for the current status quo?
- What is the readiness for a system to change?
- What is the best strategy for influencing the system?

What do we know?

- The ECEC landscape in the UK is diverse and multifaceted. The settings which provide ECEC are broadly divided into the maintained sector (nursery schools and nursery classes), and the private, voluntary and independent sector (including day nurseries, pre-schools and childminders). As a result, children’s experiences vary significantly and families navigate a highly complex terrain of provision, dependent on where they live, the services they and their children need and what they can afford (Archer and Oppenheim 2021).
- Accessibility of provision is not always guaranteed and is often framed as the availability of a local place. However, improving accessibility might also involve improving affordability of provision, the extent to which provision supports children’s developmental needs, and equity[1], as in provision which reaches underserved or disadvantaged children as well as children with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND).



- Current ‘childcare deserts’ mean the system is working for some children and not others. Notably, only 29% of local authorities in England that responded to the survey report having enough provision for at least 75% of children with SEND in their area (Hodges et al 2025).
- ECEC provision in the UK has long experienced ‘systemic underfunding’ (EYA 2021). This shortfall in funding is having a detrimental effect on the sustainability of provision—it is estimated that 35% of nursery closures in 2018 were in areas that are among the 30% most deprived wards in England. By comparison, 14% of nursery closures were in communities in the 20% most affluent areas in England (NDNA 2021).

Case Study

Dingley’s Promise is charity whose mission is to deliver life changing support to under 5s with special educational needs & disabilities, and their families. The charity

- Offers specialist nursery provision, holiday playschemes and family support.
- Delivers high quality training for early years professionals.
- Uses their national voice to raise awareness of challenges faced by families.

Dingley’s Promise has grown from a small charity, responding to local need, to having national impact over recent years. In addition to the direct provision of services, the charity is lobbying to bring about wider change, training to improve the confidence and skills of early years practitioners to work inclusively and providing consultancy to local authorities to better support SEND provision.

In response to the growing demand for early years SEND provision and worsening funding and sufficiency issues, Dingley’s Promise launched its Manifesto for Early Years Inclusion in 2023, supported by national partners. In addition, the charity has produced political briefings which have been shared widely with local politicians and national decision makers including ministers. The influencing work of the charity includes numerous presentation and speaking engagements including to political party conference events and sector wide meetings.

Reflective Questions: Are there any issues in your current role or past roles which you feel should be addressed at a systems level? How might you address those issues beyond the local level?

What can I do?

- ✓ Participate in early childhood research. Completing national (and local) surveys and participating in interviews or focus groups can ensure your perspectives are collected by researchers. The findings from this research often feed into policy-oriented recommendations for systems change.
- ✓ Drawing on this research data to build an argument can be powerful. Combining national data with local stories can be an impactful way to make a case for systems change with national policy makers and influencers.
- ✓ Consider direct action in the form of demonstrations where appropriate. This can be a visible and collective way to advocate for policy change. The ‘March of the Four Year Olds’ (2019) was organised by More than a Score in opposition to Baseline Assessment. The march was led from Parliament Square to 10 Downing Street to hand in a petition calling for a halt to statutory tests for four-year-olds. The petition had over 64,000 signatures and garnered significant publicity and political attention.

- ✓ Get involved in national campaigns such as NDNA's #FirstFiveYearsCount which promotes the value and importance of ECEC.
- ✓ Engage with your MP, share your experiences, research, local insights and your policy asks for children and families on a system level.
- ✓ Promote the All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) for Early Education and Childcare to your local MP and ask them to get involved. The APPG brings together parliamentarians and leading members for the sector to work collaboratively to facilitate discussions and find solutions on key policy issues. The Group's purpose is to help ensure that every child gets the best start in life.
- ✓ Making representation to the Minister for Early Education – conveying the lived experiences of colleagues and families (anonymised and with permissions) brings to life policy decisions and their impact in the real world.
- ✓ Celebrate the impact of changes you have made to influence wider systemic change. See https://www.theguardian.com/education/2025/jun/11/headteacher-bringing-play-based-learning-back-to-classroom-tina-farr?CMP=Share_iOSApp_Other
- ✓ Inform yourself about research into aspects of ECEC which particularly interest you – e.g. by reading articles in 'Early Years', the journal received by all members of **TACTYC**.

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4. ADVOCACY FOR SELF AS EDUCATOR AND THE ECEC PROFESSION AT SETTING LEVEL

INTRODUCTION

“I LEARNED A LONG TIME AGO THE WISEST THING I CAN DO IS BE ON MY OWN SIDE, BE AN ADVOCATE FOR MYSELF AND OTHERS LIKE ME.” – MAYA ANGELOU

Quality early childhood education and care depends upon the calibre and strength of those working in the profession. A stable workforce is also essential for building responsive relationships with children and families. In order to advocate for this, activity which is both self-advocacy and advocating for the wider profession can happen at a setting level.

Unlike the teaching profession in maintained schools, ECEC is a complex landscape with many different types of schools and settings, multiple qualifications and numerous professional roles. This makes advocacy work more complex as work with children in this range of contexts is not as commonly understood as, for example, teaching in a primary school.

The skills and knowledge needed to work in ECEC are not always recognised. Additionally, the complexity of the work of early childhood educators and the impact of their work are not always well understood by parents/carers and the wider public.

Advocacy for the early childhood education and care profession at a setting level means speaking up about the important work that early childhood educators do. There are many ways to [2] engage families and other professionals who visit the setting on this topic. In doing so you create opportunities to express the huge impact of this work and improve recognition of the profession. Communicating the complexity and impact of this work to the local community is an important piece of the advocacy jigsaw.

What do we know?

- As part of their ongoing work to change the national conversation on early education and childcare, the Early Education and Childcare Coalition carries out an annual survey of public attitudes to understand how the public views and values the sector. In 2024, the survey found that There is growing recognition of the importance of early education and childcare to the whole country, not just parents. The majority of voters view early education and childcare as a way to improve the life chances of children, rather than it being primarily about enabling parental employment....The public continues to think highly of early education and childcare professionals but they are aware of the staffing challenges facing the sector. Voters are supportive of increasing funding to providers to enable them to recruit experienced staff so they can offer more places.
- Research also tells us ‘Early childhood educators are in a position to change the conversation about ECEC that is so often dominated by media discussions of affordability, availability (Fenech and Wilkins 2017) and a focus on individual children. As important as these issues are, more nuanced conversations with families can work to build community understandings about what early learning and development is, why it matters and the role played by quality ECEC, thereby reframing ECEC as a public good that serves children first rather than solely a child care commodity purchased by working families positioned as consumers’ (Fenech et al 2019: 13). Strong leadership that is grounded in a commitment to parental engagement appears paramount , and middle managers may need additional training in order to be able to support their teams (Ward 2018).

Case Study

London Early Years Foundation (LEYF) is a charity and social enterprise group of 40 nurseries in London. In 2019, the group took the decision to review the terminology used to describe its team members and moved away from 'practitioners' to nursery teachers

"Calling our staff teachers has changed the narrative within our nurseries," says Dr June O'Sullivan (CEO of LEYF). "It's made us much more focused on teaching. We have a strong pedagogy and the combination of that and calling our staff teachers has improved our teaching. It's given people confidence and frames our conversations in a context of teaching children."

"People here can even do their degree without leaving because of the partnership we have with the University of Wolverhampton," says June. "Our development offer allows people to progress without having to leave. Early Years is often seen as a stepping stone to becoming a school teacher but I want our staff to feel like, 'why would I do that?' We give people the space to grow here. It's easy to talk the talk on training but we're a provider that actually delivers. And making all our staff teachers is very much part of that." [Ma3]

Nursery World **Why LEYF nurseries turned its staff into teachers 14/10/19**

Reflective Questions: Can you identify language or terminology that you find problematic or challenging in the sector? What actions might you prioritise to use different language to shift perceptions about early education and care and the profession?

What can I do?

- ✓ Reflect on the language used in your setting, e.g. to describe the work and roles of the team. Does this language reflect your attitudes to the value of early childhood education and care? Do your communications explain the importance of well qualified carers and educators as professionals who continually develop their knowledge, skills and understanding? Do you detail how effective pedagogical leaders understand the learning and development needs of children and can enhance and extend teaching and learning opportunities?
- ✓ Explore understandings of professionalism in team meetings. How do you define this? What does it look like in practice?
- ✓ Take opportunities to share with parents/communities the importance of the work and the role of early education in shaping children's outcomes now and for the future.
- ✓ Share summaries of research in newsletters to communicate the impact of high-quality early education.
- ✓ Share accessible information with parents/carers on the impact of early learning on brain development (e.g. resources from Harvard University Center for the Developing Child and Centre for Research on Play in Education, Development, and Learning (PEDAL) at the University of Cambridge).
- ✓ Display team qualifications and CPD commitments on your website and celebrate these achievements.
- ✓ Communicate to parents/carers details of the range of other professionals you liaise with in your daily work in supporting children and families.
- ✓ Share with parents/carers national campaigns seeking to raise the status and profile of the ECEC profession.

5. ADVOCACY FOR SELF AS EDUCATOR AND THE ECEC PROFESSION AT A LOCAL LEVEL

INTRODUCTION

“IF YOU WANT TO BECOME AN INSTRUMENT OF CHANGE, GATHER PEOPLE IN YOUR COMMUNITY AND HOST A REGULAR CONVERSATION. THE ONLY WAY TO SUCCEED IS TO CONNECT PEOPLE, SHARE INSPIRATION AND SUPPORT ONE ANOTHER.”

— DEEPAK CHOPRA

Beyond immediate responsibilities to children and families, there are many opportunities to advocate for yourself as a professional, for colleagues and for the ECEC profession[1] at a local level. This advocacy work can address limited understandings of the role of early childhood educators through speaking up to the wider community about this important work.

In addition to increasing the profile of ECEC, this work might also include advocating for further local investment for services and for the profession. It is important to have a sound understanding of local structures and agencies and their duties. By having this awareness of statutory authorities and their responsibilities, it is then possible to build strong relationships and to hold elected members to account.

There will also be a number of networks, facilitated by a range of organisations at a local level, which are useful platforms for advocacy activity. Thinking beyond ECEC groups, there is value in engaging with business and community/voluntary sector organisations and networks, communicating the work of your setting and the wider sector and harnessing support for further advocacy work.

Local media advocacy is another valuable tool to influence public opinion and gain the attention of elected officials and the wider public about the work of the ECEC profession. Through print, broadcast and social media it is possible to reach a wider audience, dispelling myths and conveying the nature and impact of work in ECEC.

What do we know?

- We know local authorities have duties under the Childcare Act 2006 & 2016 to secure information, advice and training for ECEC providers. But we also know that recent years have seen significant reductions in their budgets to meet these duties. In some areas there are limited opportunities for professional development and networking. Reductions in local authority budgets have left some areas with less opportunities than others for engaging in funded qualifications and CPD.

- We also know that there is some understanding of the financial challenges being experienced by ECEC services. Research by Department for Education (2022) in the Parents survey on Childcare includes:
 - o There was a general consensus that childcare was expensive when paying in addition to the funded hours or if their child wasn't eligible. Some participants felt the cost was reasonable given that nurseries were businesses, and some wished that nursery staff would receive higher wages given the importance and value parents placed on their work.

- The Early Education and Childcare Coalition (2024) found in a survey 53% of voters are concerned about the availability of early education and childcare, while almost half (49%) think it's unaffordable. Similarly, the biggest challenges for providers are also seen to be financial, with low government funding (74%) and high running costs (78%) cited by voters as the main problems facing the sector.

Case Study

A nursery setting in Lincolnshire approached the local newspaper to ask whether they would be interested in an opinion piece on the importance of high quality early childhood education and care. The setting's director had worked in the profession for over thirty years and drew on this experience and credibility to advocate for the ECEC profession at a local level.

Using a local debate about 'school readiness' as a 'hook', she wrote two persuasive newspaper columns focussing on how early educators worked beyond conventional understandings of school readiness. The nursery director used the opportunity to express views about the importance of a child's early years as a phase in its own right and not primarily as preparation for school. She also conveyed the important skills, knowledge, experience and dispositions required of early childhood educators in undertaking their work.

Following publication, the director sent the weblink to the online newspaper column to local councillors and followed this up to arrange for them to visit the setting to see the work of the nursery team. [Ma1]

Reflective Questions: To what extent are you engaged in your local community beyond your role? How might you convey the complexity, demands, and importance of the work of early educators in your local community?

What can I do?

- ✓. Understand local government structures and responsibilities[2] , including the duties placed on local authorities, the role of local elected members, Schools Forum, and Combined Authorities.
- ✓. Engage with local ECEC networks[3] , including those facilitated by local authorities, National Day Nurseries Association, Early Education, Early Years Alliance, PACEY.
- ✓. Establish your own community of practice (with a focus on, for example[4] , an aspect of pedagogy or workforce related issues) e.g. Bristol City local authority has established a recruitment and retention forum to address workforce challenges at a local level.
- ✓. Invite your ward councillor and the local authority elected member for education into your setting so that they can meet you and colleagues to better understand your work and any local challenges.
- ✓. Use local media to advocate for quality ECEC and for investment in the profession through opinion pieces, letters to the editor or sending press releases on advocacy campaigns
- ✓. Respond to local consultations as part of wider campaigning work
- ✓. Offer to speak or give a presentation at business/voluntary sector network meetings to raise the profile of the ECEC profession at a local level and reach new audiences.
- ✓. Organise public meetings to explore, debate and build a campaign around local ECEC issues



6. ADVOCACY FOR SELF AS EDUCATOR AND THE ECEC PROFESSION AT A SYSTEMS LEVEL

INTRODUCTION

***“WHEN ENOUGH PEOPLE COME TOGETHER, THEN CHANGE WILL COME AND WE CAN ACHIEVE ALMOST ANYTHING. SO INSTEAD OF LOOKING FOR HOPE – START CREATING IT.” – GRETA THUNBERG
– DEEPAK CHOPRA***

Advocacy for the ECEC profession at a systems level targets macro change. It seeks to influence government policies -including funding and programmes of professional development, legislation affecting pay and conditions– [1] in ways that meet the rights and interests of young children and the ECEC profession.

In the UK the ECEC profession is made up of a large number of different roles in diverse contexts, each with a rich heritage and with their own terminology. These roles are rooted in long-standing policy trajectories and deep-seated cultural traditions of early childhood education and childcare. This system has been described as fragmented and research suggests that this fragmentation has, at times, hampered collective action. However, there are many examples of both individual and collective advocacy which has made real change to systems level policy.

It remains important to have an understanding of the wider system in which we are working and the ways in which policies are formed and how they shape the profession and practice. This understanding, or systems mindset, can help situate our own experiences in the bigger picture and shape the actions chosen to advocate for the profession on a wider scale either dashes before and after 'including funding ...and conditions' or commas

What do we know?

There are a number of current issues linked to the ECEC profession on which individuals and organisations have advocated and continue to advocate.

- Recruitment and retention of early childhood educators continues to be very challenging as turnover of the workforce remains relatively high at the same time as government is seeking an expansion of funded places. (Hardy et al 2023, Early Years Alliance 2024) A key, sector wide issue linked to this is the pay and conditions of the workforce. Many advocacy organisations continue to lobby government to improve early education entitlement funding rates to enable settings to improve wages.
- Professional development opportunities are available but there is a lack of clarity and funding around a pathway of qualifications to degree level and beyond. We know that graduates make a significant impact on the quality[2] of provision for young children, but a lack of political attention on the workforce has hampered progress in this area.
- At the same time, research suggests educators feel a strong vocational commitment to early years. They experience high job satisfaction with many elements of their work (Hardy et al 2024)
- The ECEC workforce lacks diversity being over 80% White British and men making up just 2% of early childhood educators.

Barriers to greater systems advocacy by early childhood educators appear to be a lack of awareness about macro issues in the early childhood sector and how to actually TO actually do systems advocacy and a lack of time and confidence.

Mevawalla's (2009) found in interviews with early childhood educators in Australia, awareness of the experience required for systems advocacy, prioritising of centre-based work (teaching) over work considered to be non-core (systems advocacy); feelings of powerlessness and marginalisation and ambivalence about accessing and exercising power.

Case Study

Joelle Feudjo-Maneze, Independent Consultant Researcher and TACTYC Trustee, has been advocating for the ECEC profession:

'The Private, Voluntary, and Independent (PVI) sector lacks sufficient representation, and the voices of professionals working within it are often overlooked. Their daily struggles are frequently undermined due to a lack of advocacy from professionals who understand these challenges firsthand.

The thought of stepping into an advocacy role initially scared me. Yes, I was afraid. But at a certain point in my career, I told myself, "What must be done should be done." We must act! Professionals working in daycare settings and childminding need a voice.

I had the privilege of sharing the TACTYC manifesto with the new MP for Uxbridge and South Ruislip, Danny Beales, alongside Dr. Viki Veale, the chair of TACTYC, Toyin Balogun, Area manager for the Coat of Many Colours Nursery, Uxbridge, Hayes and Hounslow. During the visit, we walked Danny through the realities of funding challenges, an undervalued workforce, and limited access to quality services; issues that early years providers face daily. We highlighted how these challenges impact children, families, and ECEC professionals alike.

It was truly encouraging to engage with an MP committed to listening to and supporting the PVI sector. We deeply appreciate his willingness to engage with and advocate for early years professionals in Uxbridge. Even more exciting was his openness to the idea of establishing a dedicated forum for the sector, a move that could strengthen our community and ensure that the needs of local providers are addressed more effectively.

[Working with My MP to Advocate for the PVI Sector and ECEC Profession](https://www.tactyc.org.uk/post/working-with-my-mp-to-advocate-for-the-pvi-sector-and-ecec-profession)[6]
(<https://www.tactyc.org.uk/post/working-with-my-mp-to-advocate-for-the-pvi-sector-and-ecec-profession>) **Joelle Feudjo-Maneze**

Reflective Question: How might you bring your work and the impact that you and colleagues have on the lives of young children to wider attention?

What can I do?

- ✓ Articulate your vision for the profession to decision makers. Draw up a checklist of what you think needs to change for the workforce and share that with national politicians and policy makers.
- ✓ Understand the levels of local and national government, your elected representatives and their role in the policy making process. Write a letter or email your MP (<https://members.parliament.uk/FindYourMP>) to convey any concerns and the structural barriers (e.g. funding) to realising your vision for the profession.
- ✓ Engage parents in your lobbying work too. Ask them to contact their MP with your message about recognition for the workforce. Use your setting's social media accounts to galvanise families into supporting your advocacy work.

- ✓ Be proactive as a member of national ECEC membership organisations or unions. Many have campaign resources linked to the ECEC workforce and provide useful templates for communicating statistics to frame an argument and social media graphics to support online communications.
- ✓ Connect with other changemakers via these organisations, building alliances and mobilising others in local and national networks.
- ✓ Many membership organisations have a press office which is often looking for spokespeople willing to speak to the media on ECEC issues.
- ✓ Sign a petition! There are a number of ECEC petitions at change.org and <https://petition.parliament.uk/>
- ✓ Sharing personal stories is one of the most impactful ways to advocate for change in early childhood. Stories help us connect with others and highlight the human side of important social issues. Through sharing your story as an early educator in a range of formats, you raise not only your own voice, but the wider profile of the profession. Your story is important.
- ✓ Create a blog or vlog and use a micro blogging platform such as Bluesky, TikTok or LinkedIn to share your work. Or write a short blog for one of the national membership organisations.
- ✓ Social media provides powerful opportunities to express your vision for the profession and your priorities in realising this. Tagging in key supporters, influencers and officials increases the chance they will read your posts.
- ✓ Offer to speak at a roundtable or conference and connect vital practice experience to national policy debates.
- ✓ Investigate free campaigning resources at <https://freecampaigntools.smk.org.uk/>





FURTHER READING

These summaries are drawn from Mevawalla, Z., & Archer, N. (2022). Advocacy and activism in early childhood. In Oxford Bibliographies Online

Ang, Lynn. (2014). "Vital Voices for Vital Years in Singapore: one country's advocacy for change in the early years sector." *International Journal of Early Years Education* 22 (3):329-341. doi: 10.1080/09669760.2014.911695

Article on 27 'leading professionals' views of early childhood in Singapore. Findings reveal that participants advocated for systematic changes to policy and service delivery in relation to addressing a) the importance of early childhood as a more than 'school-readiness', b) widening gaps in accessibility and equity, and c) raising the status, pay and quality of the workforce. The paper provides reflective questions which emphasize the potential for policy directions.

Cooper, Patricia M. (2020). *Fighting for the unity of care and education in early childhood. In Disrupting and Countering Deficits in Early Childhood Education*, edited by Fikile Nxumalo and Christopher P. Brown, 83-102. New York: Routledge.

A chapter on challenges to early childhood teacher-professionalism which reports on actions that can be used to advocate for professional control of representation, requirements, and compensation. The author considers basic tools of advocating to maintain early childhood teachers' professional authority over their own identities and classroom curriculum. Actions explored include getting involved in professional organizations, community organizing, as well as local and state opportunities to influence early childhood legislation.

Fenech, Marianne, and Mianna Lotz. (2018). *Systems advocacy in the professional practice of early childhood teachers: From the antithetical to the ethical. Early Years* 38 (1):19-34. doi: 10.1080/09575146.2016.1209739

Article on four Australian early childhood educators who engage with systems advocacy as an integral part of their practice. The authors highlight that participants demonstrated: a) motivation and commitment to social justice, b) courage in pursuing justice, and c) fortitude throughout facing challenges and adversities. Findings demonstrate how participants' proactively constructed teacher professionalism as 'ethical practice' - thus challenging dominant constructions of teacher professionalism that remove advocacy teachers' roles.

Fennimore, B.S., 2014. *Standing up for something every day: Ethics and justice in early childhood classrooms. Teachers College Press.*

This text^[1] is written for present and future early childhood educators and provides concrete ways of addressing social justice concerns in practice. Four model teacher-guides accompany readers from chapter to chapter and demonstrate strategies for standing up for children through ethics, respect for diversity and a commitment to ongoing advocacy.



FURTHER READING

Gibbs, L. (2003). Action Advocacy and Activism: Standing up for children. (1 ed.) Community Child Care Cooperative NSW.

This publication is for all people interested in advocating for the rights of children-directors, child care staff, management committees, parents, students- covering everything that you need to know for your next campaign-working with the media, preparing media releases and press kits, liaising with governments and councils...as well as explaining what advocacy for children really means and case studies from centres that have run successful community campaigns.

Hollingsworth, Heidi L, Mary Knight-McKenna, and Ren Bryan. (2016). Policy and advocacy concepts and processes: Innovative content in early childhood teacher education. Early Child Development and Care 186 (10):1664-1674. doi: 10.1080/03004430.2015.1121252.

This article describes an innovative undergraduate course that goes beyond traditional foci on developmental research and pedagogy and aims to inform future early childhood professionals about policies and policy-making procedures and prepares students to engage in advocacy.

Kieff, J. (2009) Informed Advocacy in Early Childhood Care and Education: Making a Difference for Young Children and Families. New Orleans: Pearson.

This text book details how advocacy is a skill and responsibility to be practised at a local level by all with an interest in early childhood education. The text discusses contexts for advocacy for young children and families, beginning locally and working outwardly to global advocacy providing specific guidelines for readers in developing an advocacy agenda.

Long, S., Souto-Manning, M. and Vasquez, V. eds., 2016. Courageous leadership in early childhood education: Taking a stand for social justice. Teachers College Press.

In each of this collection's thirteen chapters an early childhood leader in the US details the action they have taken to challenge and change inequitable practices in pre schools and elementary schools. Through the voices of families, teachers and administrators each chapter shares ways that these leaders use the power entrusted in them to disrupt discriminatory practices.

Mevawalla, Zinnia, and Fay Hadley. (2012). The advocacy of educators: Perspectives from early childhood. Australasian Journal of Early Childhood 37 (1):74-80. doi: 10.1177/183693911203700109.

Article on twelve Australian early childhood educators' understandings of advocacy for raising the professional status. Findings show participants felt able to advocate with 'internal' stakeholders (e.g., families), but outsourced 'other' forms of advocacy for teacher-professionalism in 'external' spaces (e.g., beyond their workplace) to senior stakeholders in broader socio-political contexts (e.g., echoing the perception that advocacy was the role of those in higher positions of power such as peak bodies).



FURTHER READING

McLoone-Richards, Claire, and Catriona Robinson. (2020). "I know I am just a student but." : The challenges for educators in supporting students to develop their advocacy skills in protecting children. Early Years:1-14. doi: 10.1080/09575146.2020.1749036.

Article on the confidence levels of students and staff knowledge of child protection processes. Findings show the significance of advocacy skills, and the need to ensure confidence and competency in advocating for children's rights. Authors suggest programmes do not provide sufficient knowledge of child abuse and neglect signs. Additionally, there is a need to improve the extent to which child protection studies focus on learning and 'doing advocacy' with students.

Nicholson, Julie, and Priya Mariana Shimpi. (2015). "Guiding future early childhood educators to reclaim their own play as a foundation for becoming effective advocates for children's play." Early Child Development and Care 185 (10):1601-1616. doi: 10.1080/03004430.2015.1013538.

Article on how two undergraduate students were guided to examine play across their lifespan, critique barriers to play, and consider adult play experiences in order to discover pathways to reclaim play. Findings suggest supporting early childhood professionals to develop as child advocates to articulate the value of play for children's learning and development should begin by helping them to make important discoveries about the role of play in their lives.

Schmit, C. (2020). Advocacy for early childhood educators: Speaking up for your students, your colleagues, and yourself. New York: Routledge.

This is an accessible guidebook which provides tools and strategies for early childhood teachers to engage in advocacy. Following an initial section on the purpose, need and significance of advocacy, the book is divided into three sections, the book focuses on advocating for children and families, advocating for colleagues and engaging in self-advocacy



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