

**ECF History**

In January 1993, Gillian Pugh, Director of the Early Years Unit at the National Children’s Bureau, found it frustrating that there were so many early years organisations who had many different interests  and all worked independently that she decided to set up a meeting and invite them to come together to discuss their issues and if possible to reach consensus. This would enable the Unit to represent the early years sector more effectively to government and policy makers. This was the beginning of the Early Childhood Education Forum which then met regularly and everyone found useful. An increasing number of groups were invited to the Forum meetings and eventually policy documents were written. The Forum thus became a consortium of major national organisations concerned with the care and education of young children including those responsible for statutory provision, the voluntary and private sectors, organisations supporting families with children with special educational needs, parents , governors, advisers, inspectors and local authorities. The principles on which the Forum was based were derived partly from Investing in Young Children: costing an education and day care service‘ (Holterman 1992) published by the NCB.

In 1997 it was decided that it was important to draw up a joint document on quality which everyone could support and use. The Forum believed that all children had a right to good quality care and education in the early years and that investment would have long term beneficial educational, social and economic results. The Forum joined with Goldsmiths College, University of London, a project team was established and Vicki Hurst became the project co-ordinator. The aim was

\* “To raise public awareness of the needs of young children

\* To seek a more appropriate share of resources for early years services

\* To work towards developing common standards , based on developmentally appropriate care and education, across all services for young children

\* To seek access to appropriate training for all early years educators

\* To speak with one voice for children.”

The result was Quality in Diversity - a ‘framework to enable early childhood practitioners to think about, support and extend the learning of young children from birth to the age of eight’. This was remarkable - the coming together of a wide range of groups, individuals and organisations to speak with one voice - the original purpose of the Forum.

The basis of the framework was to provide foundations for quality provision, goals to be used in observations and entitlements for all children.

The Forum endorsed the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

It also believed that learning begins at birth and that care and education are inseparable - this led at a later stage to changing the name, after much debate, to the Early Childhood Forum.

By 1998 when Quality in Diversity was published there was a new, Labour Government which early on showed an interest in children. The Department for Education was renamed the Department for Education, Children and  Families. Every Child Matters became the mantra and Sure Start Children’s Centres, bringing together education, health and social services, were established in every local authority to provide support for families with children under five. T he importance of early intervention was recognised. Birth to Three Matters was produced and the Desirable Learning Outcomes for 3, 4 and 5 year olds. All were debated by the Forum.

Then in 2000 the Early Years Foundation Stage was published by the Government ‘a curriculum that **sets standards for the learning, development, and care of children from birth to 5-years-old**. It is directly aimed at supporting practitioners, teaching/education staff, and childminders who are providing care and education for young  children’ It became part of the National Curriculum in 2008. Concern was expressed by ECF members about the lack of commitment to outdoor play and members of the Steering Group met with DFE officials to discuss this. (In 2017 ECF with Learning through Landscapes sent out a survey to find out about outdoor play in early years settings. The responses showed that provision was patchy. This led to a meeting with OfSTED to discuss the possibility of inspectors reporting on the quality of outdoor play but this was not incorporated in the latest framework.)

The Forum was by now inviting politicians, representatives from the Department for Education, OfSTED, Children’s Workforce Commission  and responding to consultations.

This was hugely helped by the Early Years Unit’s appointment of Heather Ransom as co-ordinator for the Forum for one day a week. She oversaw the administration of the meetings, kept contact with members and was a direct link with Government, the National Children’s Bureau and its media team.

The Forum decided it wanted to develop a statement on inclusion which could be used by all organisations. A facilitator was appointed to help put together wording which everyone could support. This was incorporated into the ECF Policy Agenda which was drawn up in 2006. It was planned to write leaflets on each of the five  key areas identified. In 2007  it was agreed also to write a leaflet on Play .  In 2008 ECF held a Conference in Birmingham which was very well attended.

Partnerships were developed - with the General Teaching Council who offered space and hosted several seminars on different topics with external speakers and a wider audience, with Lord Listowel who booked a space in the House of Lords for ECF to have a Conference on ‘Investing in the Early Years’ to which MPs and peers were invited. Later the Forum joined with members of the Early Years team at London Met University  to set up a series of workshops involving parents, practitioners and others to discuss, with invited speakers the health and well-being of young children. This resulted in the book ‘Exploring Well-being in the Early Years' by Julia Manning - Morton which was published in January 2014.

With an impending  General Election in 2015, ECF decided to draw up a Charter for Early Years for general distribution. All members were invited to meetings set up for this purpose, those who were not able to attend were consulted at every stage. The Charter was launched in the House of Commons.

At the time Forum meetings were held all day, five times a year, and the room, lunch and refreshments were provided by the NCB. Eventually members were asked to pay a subscription and then had to bring their own refreshments. This was because the NCB finances were reducing. In addition Heather had a new post and ceased to be the co-ordinator. The costs of the room the Forum used in the basement of the NCB building became prohibitive and after lengthy discussions with NCB senior leaders the ECF decided to leave. It was well supported by its members , particularly the teachers Union, the NUT, and UNISON who gave us rooms to meet free of charge. ECF continued to attract good speakers to all its meetings. OfSTED and DfE were invited from time to time.

Then, thanks to Barbara Isaacs, who represented Montessori on the Forum, a meeting room was provided at the Montessori International Centre near Oxford Street and then in their building Marlborough Place, St Johns Wood, London.

A campaign leaflet arguing for early years provision to continue to age seven as in most other countries was written in 2019 but the arrival of Covid in 2020 prevented its distribution. Members were asked to raise the issue in any way they could .

New groups have emerged producing documents on the early years but again operating independently:

The Early Years Commission which launched its manifesto in June 2021, the Royal Foundation, Parent Infant Foundation - 1001 Days, Nuffield, Early Years Workforce Commission, One Nation Conservatives, More than a Score, Children First Alliance, and APPGs n: Childcare and Early Education, Nursery Schools, Fit and Healthy Childhood.

The ECF chair has attended workshops, launches and other meetings organised by these groups. It continues to be difficult to convince the Government to make the many changes that are needed and groups need to work together.

The Steering Group met the Shadow Secretary of State, Kate Green and Tulip Siddiq in January 2021.

Early Years Coalition:
In 2020 , responding  to the Government’s revised EYFS, ECF joined the Early Years Coalition, set up by Early Education, and ECF members with 100 early years experts, were involved in the development of Birth to 5 Matters non-statutory guidance, published in March 2021.

When the COVID Pandemic hit, ECF moved to having online meetings via Zoom. A different speaker has been invited to each meeting and good discussions followed. Minutes and presentations have been sent to members after each meeting so that the information could be passed to their members. The Steering Group decided to introduce a newsletter in June 2020 and five have been written by Barbara Isaacs and Tricia Johnson.

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