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Involving *Parents* in their  
*Children's Learning*

*A Knowledge-Sharing Approach*

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*& the Pen Green Centre Team*



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# *New forms of provision, new ways of working*

## *The Pen Green Centre*

*Margy Whalley*

The Pen Green Centre opened in 1983 as one of a small number of pioneering integrated centres offering children and their families both nursery education and a wide range of support services. It was established after a comprehensive research project undertaken in the late 1970s on under fives services in Northamptonshire, with a clear intention to bridge the traditional divide between day-care and child protection services provided through social services-run day nurseries and early education as it had traditionally been provided in nursery classes and nursery schools.

The centre had a joint advisory group with strong political representation from both education, social care and health and the project was jointly managed by the Education and Social Services Departments and the local Health Authority. From the start the centre was staffed by a multidisciplinary team; in 1983 there were six staff working with 50 children and providing a range of services for 300+ younger children and their families. The staff included a social worker, early educators, a teacher and an unqualified community worker from the local area, with health visitors 'on loan' from the local health visiting team.

Pen Green was one of the first six Early Excellence Centres in 1996, became a trailblazer Sure Start programme in 1999 and was one of the first children's centres in England in 2006. By this time we were employing more than 120 staff including teachers, early educators, social workers, play workers, midwives, health workers and support staff, working on an annual basis with over 1400 families. Today, there are now three nursery areas (for children from 2 to 5 years) and two baby nest areas (for children from 9 months to 3 years) working daily with 340+ children. We also have indoor and outdoor environments for children and families that are used 48 weeks a year, five days a week and into the evening, and on Saturdays and Sundays between 9am and 1pm. We still engage with over 1500 families from across the whole town.

Corby, where the centre is based, became a steel town in the 1930s with a teeming population of steelworkers who had come down from Scotland to find work. A high proportion of the town's population were first generation Scots and the Scottish culture is still very strong with kilts, bagpipes, highland gatherings, ceilidhs and large followings for Celtic and Rangers football clubs. This migration has been summed up in the local adage '80% of the population are Scots and the rest are jealous'. The town also has a large Irish community with their own clubs and social centres and cultural traditions and in the immediate pre- and post-war years many families also migrated to Corby from Eastern Europe. The town's school registers represented this shift, so along with the Camerons, McKenzies, Wallaces, O'Malleys and Dochertys we began to see the Dejaralovics, Konsbergs and Merniaks.

In the 1980s, when the Pen Green Centre opened, the steelworks had closed, the local council housing estates were boarded up and shops were barricaded with wire grills; 43 per cent of the male population were unemployed and 50 per cent of children attending the centre when it first opened were from single parent families. Poor nutrition, inadequate housing and high infant mortality rates were all major factors influencing the lives of young families. There were minimal public services for parents and young children and very few of the traditional voluntary organisations for families facing social economic challenges or to support children at risk of social exclusion.

In Corby in the early 1980s there was no choice of services for parents wanting nursery education, childcare or 'time out' to study. There was no partnership between the public, private and voluntary sectors because there was little provision for family support or early education. There was only one private day nursery, a small number of registered childminders and a few volunteer-led playgroups. The part-time nursery education that was available in nursery units attached to local primary schools was hugely oversubscribed, and these short nursery sessions did not help parents who wanted to attend college or go back to work. There was also a social services children's centre in Corby, which was perceived by local parents as a resource exclusively for 'problem families'.

The Pen Green Centre was set up in what was formerly a comprehensive school built in the 1930s by the Stewarts and Lloyds steelmaking company to provide an education for the children of the steelworkers. The houses that surround the centre were built specifically to be homes for the 'steelworkers'. Sixty feet away stood the last of the blast furnaces that had transformed a small Northamptonshire village into a thriving steel town (Whalley, 1994). In the first year that the centre opened we witnessed the detonation of the last 'Corby candle'.

## Problems and contradictions

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Corby in the 1980s exemplified many of the problems and contradictions inherent in education and day-care/childcare services in the UK at this time. The issues that staff at Pen Green had to face then remain problematic some thirty-three years later in 2016.

1. *Simplistic demarcation lines*: crude divisions remained in the 1980s between those who saw themselves as providing for the educational needs of the children i.e. the local education authority, and those supporting the child in terms of welfare and childcare i.e. social services, and in a very limited way, the private sector.

In 2016 these divisions still remain. The main provider for 3-and 4-year-olds is the local authority through provision in nursery classes in primary schools across Corby. Most of these offer limited access to breakfast clubs or after-school provision and they do not open during the school holidays. Childcare support for the 3-and 4-year-olds of working parents is therefore very limited. The evidence from the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) study of the standard of early learning and development in nursery classes also shows that they do not currently demonstrate the same good outcomes for children as nursery schools (EPPE Study; Sylva et al., 2004).

Corby now has a plethora of private childcare services, some of which are still run on the old playgroup model of school hours and school year. There has been a very significant take-up of 2-year-old provision in Corby in the private sector, however, only two primary schools in the town make that kind of provision. There are particular difficulties for families with young children with disabilities and special education needs in accessing high-quality services. The 'crude divisions' in 2016 in Corby would be between the various academy providers, as most of the primary schools and all of the secondary schools are now academised. We have six different academy chains involved in the delivery of education across the town. Currently 59 per cent of the schools are in Special Measures.

2. *Separatism*: in the 1980s there was no tradition of working in a fully integrated way with other services such as health visiting, midwifery, child and family guidance (CAMS) or Adult Education, all of which had a critical role in working with children and their families.

Paradoxically we can look back on the 1980s as halcyon days for multidisciplinary working in Corby. Because of the closure of the steelworks, public service engagement and collaboration between health visiting and social care were outstanding. Whilst there have been an enormous number of policy directives on multi-agency partnership working the level of co-operation that we had with health visiting, midwifery and other services was at its very best in the years up to and including the Sure Start intervention years. Since then joint working has become increasingly eroded with constant reorganisations in health and social work in Northamptonshire; the long anticipated shift of health visiting from Public Health England into the local authority has become a very protracted journey. Whilst there have been some powerful interventions such as Family Nurse Partnership for the most vulnerable young mothers in Corby, there is no seamless integration of services between midwifery and health visiting or full data sharing between social care and education. Indeed the pressures on all these services are such that we are struggling to maintain the level of joint working that we had in past years, with up to 60 per cent of social workers employed by agencies.

The direct work of health visitors and midwives at Pen Green has been outstanding and hard fought for and has demonstrated a deep commitment from individual workers. Even when departments were reorganising, health visitors and midwives held onto their commitment to community-based services within an integrated centre for children and families. Health visitors and midwives work directly with our across-town family support team, and Home Start which is based at Pen Green, to co-ordinate new birth visits and referrals. Data sharing can still be problematic across agencies, but in the area of SEN and disability we have made some major breakthroughs with very early notification and identification and highly effective joint working.

3. *Over-professionalisation of services and under-representation of the voluntary sector*: this was a key issue in the 1980s and continued to be so into the 1990s whilst early childhood services were perceived by government as the panacea for all social ills. The contribution of the voluntary sector was and is still underestimated and Pen Green's commitment to voluntary groups such as Home Start has prevented their closure on several occasions.

The concept of the Pen Green Centre was about co-constructing local services with local people. It has to be said this was largely the result of an action group against the centre, which was established in 1982 when the local authority first developed the idea of a new early years service for Corby. Local people took matters into their own hands and made it clear that they did not want another 'problem family' centre in Corby. What they really wanted was an institution that would be flexible and responsive and driven by local need.

4. *Inability to learn from history or the rest of Europe*: when setting up the early childhood services in Corby in the 1980s there was very little reference to early interventions at the beginning of the century; for example Margaret McMillan's work in Deptford and Bradford, the family centre movement in social care or radical community interventions in health in this country. Nor was there any effort made to learn from other European countries, such as Scandinavia or Italy, where fully integrated services for young children have a long history.

In subsequent years we have worked collaboratively with projects across the UK, Western Europe, Australia and New Zealand.

5. *The narrow view of evidence-based models*: the only 'models' generally recognised as successful in the 1980s were those transplanted from the USA. The insistence on using medical models to provide the evidence base was particularly unhelpful for small-scale local projects. There was very little recognition in the 1980s of the importance of a local 'diagnosis' of need and this remains true today.
6. *Compensatory models*: in 1980 the prevalent professional perspective on working with parents assumed a 'deficit' model of parenting. This could be seen in almost all policy and much practice. There was an assumption that parents could become more effective by being taught a set of 'parenting skills' and this remains true to this day.

In 2016 former Prime Minister David Cameron spoke about life chances and once again presented us with the notion of parents who require 'treatment' to

improve their performance. There was and remains very little acknowledgement or celebration of 'difference' in terms of parenting approaches. The assumption is still that there is only one way to be an effective parent, and that is to have produced a compliant 'school ready' child.

7. *Political will*: it was clear in the 1980s that the early years workforce was relatively inexperienced in engaging in political debate and unaware of the inherently political nature of early years work. What has been most significant in subsequent years is the huge shift in delivery of early years education and care services from the public sector into the private sector where most provision for 0–3s now takes place (Gallagher and Arnold, forthcoming). Even in areas of very significant socio-economic deprivation like Corby, the private sector has become the preferred provider for the local authority and public sector provision, particularly in nursery schools, has been marginalised (Gaunt, 2016). The delivery of services such as preventative family support, which used to be found in both the public and voluntary sectors, is now predominantly delivered exclusively through large national voluntary organisations which are highly dependent on government funding. In Corby, the nursery schools and primary schools still do continue to deliver the children's centre offer. Pen Green's experience is that, without local borough council and county council support, settings such as ours would have been cut back on successive occasions. It has been the political will of the local community that has been most significant in retaining Pen Green as a local service that is much loved and well supported by families and the wider community.
8. *Lack of public accountability*: in the 1980s this was manifested as a general lack of awareness of the changing needs of young families, and the need for services to be increasingly flexible and responsive to the realities of family life. Families in Corby had fought hard to get their critical concerns recognised throughout the 1980s and 1990s as active stakeholders in public services. Corby is a town that is prepared to march and Corby families marched in the 1970s to save the steelworks and many times over the last few years to save *their* centre for children and families. With the marked exception of pre-election rhetoric, successive governments have failed to recognise the concerns that children, parents, families and the wider community have for services that really support family life in the twenty-first century; services that recognise parents' need to work and study and children's right to a rich early childhood experience with the added provision of accessible and effective family support within their locality.
9. *Poor conditions of service and training*: in the 1980s our studies had shown that although early childhood educators were capable of powerful advocacy on behalf of children and families, they were relatively passive in relation to their own pay and conditions of service. Staff were accustomed to working long hours, with inadequate training, little supervision and no non-contact time to plan and reflect on children's learning and development.

There has been relatively little improvement in pay and conditions in the private sector. In 2016 the government still appears to see Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) as a Cinderella service, assuming staff will work for

less than the living wage. In the public sector significant improvements have been made. Well-qualified staff at Pen Green have pay that is commensurate with their incredible commitment and hard work. All staff have continuous professional development opportunities and we work with a 76–84 per cent graduate workforce across the three nursery spaces and two baby nests. Most senior staff have Master's degrees and all staff have some non-contact time to home visit and to dialogue and document children's learning and development.

## Working with the community

Pen Green, as a centre for children and families, developed from a perspective 'which regards early childhood services as a need and right for all communities and families, and as an expression of social solidarity with children and parents' (Moss, 1992: 43; Moss and Penn, 1996). However, this social solidarity was born, in the first instance, out of conflict.

When the centre was set up, staff had to work with a very vocal and often hostile group of people. The most well-organised volunteer group in the local community was a local action group *against* the centre. This group was made up of local residents who felt that there had not been enough consultation between those setting up the new early years service and those who were expected to use it. They were afraid that the local authority planned to set up a centre for 'problem families', a day-care/child protection service exclusively for families where children were perceived to be 'at risk'. This was not what local residents wanted. The Local Action Group (LAG) was clear that what was needed in their local community was a radically new kind of service.

From December 1982 to July 1983 the purpose and principles behind the services that were to be set up at Pen Green were carved out by this 'local action group', local politicians, local authority officers, the centre leader and newly appointed staff group. The LAG's 'big idea', their vision for the future, was that in this small community there should be a service for children under five and their families, a service that would honour the needs of young children and celebrate their existence. It would also support families, however they were constituted within the community.

This vision for the newly established Pen Green Centre in 1983 was underpinned by the belief that:

- the most effective way of delivering coherent early education, health and social services to young families was through an integrated centre which would be easily accessible (i.e. at pram-pushing distance);
- services should be flexible and responsive to the needs of all local children and their extended families;
- education and care were indivisible; the early years curriculum offered in these services should be developmentally appropriate for children aged up to five years and should recognise the central position of play in early learning (DES, 1990).



- services should respect and value children's and parents' individual differences and celebrate ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity;
- education begins at birth, and services must recognise the key role parents play as their children's first educators, and parents' commitment to their children's early education and development;
- adult community education should be made available to parents *within* services for early childhood education and care;
- all the staff working in these settings need to be highly trained, reflective practitioners with equitable conditions of service, adequate pay, appropriate non-contact time, in-service training, supervision and support, opportunities for promotion, and to engage in reflexive practice and practitioner research;
- workers in early childhood settings need to be concerned with power-sharing, community participation and local regeneration.

## Hindsight

From our perspective in 2016 it is becoming easier to see that the greatest single determinant in terms of the development of the centre was probably the LAG and the energy for change in the local community. When we first began to develop the Pen Green pilot project, as it was described by the local authority, the energy and commitment of local parents were palpable. It is fair to say that in our experience all Corby parents want more for their children than they had themselves and consistently demonstrate their commitment to achieving the best possible outcomes for their families. It is not insignificant that at all times in the centre's history more than 50 per cent of staff working in the setting have started their learning journeys as parents who have volunteered, taken on training and become workers in the setting where their children were also being educated and cared for. Our intention was to engage parents on their terms and in their own timescale and it has worked. Pen Green has been judged 'Outstanding' at each and every Ofsted over the ensuing thirty-three years and Ofsted have commented on many occasions about the strong family ethos of the centre:

Senior Managers show outstanding commitment to the children and their families and the local community. They are instrumental in maintaining the strong family ethos and make a considerable contribution to community cohesion within the nursery and beyond.

Staff work tirelessly with families, children and a range of agencies both in the children centre and beyond to sustain children's excellent achievement and wellbeing. Outstanding links with parents ensure that they understand how staff are supporting their children's learning and are able take part in the process.

(Ofsted, December 2009)

Whilst the vision has not changed in 2016 we have to communicate our local project within a global Early Childhood Education Context.



**Figure 1.1** Pen Green estate when the steelworks was thriving

It wasn't until the centre had been going for about twenty years that parents and staff had the opportunity to travel and were invited to visit settings in Denmark and Italy and in Australia and New Zealand. One very young parent governor on returning from a visit to Denmark was heard harassing our Chair of Governors (who was also the opposition leader of the County Council) because she had discovered that in Denmark there had been one hundred years of integrated service development while people in England were, in her words, 'still stuffing children up chimneys'. She wanted to know why there hadn't been a wholesale buy-in to the notion of integrated services in this country. She didn't get an answer, but she did go on to take senior responsibility as an active volunteer and further her own adult education and development, as well as supporting her children's learning and development right through the education system. We are clear that when governments fail to respond to the needs of families and prioritise other issues the only way for early childhood services to survive periods of oppression is to be aware of the innovation and expansion of services that may be happening nationally, internationally and globally, because that gives heart to our endeavours.

## Principles

The staff group appointed to work at Pen Green in the early 1980s were committed to engaging parents as decision-makers in the planning and implementation of work at the centre. They knew that working in this way was not about 'compensating for disadvantage'. Instead it was about acknowledging the impact of poverty on the lives of local children and their families, and encouraging families to take an equal and active role in developing high-quality, fully integrated responsive services.

The principles that underpin the work at Pen Green are the principles of community education. That community education should:

- be concerned with individuals' capacity to be self-directing;
- help individuals to gain more control over their lives;
- be about raising self-esteem;
- promote learning as a lifelong experience;
- be about equal opportunities;
- be about pushing boundaries;
- be about constructive discontent and not having to put up with things the way they are;
- encourage people to feel they have the power to change things;
- be about self-fulfilment.

(adapted from Whalley, 1994)

We were strongly influenced by Paulo Freire's (1996) work when we first developed services at Pen Green, as senior staff had also worked in Northern Brazil. We were very concerned that we should understand and respect the strengths of the local community and its very specific history ([www.youtube.com/watch?v=BkFLOiRkuew](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BkFLOiRkuew)). Clearly the project has thrived and survived for thirty-three years. We have had to learn much more about the changes socially and culturally in the local community during this period. We have a very significant increase in the number of families migrating to Corby from Russia, Poland, Bulgaria and Portugal, as well as Latvia and Croatia, all bringing their very different cultures, values and languages which strengthen the Corby community. In 2016 we still buy into the principled approach that we adopted in 1983 but we would probably articulate it differently. Today we are concerned with *co-constructing services* with the children and the families. We resist imposing new models of working and new interventions unless they build on respectful and reciprocal relationships with stakeholders. We have tried to build up our own evidence base on what works and why it works in this local community (see Chapter 2 for more on how we secure national validation for local interventions).

## A 'one-stop shop' (Audit Commission, 1994)

Chris Athey, one of the greatest pioneers of early childhood education in this country, and a mentor to Pen Green staff for many years, describes the conceptual gulf that exists when groups of people who lack shared experience begin to work

together (Athey, 1990). Whilst we knew that the 'Pen Green project' was not an entirely new concept, since there was nothing new about putting baby clinics next to a community nursery inside a family centre where day-care was on offer, Margaret McMillan was working in this way in Deptford at the beginning of the century (Whalley, 1994). What was new, however, was that we adopted a way of working which was based on an intense collaboration between parents and workers – 'a radical notion of self help as personal growth and the development of a sense of community responsibility' (Hevey, 1982, personal communication). We knew that we needed to work in an integrated way and that we also needed to adopt inter-agency strategies to achieve this. The newly appointed staff at Pen Green in 1983 adopted an 'open-door' approach, which helped to bridge the gap between these local parents and the new service. Parents were invited into the centre before the concrete was even dry. They shared the experience of transforming a derelict comprehensive school, one which many of them had attended as students, into a stimulating and secure environment for very young children and their families. They shared the responsibility for establishing priorities, allocating space and developing the work.

From 1983–1997 the centre developed the following strands of activity, which are still fundamental to the work of the centre in 2016:

- Early years education
- Extended hours, extended year provision to support families
- Inclusive, flexible, education with care for children in need and children with special educational needs
- Adult community education and family support services
- Voluntary work and community regeneration
- Training and support for early years practitioners
- Research and development

The Audit Commission in 1994 described the 'one-stop shop' for families with young children as implicit in the local community approach that we had adopted. What we at the centre provided for children and families was as follows:

- A high-quality, developmentally appropriate, early childhood education with care provision for young children from 0–5.
- A place where children could meet, learn and grow; where staff worked hard to meet children's affective and cognitive needs; where there was appropriate provision for children in need.
- An inclusive service for children with special educational needs/special rights.

- A seamless provision for parents, with accessible adult education, health and social welfare services all on one site; a focus for lifelong learning in the community.
- A centre where parents were engaged in an equal, active and responsible partnership, and shared their concerns about their children's development.
- A centre where workers engaged with parents and shared power and responsibility.
- A centre where knowledge and information were shared about children's development and learning.

## The changing political and educational agenda 1996–2016

The concept of a 'triangle of care' was conceptualised in the Start Right report (Ball, 1994), which described a new kind of partnership between parents and professionals. Through this equal and active partnership, a secure, warm and stimulating environment could be created for children. Parents, probably for the first time in a government report, were described as having their own proper competence, and their deep commitment to their children's learning was finally acknowledged.

The Start Right report made it clear that the key issue for early childhood educators in education and care settings was to develop a strong relationship with parents as the child's first and enduring educators. The role of early childhood settings was to support parents through:

- exemplifying good practice;
- providing information about current research;
- offering appropriate parent education and professional support;
- helping parents to develop and sustain their sense of self-esteem and self-efficacy.

Somewhat disingenuously the main author of the report, Sir Christopher Ball, made his own recommendation that if parents were non-compliant and failed to engage in parent education programmes they should have their benefits reduced. Words like 'parent support' and 'parent education' have to be 'troubled' when they represent the iron fist of the state dressed in a velvet glove, and this is as true in 2016 as it was in the 1980s and 1990s.

By 1997, the need to involve parents actively in their children's education was high on the political agenda of the newly elected Labour government. The role of parents as their children's first and most consistent educators seemed to be firmly established, at least in policy directives (Barber, 1996: 244). The link between parents' own experiences of the education system, their attitudes and expectations, and their children's achievement was acknowledged as a factor of even greater significance than school improvement (OECD, 1997).

In 1997, the government recommended that there should be a fully integrated approach to early years education and care across the public, private and voluntary sector. 'Supporting' parents and 'training' parents were identified as major tasks for

all early childhood educators in all settings (DfEE, 1996, 1997) although still conceptualised on a deficit model rather than as an equal and active dialogue between parents and professionals.

## Early Excellence Centres 1997

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In December 1997, the government launched its Centres of Excellence programme (DfEE, 1997), offering financial support and defining standards for those individual centres or networks where flexible, high-quality, early years education and care were offered alongside education and training for parents. This government initiative acted as a catalyst, inspiring many local authorities to bid for funding to improve existing services or initiate projects.

Pen Green was one of the first centres designated by the government as an Early Excellence Centre. The additional financial support the centre received meant that we could increase our educational services to both children and their parents with new after-school programmes for school-aged children and for family community education. The government acknowledged the work of the centre in providing local and national training: 'The centre is ... a focal point for training early years educators in the public, private and voluntary sectors and is playing a major role in the dissemination of good practice in early years provision' (DfEE, 1998: 19). Under the Early Excellence Programme, Pen Green was allocated funding for new family education premises, which provided badly needed accommodation in which to set up research, training and development work.

## Corby Sure Start 1999

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In 1999, the government introduced another major initiative, the Sure Start local programme (DfEE, 1999). These programmes were designed to offer comprehensive support to families with children under four in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. A Sure Start Unit accountable to both the Minister for Health and the Minister for Education was established at Westminster. Identified communities were invited to prepare proposals for innovative multidisciplinary work at a local, community level. The programme had a strong community development strand, and there appeared to be a real expectation that local residents would be involved in developing these locality bids. In practice, local consultation was severely restricted as the consultation period for the Sure Start pilots was, as always, across the summer holidays.

Pen Green became the lead partner for Corby Sure Start and worked in close collaboration with all the other statutory and voluntary agencies concerned with family support across that summer. A particular feature of the Corby Sure Start programme was the very large numbers of parents involved in conceptualising local outcomes and programmes of work. Parents who had been involved in Pen Green

for several years became powerful advocates for other parents living in the extended catchment area that was to become the 'Sure Start reach area'. A 'parent-led' needs assessment was immediately set up to assess the effectiveness of local services for the 103 new families whose children were born in the previous year. Parents were recruited and trained in interview techniques. They constructed an interview schedule collaboratively with staff and then were paid to conduct informal interviews (Pen Green Research Base Report, 2000; McKinnon, 2005). This provided rich data for the new Corby Sure Start programme, data which were then shared with health visitors, midwives and social care professionals. Parents presented the data at local seminars, and professionals were able to use the constructive feedback they were given very creatively. Within a few months, professionals were already beginning to think differently and make services more accessible and responsive to families. Retrospectively, it is possible to see how devising and developing new approaches to 'research from the underside' (Holman, 1987) was critical in terms of the development of our research in practice base at Pen Green. We developed innovative ways to identify local need and responded with home-grown, tried and tested interventions and we were able to embrace all four of Labour's major programmes (McKinnon, 2014).

## A learning community

Pen Green benefited enormously from Labour's Neighbourhood Nursery programme in 2001, in that it made it possible for us to open our first baby nest provision (Gallagher and Arnold, in press). We developed our NNI baby nest as a research in practice project over several years. Pen Green now has two baby nest projects onsite and two offsite provisions are being developed in parts of the town facing specific challenges.

The additional funding and capital build that we attracted when we became one of the first children's centres in 2004 made it possible for us to realise significant family support coverage across the whole of the town with four children's centres working on an integrated locality-based model, led and managed through a Community Interest Company. We profoundly regretted the title 'children's centres' and rarely used it. The title 'Pen Green' comes from the name of the street in which we are located and we have always been described as an integrated centre for children and their families. The concept of a Centre for Children and Families seemed very important to us and in 2006, when we took on the legal status of a nursery school, the hundreds of parents who attended the consultation event insisted that we should not become an outward facing school but be rooted in the community and committed to working with families.

By 2006 what we had created at Pen Green was an environment in which:

- children, parents and staff were encouraged to be good decision-makers, able to question, challenge and make choices;
- there were opportunities for staff to become highly trained reflective practitioners, with good levels of support and supervision, in an environment where they

could build powerful relationships with other agencies and with families, where they felt valued personally and professionally;

- staff consult with, and see themselves as accountable to, all stakeholders – children, parents, staff, the local community, and local authority;
- parents have become passionate advocates for their children and are sharing their understanding of their children's learning at home with nursery staff.

Over thirty-three years, we had been able to develop a comprehensive parent partnership programme. Many thousands of local parents had been involved (Whalley, 1997b), and staff had established a model of co-operative working that respects both the learning and support needs of parents, and their children's right to high-quality early years education with care.

Our work with parents continues to be underpinned by the belief that all parents have a critical role to play as their child's primary educators. Working as we do increasingly with foster parents and adoptive parents reminds us that we must engage effectively with *all* the important adults in a child's life. We are very aware that young children achieve more and are happier when early years educators work together with parents and share views on how to support and extend children's learning and this belief is supported by powerful international research (Athey, 1990; Meade, 1995; Arnold, 2010; Blanden, 2006).

## Setting up a research base in a centre for children and families

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The involvement of parents in the Froebel Early Education Project (1973–8) provided strong evidence of deep commitment on the part of parents, who were consulted on professional concerns rather than 'peripheral issues' (Athey, 1990: 206). Dissemination of Athey's work has taken many years and her rallying call for a proper parent professional partnership in all early childhood settings has yet to be realised:

Parents and professionals can help children separately or they can work together to the greater benefit of children.

(Athey, 1990).

Building on our long tradition of parental involvement, we decided in 1996 to establish a practitioner research base at Pen Green in partnership with parents, early years educators and researchers in higher education. We realised we had underestimated the enthusiasm which parents demonstrated for a deeper and more extended dialogue about their children's learning. We began to see that teaching and learning and curriculum issues, which had previously been the fairly uncontested domain of professional staff, needed to be opened up for a wider discussion with parents in the early years community (Hughes and MacNaughton, 2000; Pushor, 2007).



What we needed was a rich and relevant dialogue between parents and nursery staff, which could be sustained over time – a dialogue that focused on the children’s learning and achievements and our shared pedagogic practice. We wanted to deepen our understanding about the impact of engaging parents to share their knowledge about their child’s learning at home. We also wanted to see how a knowledge-sharing approach could help us to best support children’s learning and development in the nursery.