



## Early Years Leadership in a Post-Covid World

The relaunched Leadership in Early Years Education RIG held an online symposium on Tuesday 10<sup>th</sup> November 2020. We were fortunate to welcome a fantastic trio of speakers to the event, bringing local, national and international perspectives to the problem of how we move forward as a sector in response to the Covid-19 crisis.

Our speakers were:

- Julian Grenier, headteacher of Sheringham Nursery, working with the DfE on EYFS reforms
- Sharon Quamie, baby room leader at the New Cross Nursery, part of LEYF
- Professor Julie Nicholson from Mills College CA, trauma-informed practice specialist

Each speaker gave a ten-minute talk on their professional views and experiences. These talks were followed by breakout room discussion for participants and then the opportunity to pose a few questions to the speakers.

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*Thank you for the amazing leadership group you put together. I definitely was inspired – Nursery manager*

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**Julian's presentation** focused on what could we learn about early years from our response during the Covid crisis. He highlighted the incredible professionalism that so many early years educators had shown during the crisis and the way that the return from lockdown had reminded us of the spirit and joy of working with young children. He discussed how Covid had demonstrated the

value of our 'normal' provision for children and the positive impact that it has every single day on children's lives. Building on this, what we need is a strong, unified, progressive voice for the sector that enables us to demand more: more recognition, better conditions and more opportunities for professional development.

## SOME OF WHAT WE ARE LEARNING

- The value of our 'normal'
- Depth, flexibility and resilience in our teams
- Spirit and joy

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*The things we do every day for children, the play, the facilities, the interaction, the way we love children to bits and treasure their individuality and their uniqueness and feel that great pleasure in inviting them into our settings, and giving them enticing and exciting and dynamic experiences. All those normal things we do are unbelievably valuable to children. – Julian Grenier*

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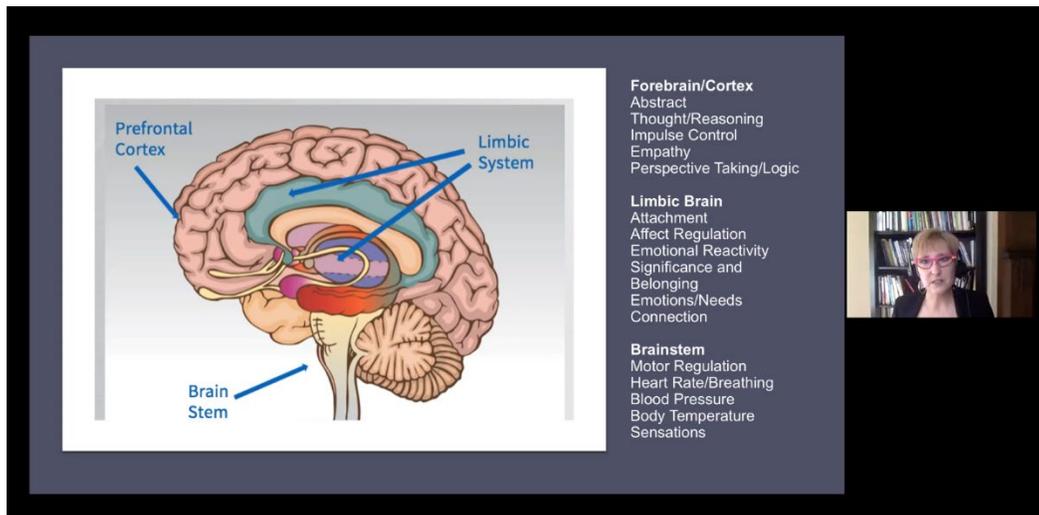
**Sharon talked** with passion about the need for us to show pedagogical leadership now more than ever. She described parents' heightened anxiety and our responsibility to respond to this anxiety in authentic and creative ways. This means that we need to find genuine ways to connect with parents and show them that their child is coming each day into a safe and stimulating space that they can depend on.

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*We have to make sure that when we hand over the children, we don't just say 'oh they had a good day'. No. That really is not enough. We have to show our parents all the learning that they've done, the activities that they're involved in and how much we are doing for the child throughout the course of the day. – Sharon Quamie*

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**Julie gave us an insight** into the practice of trauma-responsive education. We learned about the brain's response to stress and the way that, if we're emotionally and physical dysregulated, we are cut off from our normal levels of engagement and cognitive processing. This is relevant now more than ever, with parents, staff and children all experiencing higher stress levels. At a time like this, Julie suggested the need to show grace and kindness to ourselves and others, and to plan for success by planning for regular regulation breaks.



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*Us seeing each other and being in community, it calms the stress response. Just bearing witness and hearing someone's story will calm your stress response. So relational regulation is the most important thing. – Julie Nicholson*

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Thoughtful questions emerged from the breakout discussions including:

- How can we promote children's emotional wellbeing in context of academic pressure?
- How can we build and maintain strong connections with parents?
- How can we make ourselves – as the early years sector – heard?
- How can we influence policy in the direction that it needs to go?
- How can we improve quality across the sector given the fragmentation of the sector?

There was an exciting dialogue about how we can best support children's emotional wellbeing at a time like this. There was agreement that it is essential not to think about school-readiness in a narrow way, as a purely cognitive kind of readiness, and instead to see that helping children to develop in preparation for school is absolutely about emotional and physical wellbeing. Having said this, we also need to recognize that emotional wellbeing is part of the child's wider development. For example, recent research shows how communication and language are essential aspects of emotional wellbeing since through language, children can express how they feel and what they need.

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*The schools that went through hurricanes and natural disasters, we have lots of research to show that when they stopped to focus on connection and regulation with students, they caught up on the academics much faster than the schools that focused immediately on the academics, which saw children dysregulated, expelled and suspended and so on. – Julie Nicholson*

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We also discussed the difficult task of effectively reaching out to parents, and building the parent partnerships that we so need at this time. We talked about the importance of being creative in how we reach out to parents, to let them know that we are thinking about them. All of the speakers highlighted the importance of showing parents that things in the setting continue as normal, that they can depend on the setting as a place of certainty and predictability. There was recognition that this is particularly difficult given that staff are going through their own personal concerns and issues. The weight is on leaders to balance these competing needs.

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*You might feel extra tired when you go home from work because it is a lot of work to hold all that stress, first in your body, and then in all the other people that you're working with – and you're having to hold stress for staff and so on. So we need to know that it is extra work in these stressful times just to go through the day – Julie Nicholson*

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Thanks to the speakers and all of the participants for a fantastic event. We'll be running more events soon. The best way to hear about what's coming up is to follow us on twitter: [ey\\_leadership](#)