**MANAGING THE RETURN TO SCHOOL/NURSERY FOR THE UNDER-SEVENS**

**A suggestion from Upstart Scotland**

As political conversation turns towards reopening schools, it’s hugely reassuring that the Scottish government’s Education and Skills Committee has opened a consultation about the effects of coronavirus on children and young people.

Upstart’s contribution to this is simple and, we hope, obvious: Please, in making your decisions about the immediate future of education in Scotland, **begin at the beginning of the educational process**.

Education Scotland’s document *Realising the Ambition: Being Me*, published this February, brilliantly describes the best educational start to underpin realisation of the four capacities in Scotland’s future citizens (confident individual, successful learner, responsible citizen, effective contributor) and its reception across the early years sector has been overwhelmingly positive. There is, therefore, huge enthusiasm among practitioners and teachers in Early Level classes to put *RtA’*s principles into practice when children return to their settings.

By concentrating on the significance of strong relationships and support for play-based learning – especially outdoors – *RtA* is ideally suited to support the Scottish public’s main concern for our children as a result of the coronavirus crisis: i.e. their health and well-being.

**Refreshing CfE and NIF from the very beginning**

For the last decade, it was impossible to realise the ambition of *Curriculum for Excellence’*sEarly Level because, half-way through it, children moved from nursery to school, where the ethos of education was still sadly influenced by the *Five to Fourteen* curriculum. However, over recent years, there has been increasing recognition and understanding of principled play-based pedagogy among teachers in Primary 1/2. And in primary schools where these pedagogical processes have been implemented, teachers and managers have been impressed by children’s confidence, communication skills and disposition to learn as they progressed through the school.

The existence of *RTA* therefore provides an opportunity to avoid the mistakes of the past. If all school leaders are expected to respect its principles, Scotland can at last begin to treat the Early Level as a whole and find ways to ensure all children have the best possible experience of care and education between the ages of three and six or seven.

It is also the perfect opportunity to refresh the original principles of the National Improvement Framework, the first three of which were:

* improving early learning
* promoting social and emotional well-being
* promoting healthy life styles and tackling health inequalities.

These three aims are at the heart of developmentally-appropriate early years provision, and in countries such as Finland and Estonia (where formal schooling does not begin until age seven) attention to relationship-centred, play-based practice – with plenty of time spent outdoors in natural environments – has underpinned success in terms of educational achievement, childhood well-being and improvements in educational and social equity.

**The Early Years expansion and transition to primary school**

The coronavirus crisis has inevitably delayed the start of Scotland’s expansion of funded early learning and care. This gives valuable time to reflect on what’s been learned during the expansion so far and a further opportunity to use RtA to provide excellent Early Level care and education. The childcare sector has made enormous progress over recent years, not least because of excellent guidance from Scotland’s Care Inspectorate.

If provision of funded nursery places for all three-year-olds is delayed until the beginning of the 2021 school year, there will be a full year during which nursery facilities are available for children in the Early Level stage. Many parents of four-year-old children already lobbying for them to repeat a year in nursery and it’s likely that many more will recognise the ‘well-being benefits’ of their children returning to a familiar setting, rather than starting school in September 2020.

Upstart therefore suggests that, during the 2020-21 school year, all children born after August 2015 (i.e. four-year-olds) should remain in nursery for another year. This would still allow funded space for ‘vulnerable threes’ + other three-year-olds at the local authorities’ discretion, depending on the availability of space and staffing. It would also reduce pressure on primary schools during the 2020-21 school session, allowing P1/2 teachers time and space to follow the principles of RtA as effectively as possible within the constraints of physical distancing.

The requirement to keep children at a physical distance of two metres from each other will be particularly difficult in the Early Level, so a reduction in overall numbers would be an advantage at all stages of the Early Level. We realise that for, at least for part of the school year, all children will be attending school or nursery on a part-time basis and hope that NGOs such as Early Education Scotland and Home Start Scotland will be able to organise playgroups to help reduce pressure on parents and carers for the days when Early Level children are at home. We also hope that, throughout Early Level, practitioners and teachers will see the huge benefit (not only in terms of physical distancing) of taking children outdoors as often as possible.

**Changing Scotland’s cultural attitudes to early years education and care**

Upstart Scotland was set up in 2015 with the aim of changing our nation’s attitude to early years education and care. Historically, the Scottish public has a cultural attachment to an early start on formal education and has tended to see ‘childcare’ as little more than a babysitting service which allows parents to go out to work.

We know this is emphatically **not** the attitude of Education Scotland, the Care Inspectorate and the Scottish Government. However, it is difficult to change deeply-ingrained public expectations in the face of constant media messages from England, where the political and educational establishments (represented by Ofsted) constantly

* reinforce the perception that an early start on the three Rs is essential
* ignore the connections between early pressure for academic attainment, deterioration in children’s mental health and a widening of the attainment/poverty/well-being gap.

The coronavirus crisis provides an opportunity to create genuine culture change in Scotland. If our response to this crisis clearly emphasises the importance of health and well-being during Early Level, it will distance us from the educational policies being pursued in the South.

Upstart Scotland believes the ‘ambition’ outlined in *RtA* is not only a vision of future success for children in Early Level but – through them – for our society as a whole. H.G. Wells famous line that ‘Human history becomes more and more a race between education and catastrophe’ has never rung more true. Ten years ago we welcomed *CfE* as an excellent blueprint for twenty-first century education and are thrilled that the Scottish Government still holds true to its principles.

The coronavirus crisis provides an opportunity to revive enthusiasm for *Curriculum for Excellence* in the profession as a whole. And, by starting at *CfE’s* beginning, with a truly enlightened approach to care and education in Early Level, the Scottish Government could also engender public enthusiasm for educational policy that puts children’s well-being at the heart of the educational process.