

Developing Character and Values  
in the Early Years

# Foundations of Character

Report Summary

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**learningforlife**  
*exploring core values*

UNIVERSITY OF  
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*This report is to be launched at the House of Lords on Friday 21st May 2010  
by Lord Watson of Richmond.*

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A copy of the full report and references can be found on  
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# FOREWORD

This is the last of the five reports on the values of children and students, including graduates in their first years of employment, covering the ages 3-25. It represents the most complete empirical enquiry ever conducted in England into their values, attitudes and dispositions. This report on the Early Years covers the ages 3-6: it draws on careful observation, including evidence from carers, teachers and parents.

It is commonly assumed that the influences on the early years of a child's life are determinative for the future individual: the evidence in this report suggests that the situation is more complex. It is true that the home and the professional environment are of the utmost importance, but children themselves take initiatives and explore their own experience through story and play which inform their growing self-awareness, knowledge of other people and sense of responsibility.

As with other areas of education, early intervention and positive example seem to be crucial ingredients in developing a child's values.

Nothing is more important for the future well-being of our society than this dimension of education.

**Lord Watson of Richmond CBE**

Chairman of 'Learning for Life'  
High Steward of the University of Cambridge



# CHARACTER, VALUES AND THE PURPOSES OF EDUCATION

*Schools and the wider educational systems in Britain are subject to an understandable pressure to provide skilled people equipped to meet the increasingly competitive demands of employment. In doing so, however, schools may ignore or take for granted another critical dimension of education – encouraging students to become aware of themselves as responsible people.*

We believe that education needs to be seen as a total lifelong process involving families, schools and employers in a political and social framework concerned with personal well-being, moral sensitivity and the flourishing of human society. A reinvigorated conscious focus upon character education in schools is essential if a proper balance is to be restored to the educational process.

All dimensions of education are essential if students are to assume their personal role in society equipped with the personal qualities, dispositions, attitudes, values and virtues to take responsibility for themselves and to contribute to the common good. Good habits encouraged in the process of education underpin the ability and inclination to engage in the necessary business of further lifelong personal development and learning. Moreover, while employers repeatedly call attention to lack of skills and relevant knowledge in their new employees, they also point to the missing dimension of personal 'character'.



Character is about who we are and who we become. It is an interlocked set of personal values and virtues which normally guide conduct and includes the virtues of responsibility, honesty, self-reliance, reliability, generosity, self-discipline, and a sense of identity and purpose. This entails active character development, which is not simply about the acquisition of academic and social skills: it is ultimately about the kind of person we become and want to become. This process is not achieved within a vacuum; in order to become a person, an individual needs to grow up in a culture, and the richer the culture the more of a person he or she has a chance of becoming. The importance of cultural influences on the lives and aspirations of young people in Canterbury and London will become apparent below.

# FOUNDATIONS OF CHARACTER

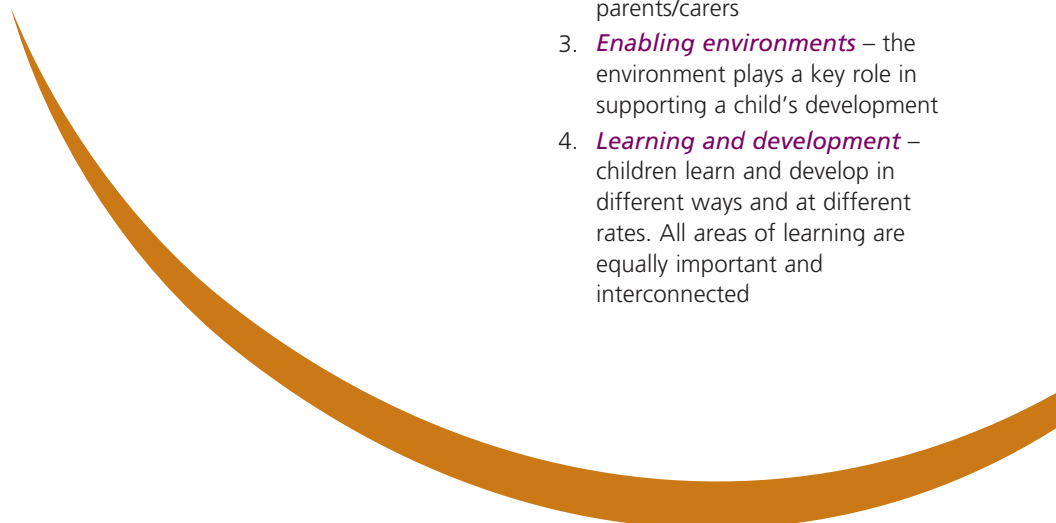
*In 2009 the UK-based charity, The Children's Society, published the findings of a large-scale enquiry into what constitutes "A Good Childhood" in contemporary British society, and noted that many children in Britain were not able to develop within a positive environment.*

Reporting the study's main findings, Richard Layard and Judy Dunn concluded that children's lives have become more difficult than they were in the past. They linked this issue to excessive individualism, which produced family discord and conflict; to more pressure to own things; excessive competition in schools; and unacceptable income inequality. The authors of the Report observed that excessive individualism needs to be replaced by a value system where people seek satisfaction more from helping others, rather than pursuing private advantage.

Children's exposure to and engagement in early childhood education (ECE) is currently a widespread phenomenon in England, with 92% of three-year-olds and 98% of four-year-olds benefiting from some free early years education of up to 15 hours per week. *The Early Years Foundation Stage* (EYFS) was introduced in 2008 to provide early education for babies and children from birth to five years under the broad policy auspices of the *Every Child Matters* agenda.

The EYFS is underpinned by 'core principles', which translate into its four principal themes:

1. ***A unique child*** – every child is a competent learner from birth who can be resilient, capable and self assured
2. ***Positive relationships*** – children learn to be strong and independent from a base of loving and secure relationships with parents/carers
3. ***Enabling environments*** – the environment plays a key role in supporting a child's development
4. ***Learning and development*** – children learn and develop in different ways and at different rates. All areas of learning are equally important and interconnected



The *Statutory Framework* encourages providers to ensure that the learning experiences are tailored to individual needs and encompasses a balance of adult-led and child-initiated activities with play as the medium for delivery. The learning experiences are intended to cover six broad learning and development areas:

- Personal, Social and Emotional Development
- Communication, Language and Literacy
- Problem Solving, Reasoning and Numeracy
- Knowledge and Understanding of the World
- Physical Development
- Creative Development

Under the aegis of the *Every Child Matters* agenda, the EYFS promotes each child's uniqueness and the importance of fostering individual interests. However, the curriculum we decide on for young children may have crucial long term consequences for our society since it influences the kind of people we want our children to be and to become.



# INTRODUCTION TO LEARNING FOR LIFE RESEARCH PROJECTS

*Learning for Life involves a series of major research projects, largely funded by the John Templeton Foundation and Porticus UK. It is an ambitious and groundbreaking initiative with few parallels in the UK. Indeed, this is the first coherent exploration of character development that studies all educational age groups and on into employment. Within the overall project, Learning for Life, Foundations of Character is one of five separate studies:*

- (a) A character perspective in the early years;
- (b) Foundations of character - the transition from primary to secondary school;
- (c) The values and character dispositions of 14-16 year olds;
- (d) The formation of virtues and dispositions in the 16-19 age range; and
- (e) Values in higher education and employment.



The overall sample involves tracking more than 4,000 children and young people, 300 parents and 100 teachers over a two-year period in Birmingham, Bristol, Canterbury and London, together with a series of group interviews and case-study observations. In addition, the sample of this report contains in-depth interviews with over 85 undergraduates and 65 graduate employees. Additional case studies of particular issues have also been undertaken. Each project has a dedicated full-time research fellow working over a two to three year period.

For a short literature review of the origins of character education the reader should consult the previous report - Character Education: The Formation of Virtues and Dispositions in 16-19 Year Olds with particular reference to the religious and spiritual – referred in this report as the Bristol report ([www.learningforlife.org.uk](http://www.learningforlife.org.uk)).

# BACKGROUND TO THE AREA

*There are three principal influences on the formation of character in the early years: families, professionals involved in early education and young people's peers and friends. Parents or carers are primary agents in influencing young children's socialization, which serves as an important medium for their moral development and character formation, and more specifically for the development of conscience, a complex system encompassing morals, emotions, conduct, cognition and self.*

Character formation begins long before children start their school life and the learning in early childhood years lays the crucial groundwork for later character development. It appears that moral awareness emerges in children as early as their second year and that understandings of moral issues underpin young children's personal and social development. Newborn babies' capacity for imitation demonstrates immediate attunement to emotional learning and the importance of imitation for the development of empathy. Young children seem to be able to understand the inner experiences of others, including the recognition of others' perceptions, knowledge, desires, intentions, and emotions. On the whole, the social worlds of very young children are largely confined to the family sphere and they learn their very early social behaviour in the family context. A warm and sensitive but boundary-setting parenting style provides an opportunity for both parents and children to engage in two-way moral interactions.

Then, when young children begin to take part in different social and educational contexts, they soon include young peers in their expanding social sphere, and the environment of those settings becomes part of young children's social universe. By expanding experiences in these social interactions, young children gradually explore ideas, rules, and norms, in which moral issues, social conventions and personal matters are situated. Thus, the environment and practices experienced in early childhood education also play a critical role in the formation of children's moral and social values and the distinction they come to make between morality and social convention. Mainstream thought places children at the centre and recognises children's competence and agency both in shaping social worlds and in putting forward their views. As a whole, the ethos within nurseries or preschools is also important for young children's moral development and character formation. A caring, trustworthy and interactive environment may explicitly and implicitly promote young children's moral behaviours and help to shape their moral characters.

The development of friendships is important at all ages in facilitating a child's moral understanding and provides opportunities to behave in a prosocial way. In early childhood, peers/friends play an essential role in the development of young children's socialization and early experiences.



# KEY FINDINGS

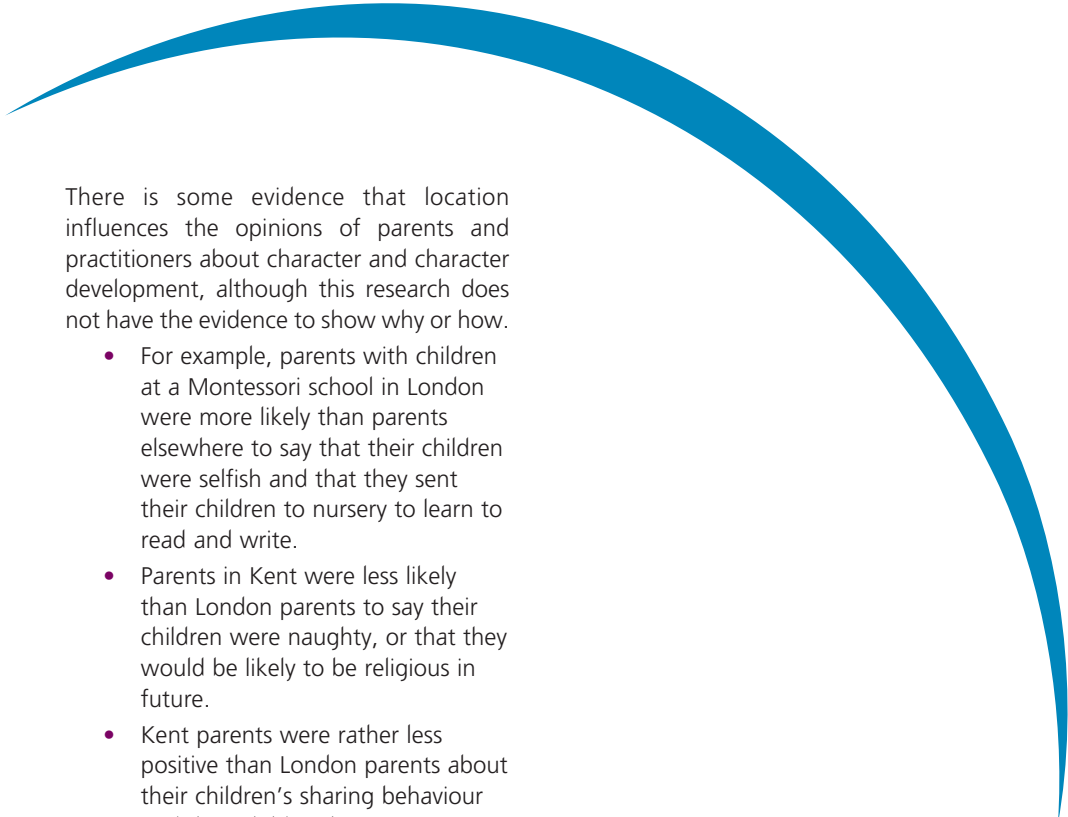
The children's varied and complex interactions demonstrated that they:

- were kind and considerate.
- showed understanding of what it meant to be involved with others.
- were capable of taking control, or even trying to dominate when co-operating.
- usually displayed honesty and fairness in the way they treated others.
- showed subtlety and flexibility when dealing with others, facing up to issues and finding ways round them.
- frequently used humour in ways which transformed situations.
- took opportunities to encourage others in a positive way.
- used several approaches when wanting to control things and get their own way. Hurtful words, strategic deception and from time to time manipulation were employed.

The parents' and professionals' perspectives:

- Parents and practitioners agreed that a good person is respectful, kind, honest and caring.
- Commenting on their child's characteristics, parents most commonly said that their children were happy, caring, curious, kind, funny, helpful, and polite.
- Practitioners agreed with parents' comments on children's characteristics but were more likely also to say the children were responsible.
- Parents were less confident about their child's sharing behaviour, though few said they were selfish.
- Parents wanted their children as adults to be happy, caring, honest, kind, respectful, responsible, confident, well-educated and hard-working.
- There was some disagreement about character-development, but most agreed that a child's character changed over time, is largely influenced by parents but also by the experience of school.





There is some evidence that location influences the opinions of parents and practitioners about character and character development, although this research does not have the evidence to show why or how.

- For example, parents with children at a Montessori school in London were more likely than parents elsewhere to say that their children were selfish and that they sent their children to nursery to learn to read and write.
- Parents in Kent were less likely than London parents to say their children were naughty, or that they would be likely to be religious in future.
- Kent parents were rather less positive than London parents about their children's sharing behaviour and their children being independent and co-operative; or that their children would be successful and well-educated as adults.
- London parents were more inclined than Kent parents to agree that their children went to school so that they could go out to work.
- Kent parents more likely than London parents to say that their children went to school to meet other children and become more confident.

Professionals said that they tried to set good examples, explained right and wrong to a child, praise children when they behave well, and would talk to a child about others' feelings.

# RESEARCH PROCESS AND FOCUS

*This study aimed to explore the developing dispositions, values and attitudes of a sample of young children in the familiar contexts of their homes, early education settings, and primary schools. It was hoped that this exploration would also provide insights into the values of the significant adults in these children's lives and these adults' views about the development of character and values.*

The study began with the following, overarching research questions:

- What are the young children's understandings of character, values and morality?
- What examples of morality and values are exhibited through the play, narratives and interactions of the young children?
- What are the understandings of these children's significant adults (staff in early years settings and primary schools; and family members) about character and the development of morality and values in the early years?
- What do these professionals and parents believe to be the significant influences on young children's character development?
- What are the implications for professionals and teachers of the findings from all of the above research questions and for the introduction of character education programmes?



This study adopted a multi-case approach to explore young children's moral character formation and development, and the potentially wide-ranging influential factors. The sampling strategy was based on the premise that the study's main sources of evidence would be young children and significant adults in their lives. The study's design recognises the significant educational and developmental functions that families fulfil and the opportunities they could provide for explorations of character and values in different contexts.

Six early childhood education settings were identified and agreed to participate in the project. A primary criterion was that Ofsted had judged the setting to be offering 'outstanding' provision, which provided a degree of parity in terms of the settings' attempts to support this aspect of the children's development. A second criterion for selection was the classification as either urban or rural. Three urban (London) and three rural (Kent) settings were randomly selected from a list of those judged to have outstanding provision.



While sample children had agreed to take part in the project from the six early ECE settings, there were 14 primary reception classes where these children chose to progress to also involved in the study. Among them, seven classes were in community primary schools, three in Roman Catholic primary schools, five belonging to Church of England, and one independent school.

The distinction between the Kent and London settings is amplified when further socio-demographic data is taken into consideration. All three Kent settings are located in areas that fall within the top quartile for the least deprived areas in the county. The picture is very different in the London boroughs where the areas in which the settings are located are more deprived than the London average and country average scores. Data from the Office of National Statistics also shows that while the total populations and percentages of people from ethnic minority groups are small in all 3 Kent locations, the population in the London boroughs is dense and comprises a large percentage of people from different ethnic minorities. This is reflected in two of the

settings where around half the pupils are eligible for free school meals and many are in the early stages of learning English. The third London setting is an independent Montessori school.

In the project's very early fieldwork phase, Stage 1, only seven children participated. This helped the researcher to gather general information about the settings, have informal discussions with parents and staff, 'get to know' the participants and gain their consent, pilot the research instruments and begin to gather observation evidence. In Stage 2, four focus children in each setting, two boys and two girls, were selected, making twenty-four children in total, all aged between three years five months and four years when Stage 2 began in September 2008. All the children were reasonably articulate, although English was not necessarily their first language.

Within the six settings, 14 focus children's key workers and 24 of the focus children's parents were invited to take part in the study in stage 2. The head teachers or the managers of the settings also participated in interviews, informal discussions and the

practitioners' survey (questionnaire). Other informants in school settings included 14 reception year teachers, 3 teaching assistants, and 2 head-teachers, with whom informal discussions took place.

Research methods included:

- (i) ***Naturalistic observation*** - unstructured observations of children's everyday interactions in a real-life context, which also allowed researchers to study the situations and events that are emotionally meaningful to the children.
- (ii) ***Discussion groups with adults*** - parents/carers, ECE practitioners and teachers.
- (iii) ***Questionnaire to parents/carers and ECE practitioners.***
- (iv) ***Interviews with parents, ECE practitioners and teachers and reception teachers.*** Discussions with ECE practitioners and parents by means of video clips.
- (v) ***Discussions with children*** by means of stories, video clips, and children's own materials.
- (vi) ***Home visits.***

The study complied with the necessary ethical guidelines. And although in the main report we suggest interpretations of the vignettes of children's play that were observed, we recognise that alternative interpretations are possible and that the children's behaviours vary in different contexts and situations.



# YOUNG CHILDREN'S DEVELOPMENT: OBSERVATIONS ON CHARACTER AND VALUES

*This section is designed to give an insight into young children's developing characters and episodes of their lives observed by researchers or described by others. A range of sources was used, including observation visits that took place over the course of a 19-month period from June 2008 to December 2009. Some evidence was planned and some opportunistically gathered, and it was structured to provide a growing picture of each child.*

Each visit to a setting was designed to capture evidence associated with more than one of the focus children. During a regular day, a minimum of thirty minutes was spent focussing the observation on each child in turn, although sometimes more than one focus child was involved in the interactions that were recorded in a single observation. The minimum 30-minute time period provided a good opportunity for the researcher to record how a child was able to initiate, invite and /or be rejected by her/his peers to play, and to record how the play or interactions continued or ceased.

Indoor and outdoor observations provided the study with a wider range of children's behaviour and talk. For instance, riding bikes, climbing trees, and running around outdoors provided a different context for children's social interactions in comparison to the indoor activities, e.g. colouring or playing with a train track. The recording of children's

interactions in different environments provided the opportunity to analyse the potential influence of location and associated resources and activities. It was also important to record the children's social interactions with a range of different people.

Over time, as the children became more familiar with a researcher's presence, they sometimes instigated conversations. When the children appeared comfortable and confident with the researcher, some structured questions were deliberately used to create conversations with the children, for instance, "Who are the important people in your family? And why are they important?" By means of these conversations, some additional evidence emerged about values and virtues that the children perceived to be important.

All the observational data were analysed using established qualitative data analysis principles. Three steps were employed: data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing/verification. Using each visit as a unit, the content of each observation was analysed according to varied perspectives and components. The detailed stories can be found in the main report.

The observations were collected and analysed over a period of 19 months using a systematic process that involved repeatedly adding the evidence to that already gathered to generate what appear to have been the most commonly observed characteristics among the 24 children.



The discussions of characteristics are organised under the following headings:

- A. **Helpfulness** including
  - Being kind
  - Being responsible
  - Being sympathetic
  - Being thoughtful
  - Conforming to expectation / wanting to please
- B. **Caring** including
  - Showing love or concern
  - Being sympathetic
  - Being kind
  - Being considerate
- C. **Cooperative** including
  - Being co-constructive
  - Being appreciative
  - Being competitive
  - Taking control
- D. **Honourable** including
  - Being honest
  - Treating others fairly
- E. **Constructive** including
  - Being humorous
  - Being creative
  - Being supportive
  - Being flexible
- F. **Controlling** including
  - Being hurtful
  - Taking revenge
  - Being strategically deceptive
  - Being manipulative

## A. HELPFULNESS

Helping behaviours have been documented by many researchers as one of the early manifestations among children under the age of three years. Models or approaches for explaining various helping behaviours include reciprocal altruism, empathy altruism and social exchange theory. Understanding helping behaviour is not a straightforward exercise. It needs to take into account many factors, e.g. context, relationships, forms of help and who was helped. Two principal kinds of helping behaviour were identified: helping behaviours that involved considering others' needs and well-being and those relating to considering one's own needs.

Helping behaviour with consideration of others leads to the emergence of **responsibility**, for instance in relation to tidy-up time – who did and didn't help and what this means to the other children. The emergent 'helping' themes revealed associations with a wide range of other values or attitudes, e.g. sharing, conforming to the rules or considering other's expectations (e.g. helping your friend). The helping behaviours can also be associated with **being kind**, for example when a girl spontaneously passes her play-doh to a friend.

The children appeared to have different reactions when they saw/heard other children crying, e.g. covering their ears, finding a tissue for them, laughing, not knowing what to do, or patting them **sympathetically**. When the children saw an accident happen they reacted in different ways, for example, telling teachers, walking away, doing nothing and watching, doing nothing and continuing to play, or doing something. Some behaved thoughtfully and responsibly.

Although helping behaviour may be concerned with the needs of others, it appears that the self-centredness also plays a part in some of the young children's helping actions. Occasionally, helping behaviour appeared to be used as a performance in order to stand out among other children and seek affirmation from the teacher. Helping behaviour may sometimes be regarded as a reciprocal act. However, withdrawing the provision of help may also be used as a social leverage to meet one's needs or exert one's power. Finally, young children praised each other for being helpful, reinforcing its importance as a value within their settings.

## B. CARING

The children were observed being caring towards people ("Are you all right?"), objects and animals (e.g. reminding their friends about the possibility of breaking a toy). They can be concerned with others' **physical safety** when they accidentally hurt others. When **someone is sad or upset**, young children may show they care by 'offering help', for example providing tissues, drinks, simply patting the child on the back and even trying to comfort their



friends with their own experiences. They have the capacity to **be sympathetic** to others' feelings and also translate this sympathy into actions. Some young children were **caring to animals** although others were not. The children demonstrated their **kindness** and **consideration** in different ways, for example, inviting others to join their play and accepting such invitations, providing help or suggestions, and sharing things.

## C. COOPERATIVE

We found that the young children were capable of working/playing with their peers in a cooperative way in that they helped each other or sought compromises, often without reference to or in contrast to adults' instructions. In their cooperative play, the children demonstrated mutuality in process and purpose and characteristics including sensitivity, consideration, affirmation, competitiveness, domination and compromise. Young children organised their cooperative play in sophisticated ways. In their mutual cooperative play/work, the children invited others to participate in the activities and shared in the **co-construction** of play narratives.

However, sometimes the cooperation took different, seemingly contradictory forms. One can be **competitive** cooperation, the other, **dominating** cooperation. In such situations, the children displayed a range of behaviours and employed different strategies to maintain and further their cooperative play. **Competitive** cooperation often involved two strong characters. Each child has her/his vision of play. They would initiate their own interests while



cooperating with others. The cooperation would involve a series of suggestions, negotiations and compromises. **Dominating** cooperation implies that children play in cooperation but one or a few of them dominate the play, **taking control**.

#### D. HONOURABLE

The children were **honest** about their wrongdoings and also showed that they had grasped and were able to express through their words and actions the concepts of **fairness** and **injustice**. When the young children perceived that one had treated another unfairly, they sometimes intervened to express a view of what constituted the right or wrong behaviours. Sometimes, they questioned a decision and defended their friends.

#### E. CONSTRUCTIVE

This group of characteristics shows how the children employed a range of qualities and techniques to adapt to different situations. They related to people, expressing ideas and solving problems in clever, positive and humorous ways. They demonstrated their flexibility in seeking alternatives and sometimes not simply abiding by the rules. Many of the observations showed children's abilities to be very **humorous**, for example making jokes or teasing their friends. To share or be willing to share with others can be a challenging experience and sometimes the children's response was to be **creative** and **resourceful**, especially when facing a conflict situation. While facing a difficult task, the children showed **positive** encouragement to others. Finally, the young children's willingness to be **flexible** was observed in different ways.



#### F. CONTROLLING

Some aspects of young children's behaviours have rarely been discussed or portrayed in detail. Our findings demonstrate how capable young children can be when they choose to denigrate others, demand the objects they want, and reject or control others. We focus on four themes: being hurtful, taking revenge, strategic deception and manipulation.

Young children sometimes use **hurtful** words to their friends. 'Should I hit you back if you hit me?' is a dilemma that many young children have faced. In such situations, some children found it hard to keep calm, walk away or report the incident to an adult. Sometimes they found a way to hit back, **taking revenge**. In order to obtain what they want or avoid the things they dislike (e.g. tidy up), some young children were able to be strategically **deceptive**. For example one child did not like to take part in tidy-up time, so he pretended to 'check the car and see if it is broken'. By doing so, not only he did not join in the tidy-up but he was able to play with the car for a little longer. The final theme concerns controlling behaviour within relationships and the ways that some of the children could be **manipulative**. Some children can be overwhelmed by another's power and demand, and see to their every need.

# SHARING IN CHILDREN'S CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

*Although, superficially at least, young children may be greatly occupied by their own needs, desires and interests, their abilities to involve or take others' needs or interests into account should not be ignored, as we have seen. Inevitably, there is struggling, negotiation and compromising between the conflict of "I and YOU". Here we present a model of ways in which the young children struggled with, compromised or sometimes expertly negotiated this potential conflict between their own and others' interests.*

At the beginning of the analysis, the researchers considered the data relating to the theme of sharing from the children's expressions in self-talk and in interactions with peers and adults. A common expression that children used to begin the process of sharing was, "Can I have it?" This request elicited a range of responses and reactions. We need to bear in mind that many interpersonal interactions are not neat or verbal and the interactions of children as young as three in this study were complicated, with some sharing behaviours occurred in a non-verbal and subtle way.

The diagram below represents a theoretical model that uses quadrants to illustrate the language the children used in various sharing situations. This model was developed from cumulative analysis of the children's language and behaviours from observations. The thematic codings were grouped into four types, which led to the development of a four-quadrant model. This shows how some children made requests for others to share with them



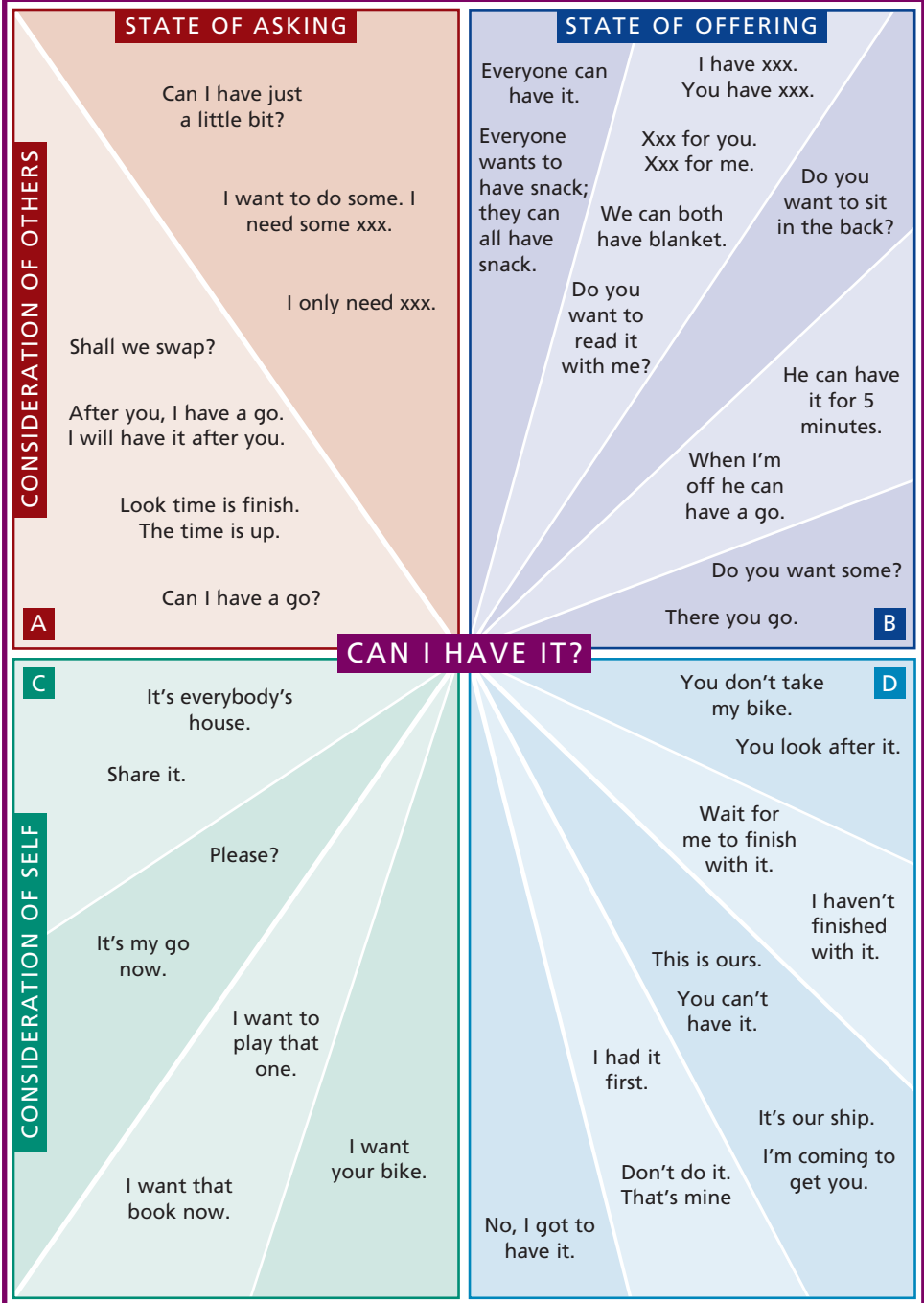
(state of asking), and others offered or declined to share (state of offering). For detailed vignettes illustrating these themes in real life, please refer to the full report.

Sharing with others can be challenging. It is a complex process requiring a balance of one's own desires for ownership, with a wish to maintain friendships and interactions.

**Quadrant A** of the diagram illustrates combined examples of the state of asking with consideration of others' needs or interests. Common examples of language used included, to share 'a little bit', have 'some', and 'only need some'. The children appeared to contemplate the idea of sharing and did not tend to take 'everything' away.

**Quadrant B** illustrates the combined state of offering and apparent consideration of others. For example, when a child was preparing the morning snack for others he talked to himself: "Everyone wants to have snack; they can all have snack." Children displayed behaviours that showed ways in which they negotiated sharing that not only fulfilled their own desires but also took others into consideration.

FIGURE 1. CHILDREN'S USE OF LANGUAGE IN DIFFERENT SHARING SITUATIONS



**Quadrant C** illustrates combined examples of a state of asking with consideration of one's own interests where the children were highly preoccupied by their own needs. Even though children have learned to use the language referring to sharing, it appeared that their attempts were sometimes linked with the fulfilment of personal needs and they had great difficulties in grasping the idea of sharing as reciprocity or division. On encountering a situation in which they needed to wait for their turn, they waited impatiently or asked repeatedly and desperately.

**Quadrant D** provides examples of children's overriding attempts at self-fulfilment, whether or not they superficially presented themselves as considering their own or others' needs. Sharing behaviour demands the sacrifice of one's possessions by the sharer for the benefit of others, so it is not unusual that interests of the self and others lead to conflict in situations where limited resources are to be shared. Children in Quadrant D defended themselves for not sharing things or cautiously protected their ownerships when they did agree to do so.

Having developed the four-quadrant theoretical model onto which the examples of children's sharing behaviours have been plotted, we then considered a continuum of sharing actions on two axes: like to share / do not like to share, and consideration of self / consideration of others. A number of activities can then be plotted on these axes. First, **considering others**:

**Volunteering** – Children give away the objects to others willingly

**Taking Turn** – Children swap the objects in turn and consider the needs of others

**Enjoy Together** – Children play/use the objects together and happily

**Distribution with Justice** - Children play/use the objects together and involve a sense of fairness

In contrast, **considering self** included themes:

**Taking Turns** – Children swap the objects in turn but considering the needs of themselves

**Asking** – A general request for having an object. For example: "Can I have it?"

**Demanding with Emphasis** – Asking for the objects with emphasis of tone

# YOUNG CHILDREN'S CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT – THE PARENTS' PERSPECTIVES

We used a mixed methods approach to gather evidence about parents' understandings of values, character development, the characteristics they (parents) have observed in their children, the characteristics and values that parents would like their children to have when they grow up, and the ways that parents promote these characteristics and values at home. The first method involved two semi-structured discussion groups in Kent (involving 11 parents) and eight individual, semi-structured interviews in London. The second part of data collection involving parents consisted of a self-completion questionnaire, of which 180 (58%) were returned. The questionnaire was constructed following the parents'

discussion groups, interviews and a review of literature, which was predominantly about the development of (children's) moral character. It is not possible to convey the nuanced findings in this summary, for instance, differences of emphasis between Kent and London parents. Interested readers are referred to the full report.

The first 13 items of the questionnaire were devoted to **parent's views of their child's character**. For each item as listed below, 1 point is assigned to 'strongly agree'; 5 points are assigned to 'strongly disagree' etc. Therefore, the mean score indicates the tendency of parents' responses for each characteristic based on which of the five possible boxes was ticked. Scores nearer 1 indicate strong agreement.

FREQUENCY COUNTS AND MEAN SCORES OF PARENTS' RESPONSES TO QUESTIONS ABOUT THEIR CHILD'S CHARACTERISTICS

	1 STRONGLY AGREE (COUNT)	2 AGREE	3 NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE	4 DISAGREE	5 STRONGLY DISAGREE	MEAN SCORE
My child:						
shares	26	20	10	4	2	1.86
is kind	83	85	8	0	0	1.57
is polite	65	98	15	0	0	1.72
is helpful	82	84	11	2	0	1.63
is honest	57	94	20	7	0	1.87
is funny	93	69	10	2	0	1.55
is curious	104	51	8	11	0	1.57
is selfish	6	27	44	74	22	3.46
is happy	122	58	0	0	0	1.32
is caring	107	67	4	1	0	1.44
is naughty	15	52	54	37	14	2.90
is thoughtful	51	96	27	3	1	1.92
is shy	13	52	44	47	18	3.03

An overall analysis shows that parents were generally positive about all the statements in this set of questions. Looking beyond parents' general positiveness, there is a contrasting outlook between two groups. One group of parents favour a set of statements showing children's *energetic, loving and upbeat mood characteristics*, for instance, being naughty, caring, curious, being funny, being happy and not shy. In this case, 'being naughty' may not be necessarily regarded as negative and undesirable since a naughty child may be viewed as energetic and curious. The other group of parents were relatively more positive to a set of questions related to *social bound characteristics*, for example, being kind, polite, honest, being helpful, sharing, and not selfish.

The next set of questions related to parents' aspirations for their child's character when she/he is an adult. There were 13 items on the 'ideal' character questions, with findings detailed in the chart below.



Again, parents seemed to be positive about most of the statements, if anything even more so, as shown by the mean scores. The second component indicates a contrasting view. On the one hand it shows those parents who gave relatively more positive responses to statements about 'success orientation', for example, being successful, well-educated, hard-working, responsible and confident. On the other hand, analysis shows parents who responded relatively more positively to statements within a 'moral orientation', for example a set of characteristics that demonstrate moral concern: respectful to others, honest, caring, loving, kind and being happy.

**FREQUENCY COUNTS AND MEAN SCORES OF PARENTS' RESPONSES TO THE QUESTION 'WHAT YOU HOPE YOUR CHILD WILL BE LIKE AS AN ADULT'**

	1 STRONGLY AGREE (COUNT)	2 AGREE	3 NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE	4 DISAGREE	5 STRONGLY DISAGREE	MEAN SCORE
Fun loving	95	76	6	1	0	1.5
Happy	147	32	0	0	0	1.2
Kind	137	43	0	0	0	1.2
Honest	138	41	0	0	0	1.2
Respectful	139	40	0	0	0	1.2
Religious	42	39	79	12	5	2.4
Confident	128	49	1	0	0	1.3
Caring / loving	139	40	0	0	0	1.2
Successful	88	76	14	0	0	1.6
Well-educated	108	63	8	0	0	1.4
Selfish	3	5	19	53	93	4.2
Hard-working	92	77	9	0	0	1.5
Responsible	118	60	1	0	0	1.4

FREQUENCY COUNTS AND MEAN SCORES OF PARENTS' RESPONSES TO 'THE CHARACTERISTICS OF A GOOD PERSON'

	1 STRONGLY AGREE (COUNT)	2 AGREE	3 NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE	4 DISAGREE	5 STRONGLY DISAGREE	MEAN SCORE
Respectful	127	47	3	0	0	1.3
Happy	56	63	38	16	2	2.1
Kind	113	59	5	1	0	1.4
Honest	121	55	2	0	0	1.3
Fun loving	49	60	51	13	1	2.1
Religious	22	27	76	24	23	3.0
Confident	52	45	48	25	4	2.3
Caring	108	58	9	2	0	1.5
Hard-working	60	64	37	14	1	2.1
Well-educated	41	26	59	34	15	2.8
Selfish	7	4	22	53	88	4.2
Successful	29	33	64	35	14	2.8
Responsible	79	78	18	2	0	1.7

The next 13 items were devoted to parents' views on a 'good' person.

Once again, analysis shows that parents were generally positive about most of the statements. As in the previous section, there was a contrast between clusters of success-oriented responses and those with a greater moral orientation. Apart from the most obvious point that good people are unlikely to be selfish, perhaps the most interesting finding relates to good people not necessarily being religious (3.0).

There were 10 items within the group of questions on parents' views about character development. These related to whether a child's character is obvious from a few weeks of age, the changes or developments of a child's character, the uniqueness and inheritance of character and whether this is associated with any influential period or factor in character



development. Here, analysis shows a contrasting view between those parents who were relatively more positive about a set of questions indicating *environmental effect on character* for example, a child's character 'is shaped by people around her/him', 'changes as (s)he gets older', and 'changes from one day to the next'; and those parents who were relatively more positive about a set of questions indicating *early manifestation of characteristics*, for example, a child's character 'is obvious from a few weeks of age' and 'has some aspects that cannot be changed' and 'is the same at 2 years as at 1 year old'.


There were 12 items that explored the parents' views about the purposes and uses (from their perspective) of early childhood education.

Attitudes were generally positive, but there were contrasting views between those parents who were slightly

FREQUENCY COUNTS AND MEAN SCORES OF PARENTS' RESPONSES TO THE STATEMENTS ABOUT THEIR INTERACTIONS WITH THEIR CHILD AT HOME

	1 STRONGLY AGREE (COUNT)	2 AGREE	3 NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE	4 DISAGREE	5 STRONGLY DISAGREE	MEAN SCORE
I usually set good examples for my child	87	87	4	0	0	1.5
My child copies my words and actions	70	93	10	3	1	1.7
I find it hard to say 'sorry' to my child	3	7	4	64	98	4.4
I try to explain my feelings to my child	61	100	9	5	0	1.8
My child must sit at the table for meals	63	76	31	7	0	1.9
I explain right and wrong to my child	114	62	1	1	0	1.4
My child doesn't know when I'm sad	5	16	27	86	42	3.8
I talk to my child about others' feelings	71	93	7	4	1	1.7
I introduce my child to other cultures	47	80	40	9	1	2.1
I spend 'quality time' with my child	100	74	4	0	0	1.5
I often try to read or tell stories or sing to my child	123	49	5	0	1	1.4
I explain that snatching toys is wrong	110	59	3	2	2	1.5
My views about parents are generally the same as other parents I know	30	87	44	13	2	2.3





more positive about a set of questions concerned with *children's social and independent development*, for example, the importance of meeting other children, becoming confident and independent so that parents can have a break. On the other hand, other parents were slightly more positive about a set of questions in relation to *children's readiness for school*, for example, the emphasis on learning to read and write, good manners, and preparation for school.

11 statements explored **parents' views about factors that influence a child's character** (and its development).

Notable findings included:

- 98% of parents strongly agreed or agreed that 'self / mother influences my child's values'.
- 94% of parents strongly agreed or agreed that 'self / father influences my child's values'.
- 84% of parents strongly agreed or agreed that 'grandparents influence my child's values.'
- 83% of parents strongly agreed or agreed that 'sisters/brothers influence my child's values.'

13 statements asked about **parents' views of their interactions with their own children at home**.

Analysis shows one contrasting view. On the one hand, parents were relatively more positive about a set of questions in relation to a *contemporary view of parenting*, for example, modelling, talking about feelings, explaining right and wrong, sharing quality time, introducing different cultural ideas / experiences and setting boundaries. On the other hand, there were parents who were relatively more positive about a set of questions relating to *traditional views of adults*, for example, 'My child doesn't know when I am sad' and 'I find it hard to say sorry to my child.' This appears to present a rather hierarchical stance and views young children as minors who are less able to be sensitive to others' feelings.



# YOUNG CHILDREN'S CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT - THE PROFESSIONALS' PERSPECTIVES

The Learning for Life Early Years questionnaire for professional staff working in the early childhood education settings was based on the content and structure of the parents' questionnaire. Following early interviews with staff in the six sample settings, a few sections were modified in order to explore professionals' views on character development and ECE, characteristics of children who enrolled in their settings, their practice in supporting character development, and factors that might influence a young child's character and its development. 32 out of 50 questionnaires were returned, yielding a return rate of 64%. As a whole, 66% of the respondents worked in London settings and 34% in Kent. 94% were female and 6% were male; 62% worked full time and 38% part time.

The questionnaire comprised seven demographic questions and 92 items (grouped into seven sections) which were

answered on a Likert-type scale from 1 to 5, with 1 being 'strongly agree' and 5 'strongly disagree'. The findings are discussed within the following seven sub-sections:

1. Professionals' views about children's characteristics
2. Professionals' views about a 'good' person
3. Professionals' views of character development
4. Professionals' views about the purposes of Early Childhood Education
5. Professionals' opinions about parents' use of Early Childhood Education
6. Professionals' views about factors that influence a child's character and its development
7. Professionals' views on their own practice in the settings



FREQUENCY COUNTS AND MEAN SCORES OF PROFESSIONALS' RESPONSES TO CHILDREN'S CHARACTERISTICS

	1 STRONGLY AGREE (COUNT)	2 AGREE	3 NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE	4 DISAGREE	5 STRONGLY DISAGREE	MEAN SCORE
Children in the nursery:						
share/take turns	4	21	7	0	0	2.1
are kind	2	24	4	0	0	2.1
are polite	3	18	11	0	0	2.3
are helpful	2	19	10	0	0	2.3
are honest	3	19	7	0	0	2.1
are funny	3	22	7	0	0	2.1
are curious	13	15	2	1	0	1.7
are selfish	1	3	5	15	4	3.6
are happy	12	16	2	0	0	1.7
are caring	7	18	5	1	0	2.0
are naughty	0	1	8	11	8	3.9
are thoughtful	5	13	12	0	0	2.2
are confident	2	21	9	0	0	2.2
are independent	3	18	11	0	0	2.3
are responsible	16	10	5	0	0	2.7
are cooperative	3	17	8	0	0	2.2

On the whole, the respondents appeared to have a **generally positive view about the children** who attended their settings.

With respect to **professionals' views about a 'good' person**, one contrast was found - between those who were relatively more positive about a set of questions relating to **core values**, for example, 'A good person is kind, honest, caring, respectful to others, well-educated, fair, responsible and not selfish; and those parents who responded relatively more positively to a set of questions relating to **relative values**, for example, 'A good person is hard-working, religious and successful.

**Professionals' views of character development** - descriptive statistics revealed that the majority of respondents either strongly agreed or agreed that in general a child's character 'changes as (s)he gets older' (94%), 'is shaped by people around him/her' (94%), 'is unique' (93%), and 'affects the way (s)he learns'(90%). Similarly to the parents, some respondents were relatively more positive about a set of statements in relation to the **possibility of change in child's character**, for example, a child's character 'changes as (s)he gets older', 'is shaped by people around her/him, 'is affected by what (s)he learns' and affects the way (s)he learns'. Others were relatively

more positive to a set of statements seemingly viewing *a child's character as being stabilized in his or her early years*, for example, a child's character 'is obvious from a few weeks of age', 'is the same at 2 years as at 1 year old', and 'is fully developed before starting school.'

**Professionals' views about the purposes of Early Childhood Education** - the descriptive statistics showed that *all* respondents either strongly agreed or agreed with the statements that the main purposes of the ECE provision at their settings were 'to allow children to meet other children', 'to help children learn to be confident' and 'to help children become

more independent'. There were more diverse views, however, about the statements 'to allow parents to go out to work', 'to give parents a break' and 'to allow children to learn to read and write'.

Respondents appeared to have a generally positive view about all the statements listed. However, respondents viewed the purposes of the provision in a contrasting way. On the one hand, one group of respondents were relatively more positive about a set of statements in relation to *parental needs*, for example, the provision can 'allow parents to go out to work', and 'to give parents a break'. On the other hand, the other group of respondents were

#### FREQUENCY COUNTS AND MEAN SCORES OF THE STATEMENTS ABOUT THE REASONS PARENTS SENT THEIR CHILDREN TO ECE SETTINGS

	1 STRONGLY AGREE (COUNT)	2 AGREE	3 NEITHER AGREE NOR DISAGREE	4 DISAGREE	5 STRONGLY DISAGREE	MEAN SCORE
Parents send their children to the nursery where you work so that:						
they can go out to work	0	5	21	6	0	3.0
they can have a break	2	5	20	4	0	2.8
their child can meet other children	8	20	4	0	0	1.9
their child can learn to read/write	2	9	16	4	1	2.8
their child can get ready for school	9	15	6	0	0	1.9
their child can learn respect	4	12	12	3	0	2.5
their child can learn good manners	6	12	13	0	0	2.2
their child becomes more independent	10	16	6	0	0	1.9
their child learns to be well behaved	6	14	11	1	0	2.2
their child learns to share	9	12	11	0	0	2.1
their child learns to be responsible	6	17	8	1	0	2.1
their child learns to be confident	10	11	7	0	0	1.9

relatively more positive about a set of statements relating to *children's development* in learning to be responsible, confident, more independent, able to share and respectful to others.

**Professionals' opinions about parents' use of Early Childhood Education** - the descriptive statistics show patterns in the respondents' perceptions of parents' purposes in enrolling their children in ECE settings for a variety of purposes, although the extent of agreement was somewhat lower than their views of the main purposes of ECE.

There was a marginal contrasting view in relation to the statement pointing out that the purpose of provision was 'to allow parents to go out to work.'

Moreover, some respondents were relatively more positive about the reasons that parents send their child to ECE settings: to prepare them for school, children 'can learn to read and write', 'get ready for school', 'parents can have a break' and 'parents can go out to work'. Others were relatively more positive about a set of reasons relating to the learning of independence, confidence and sharing.

**Professionals' views about factors that influence a child's character and its development** - the descriptive statistics showed that the majority of respondents either strongly agreed or agreed that 'Mother' (74%), 'Father' (68%), and 'Brother/Sister' (61%) influence the characters of the children at the nursery. Interestingly, these results showed lower levels of agreement than were found among the parents' responses for these items, which were 98% for 'Mother', 94% for 'Father' and 83% for 'Brother/Sister'.



Respondents had a diverse view about **TV as an influential factor**. 32% of the respondents either strongly agreed or agreed, 34% neither agreed nor disagreed, and 31% either strongly disagreed or disagreed with the statement. 56% respondents either strongly disagreed or disagreed that **people or things on the Internet** influence children's character. It is possible that the respondents believed or knew that the young children had few opportunities to access the Internet.

Looking beyond respondents' general positiveness, there appears to be a subtle, contrasting view between a group of primary influential factors and a group of secondary influential factors. Some respondents are relatively more positive about a set of statements relating to **primary influential factors**, for example, Father, Mother, Sisters/Brothers, Friends, and Professional at nursery. On the other hand, other respondents were relatively more positive about a set of statements relating to **secondary influential factors**, for example, 'People or things on the Internet', 'People at a place of worship' and 'People on TV'.

**Professionals' views on their own practice in the settings** - All respondents either strongly agreed or agreed about the two statements '*I usually set good examples for a child*'; and '*I usually encourage a child to tidy up*.' The majority of respondents either strongly agreed or agreed (94%) with the statement 'I explain right and wrong to a child.' And the majority of respondents either strongly disagreed (44%) or disagreed (44%) with the statement '*I find it hard to say sorry to a child*'. In this area of analysis, no explanatory component was highlighted.

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge and thank the people who have kindly supported this project. In particular we owe our gratitude to staff, children and families from:

Benenden Church of England, Cranbrook, Kent

Coleridge Primary School, London Borough of Haringey

Colliers Green Church of England Primary School, Cranbrook, Kent

Edinburgh Primary School, London Borough of Waltham Forest

Gordonbrock Primary School, London Borough of Lewisham

Grinling Gibbons Primary School, London Borough of Lewisham

Gwyn Jones Primary School, London Borough of Waltham Forest

Halstead Community Primary School, Kent

Halstead Nursery, Halstead, Kent

Holly Park Montessori School Nursery Classes, London Borough of Islington

Low Hall Nursery, London Borough of Waltham Forest

Plaxtol Nursery, Plaxtol, Kent

Plaxtol Primary School, Plaxtol, Kent

Rachel McMillan Nursery School and Children's Centre, London Borough of Greenwich

South Grove Primary School, London Borough of Waltham Forest

St James Church of England Primary School, London Borough of Haringey

St Katherine's Knockholt Church of England Primary School, Knockholt, Kent

St Michael's Pre-Prep School, Otford, Kent

St Peter-in-Chains Roman Catholic Infant School, London Borough of Haringey

Woodpeckers Preschool, Cranbrook, Kent

We would like to thank the members of our Advisory Board for their valuable contributions and the John Templeton Foundation, whose generous funding made this research possible. The opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect the position of the John Templeton Foundation.

We are also most grateful to Dr. Sue Rogers for reviewing this report and for speaking at its launch; Dr Ray Godfrey and Professor Tricia David for their comments on the statistics and research design; and Primrose Paskins and Elizabeth Melville for administering the project.

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