The Unique Child Project

An international project celebrating learning as a gift

THE UNIQUE CHILD PROJECT

WHAT IS THE **UNIQUE CHILD PROJECT**?

The **Unique Child Project (UQC)** has been set up in recognition of the fact that there is an urgent need to re-evaluate current systems of education in the light of new understanding about human learning and development. Drawing from expert research and opinion from around the world it aims to show that the young children are dynamic natural learners, each with unique capacities, and that they need optimal learning environments to fully develop their potential. It will confirm that positive early learning experiences set the stage for all that is to come, and are the founding stones for lifelong learning, but that early learning is also a time of enormous vulnerability when poor experiences can mar the love of learning for life.

The project aims to fight for the right of every child to feel a sense of meaning, contribution and belonging with learning experienced as a joy rather than a burden. Uniting early years experts with some of the world's most creative and cutting edge thinkers, it will examine the efficiency of current models in the light of new understanding about human learning and development and will suggest new and innovative ways forward.

WHAT IS SPECIAL ABOUT EARLY LEARNING?

Research studies from around the world concur that the period of birth to six year olds is the critically important phase for establishing learning attitudes... Many of the early pedagogues recognised that there was a biologically determined period during which it was crucial to establish certain semi-permanent attitudes about learning. The stronger these are embedded, the greater their resilience to inevitable, climatic periods of poor stimulation, and the more likely that they will persist.

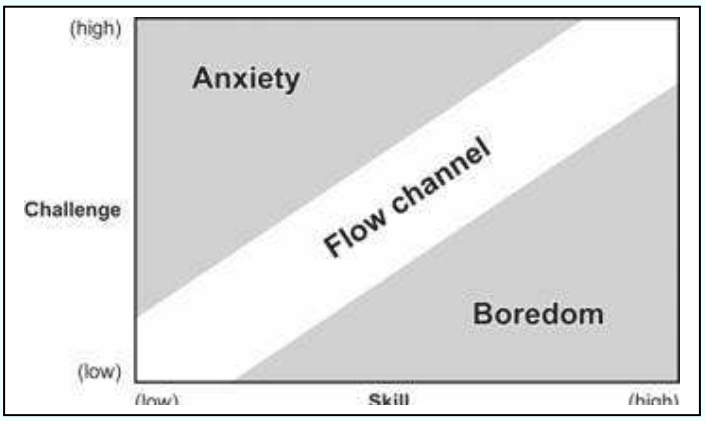
What is recognized as the 'Early Years' differs depending on where you live in the world. Most people tend to think of children 'starting' learning when they enter school, but actually they are actively learning even from before the time of birth. From the moment a child enters the world, therefore, his or her experiences profoundly effect its development. These are critically important years and we need to ensure that we truly understand how to care for and nurture these extraordinarily sensitive young minds. Who should a young child be with? Does parental leave have a fundamental effect in the child? How can we ensure that nursery settings provide the child with the kind of empathic care that is available in home settings? How effective are the transitions between nursery and formal schooling? What are the pre-cursors for the child's true wellbeing? These are all questions that we should be asking.

WHAT THE SCIENCE OF NATURAL SYSTEMS IS TELLING US ABOUT EARLY LEARNING

The issue is not just science and education; it is learning and helping children.
That concerns everybody.
John Abbott, Director of The Education 2000 Trust

Increasingly science is showing us what extraordinary learners we areally are. There is increasing recognition that any system, whether it be that of an individual or an organization, functions best when it is aligned to nature's own organic processes. This is because nature has perfected optimal creative growth and development with simplicity of structure and flow.

One of the most characteristic qualities of young children is their intense curiosity and delight in learning. They are clearly 'in a state of flow' that leads them to explore and interact with the environment. Flow is essential in natural systems and is achieved when a task is aligned to a system's individual development and potentialities. Flow requires a balance of challenge and skill. If the challenge is too great for a system's skill level, it will experience worry or anxiety. If the challenge level is too low, that system will experience apathy or boredom.



The flow channel. (Csikszentmihalyi 1990, 74)

Natural learning threfore involves creative challenge and is designed to be a joyful and social process that stimulates us to be in developmental flow. As natural learners we should be waking up each morning with the excitement of wanting to explore and know more. As a place of natural learning school should be a place of excitement and discovery where we learn to develop our individual potential. Somewhere we feel that we matter and can see how our own unique skills and abilities fit with the larger systems of family, class, school, community and the world.

Education is therefore the need to 'call forth' not to 'cram in'. And optimizing potential means bringing what is already inside out into the world not forcing what is outside in. There are certain innate human characteristics which are qualities of natural systems and which, when supported and nurtured, assist us to be natural learners:

Motivation
We come into the world as creative beings and natural learners. Our innate dispositions, if given appropriate environmental support and freedom, lead us to maximize our own development

Concentration and Flow
When aligned to the appropriate level of challenge in the learning environment we enter states of dynamic flow that facilitate high level attainment.

Courage and risk-taking
We are natural problem-solvers and risk-takers. These abilities, however, are highly responsive to negative feedback.

Co-operation and Empathy
We are social beings that are naturally caring and empathic. In order to be so we need to feel valued, connected and empowered.

Patience and Perseverance
Natural social environments allow us to understand that others have different feelings, experiences

and perceptions to ourselves and help us to develop the social skills that allow us to live harmoniously.

Self-Discipline
We have a natural sense of order and need for structure within which we can flow. This is an internal state that seeks expression rather than an external state that needs imposing. Our innate dispositions resonate with justice and fairness.

Self Responsibility
We naturally seek to master our environments and are motivated by being given responsibility, and by recognizing for ourselves when action is needed in a system. Internal rewards are more effective than external ones.

Love
We are naturally affectionate, joyful and playful and we seek that in others.

WHAT ARE THE CHARACTERISTIC S OF NATURAL SYSTEMS?

They have dynamic regularities of structure
They are self-organizing and self-correcting
They unfold and evolve
They are co-creative
They demonstrate a diversity arising from an essential unity
They clarify that there are many perspectives within any one system
They show that every component in a system is essential
They show that the health and well-being of every piece is essential to the whole

HOW DOES SCIENCE SUPPORT A NATURAL SYSTEMS APPROACH TO EARLY LEARNING?

The brain is not a computer to be programmed nor a disk to be filled;
it is an evolving ecosystem to be nourished.
— Lynn Arthur Steen

Every day scientists learn more about how a child's brain forms and develops. Every day teachers struggle to find effective tools for helping children use their brains to their greatest capacity. In a sense, both groups are focusing on different aspects of the same issues. Oddly, discourse between the two groups has been virtually nonexistent.

Neuroscience has provided fascinating glimpses into the brain's development and function. Scientists now believe the structures that control perception, action and cognition develop at the same time — not sequentially, as was previously believed. Babies are born with virtually a lifetime supply of nerve cells whose connections are established during the first five or six years of life. Although the number of nerve cells undergoes a continuous, gradual refinement and "pruning," the brain's ability to acquire new knowledge continues throughout a lifetime.

Even before birth, the infant's brain is constantly seeking to make sense of what it experiences, including the use of language. For instance, babies everywhere can distinguish the sounds of one language from another. But after about six months, babies begin to develop "magnets" that attract

them to the sounds of their own language. They lose their early ability to discern fine differences in sounds in foreign languages. Those "perceptual maps" developed in infancy may account for distinctive national accents and the difficulty in learning and distinguishing related sounds in other languages as we grow older.

The brain has multiple memory systems that process and act on information in different ways. For example, short-term memory is formed in one part of the brain but must be transferred to another for long-term storage and retrieval. Different memory systems contribute differently to physical, intellectual and emotional activities. Babies' sensory and emotional environments affect their development in profound ways that are only beginning to be understood. One study examined the effect of environment on very premature infants cared for in a newborn intensive-care unit. The nursery setting consisted of bright lights and mechanical background noise, with few voice sounds reaching the infants. The infants who had little parental contact made fewer sounds than premature infants whose parents visited and spoke to them continuously.

Other factors affecting the brain's development include maternal drug, tobacco and alcohol use, pre- and postnatal infant and maternal nutrition, and early child care. Some of the brain's primary functions, such as vision, have critical development periods, which, if missed, will never occur. It is becoming increasingly clear that there are critical periods for other functions such as the acquisition of language and that these sensitive periods create windows of opportunity when learning is easier. We know that early stimulation is vital to help a child develop. At the same time, while much of the brain's basic equipment is in place at birth and its neural connections continue to form during the first few years of life, a great deal of plasticity exists in its cognitive and intellectual development.

Children learn in different ways and display different types of intelligence, but conventional measures such as IQ address only one form of intelligence. There is neurological evidence that children are capable of learning more than is currently believed if information is presented in the manner best suited to each child's learning style. It is thus important to find ways to engage those special intelligences within an education system designed to maximize each child's opportunities to learn and to stop underestimating their capacity. Natural systems suggest that each individual has unique capacities that fit within the overall system. Neuorological studies support this fact and are starting to give us strategies that enable us to evaluate and support the learning strategies of the learner.

We now know that emotions play a critical role in successful learning and that self-regulation is an essential element. Children learn best when they are free to be curious, questing individuals within a world given meaning through relationships and interconnectivity.

In 1996 seventy-four neuroscientists, cognitive psychologists, education researchers and practitioners, and policymakers were invited to explore the possible relevance to schools of recent developments in neuroscience and cognitive psychology. The workshop was co-sponsored by the Education Commission of the States and the Charles A. Dana Foundation. Workshop participants concluded that neuroscientific findings do have implications for education, but there is a chasm between what scientists accept as proven fact and what the public, teachers and administrators believe.

A number of recommendations for fostering communication and influencing policy arose from the discussions:

Communication

- Educators, policymakers and the general public need to understand more about how the brain develops, what helps and hinders its progress, and how to accommodate different styles of learning.
- We need to develop ways of communicating scientific information to the media, public and policymakers that can be understood and acted on.
- There is a need to agree on common definitions for "learning," "memory," "critical periods" "play", and other terms with multiple levels and interpretations.

Collaboration

- There is a need to develop incentives and funding sources for sustained collaborative work by neuroscientists and educators.
- We need to find ways to expedite the translation of scientific research findings into educational practice.

Policy

- We need to develop special-education policy recommendations based on what is now known about how children learn.
- We need to identify issues and impediments to brain development, such as pre and postnatal care, lack of stimulation, emotional stress and indicators of developmental readiness.

- There need to be incentives and requirements for schools of education to understand, research and expand their teaching of early-childhood development.
- The professional development of child-care workers needs to address the need for practitioners to achieve a level of personal social and emotional maturity together with a comprehensive understanding of what we now understand about children's neurological processes.

WHAT WE WANT TO DO

We want to start a new initiative that is able to really look at these issues and to suggest new and innovative solutions. We are seeking initial finding to enable us to:

1) Establish The Unique Child Website

2) Publish the first Unique Child Book: The outline for a book is already being assessed by a leading publisher.

3) Commission The Unique Child Film: Example outline attached

4) Establish The Unique Child 'Think-Tank': A unique collaboration of experts and cutting-edge thinkers are already supporting the development of the project.

5) Promote and support initiatives that further an understanding of early childhood and the importance of natural systems.

6) Start running The Unique Child Conferences: International conferences sharing the most recent research and thinking.

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WHO IS SUPPORTING THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE PROJECT?

The Project already has the support of a growing number of early childhood experts, both within the UK and abroad, together with a number of high profile authors and practitioners. Many of these initially come together around the work of the UK OpenEYE Campaign (which challenged the recent outcomes-based Early Years Foundation Stage) but now wish to support the development of a more comprehensive initiative.

UNIQUE CHILD PROJECT SUPPORTERS

Sir Christopher Ball – Author of the Start Right Report, Founder of the Campaign for Learning
Professor Ellen Galinsky, Ph.d - President and Co-Founder of the Families and Work Institute
Professor Kathy Hirsch-Pasek, Ph.D - Stanley and Debra Lefkowitz Professor in the Department of Psychology at Temple University
Professor Roberta Golinkoff, Ph.D - holds the H. Rodney Sharp Chair in the School of Education at the University of Delaware
Professor Lillan Katz Ph.D - Professor Emeritus of Early Childhood Education at the University of Illinois and Director of the ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary & Early Childhood Education
Professor Richard House, Ph.D - Senior Lecturer in Psychotherapy and Counselling, Research Centre for Therapeutic Education, Roehampton University
Wendy Scott - Former adviser to the Department for Education and Skills and former chairman of the British Association for Early Childhood Education
Melian Mansfield – Chair of the Early Childhood Forum
Maria Robinson – Independent adviser, consultant and lecturer in early years care and learning
Penelope Leach – Child Psychologist and author
Sally Goddard-Blythe – Co-Director, Institute for Neuro-Physiological PsychologyAuthor Sue Palmer
Sue Palmer – author of Toxic Childhood
Philip Pullman –internationally renowned children's author
Michael Morpurgo – UK Children's laureate
Lynne Oldfield - Director of the London Steiner Waldorf Early Childhood Teacher Training Course
Galina Dolya – Leading expert on Vygotsky's Theory of Learning and Development
Barbara Isaacs – Principal of Montessori Centre International

FOUNDER OF THE PROJECT

Wendy Ellyatt

Wendy is an expert in Early Years Education who has spent the last 15 years working on projects worldwide - all of which have explored the nature of human creativity and potential. She has a Masters (Distinction) in Education, sits on the Editorial Board of the International Montessori Journal and has worked as a consultant, researcher and feature writer in Integral Education. She was a writer for the US based Paths of Learning Magazine and website and, during 2006, was strategic consultant to the international Sync-Q Teamplayground Project.

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In 2000 Wendy set up the website www.F2be.com – The Freedom 2Be Natural Learners and in 2007 the website www.teachersunite.com which aims to promote the importance of the health and wellbeing of teachers. She is a currently a core member of the UK OpenEYE Campaign. She is also a founder of the Ouroboros Research and Education Trust which explores ancient and indigenous worldviews and in 2007 was consultant to the Isha Foundation's international Project Greenhands Initiative.

FUNDING

The Project is seeking seed sponsors who can help it become established. Initial estimated requirements are:

PROJECT DEVELOPMENT

Project Direction	25,000
Web Design	5,000
Book printing	2,000
Film Production	50,000
Advertising and PR	5,000
2009 Conference	10,000
Admin	3,000
TOTAL	**100,000**

RESEARCH DEVELOPMENT

Project Direction	25,000
Project support (x3)	75,000
TOTAL	**100,000**

The UQC Project would like to assist with the ongoing development of three innovative Early Years initiatives in the UK. Each of these has already been successful piloted in other countries. Following initial support the aim will be for each to be sustainable in its own right.

1) **Mind in the Making**. - Mind in the Making (MITM) is a series of 12 Learning Modules for Early Childhood Teachers produced by The Families and Work Institute, New York. These modules are based upon adult education principles and lead teachers through a reflective and experiential learning process that focuses on key learning concepts, such as: the importance of teachers being learners about children's learning; the importance of relationships; how learning begins and continues in early childhood; seeing social, emotional and intellectual learning as integrated; and how to help children learn a variety of necessary concepts and skills (regulating their thoughts and feelings, using language to communicate, learning to solve problems, managing stress, encouraging children's natural curiosity, and fostering a love of learning).
http://www.mindinthemaking.org/

2) **The Child and Nature Network -** The Children & Nature Network (C&NN) was created to encourage and support the people and organizations working to reconnect children with nature. The network provides a critical link between researchers and individuals, educators and organizations dedicated to children's health and well-being. C&NN also promotes

fundamental institutional change and provides resources for sharing information, strategic initiatives and success stories .and case studies on children's health and nature, and related program-development strategies and support.
http://www.childrenandnature.org/contact/

3) **Sync-Q TeamPlayground –** Uniting the fields of transpersonal and educational psychology with systems thinking, TeamPlayGround is an innovative new organizational model for classrooms that is based upon an understanding of Natural Systems. Through the introduction of a number of simple roles and tasks it emphasizes relationship, diversity, connectivity and flow as essential elements of any healthy system with the well-being of each participant shown to be essential to the whole.
http://www.teamplayground.org/#SyncQ%20Fields

FUNDER BENEFITS

Sponsors will participate in a project that has enormous media and publicity potential. The OpenEYE Campaign has attracted national coverage with interviews requested on both radio and television. The content is highly topical and the issues affect everybody in the UK. We hope that our sponsors will join with us to promote real and effective change, nurturing creative capacities and innovation and ensuring that children grow as joyful natural learners, confident in their own abilities and able to adapt easily to the changing needs of our modern world.

PROJECT TIMING

Phase	Activity 2009	1 Jan	2 Feb	3 Mar	4 April	5 May	6 Jun	7 July	8 Aug	9 Sept	10 Oct	11 Nov	12 Dec
1	Planning												
2	Acquisition of funding												
3	Identification of Think Tank												
4	Book completion												
5	Advertising and PR												
6	Film completion												
7	Conference and Full launch												

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' The flow model suggests that the mastery of any skill or body of knowledge should ideally happen naturally, as the child is drawn to the areas that spontaneously engage her - that, in essence, she loves. That initial passion can be the seed for high levels of attainment, as the child comes to realize that pursuing the field - whether it be dance, math or music - is a source of the flow. And since it takes pushing the limits of one's ability to sustain the flow, that becomes a prime motivator for getting better and better; *it makes the child happy*...Pursuing flow through learning is a more humane, natural, and very likely more effective way to marshal emotions in the service of education'

Daniel Goleman – Author of Emotional Intelligence

'If formal instruction is introduced too early, too intensely and too abstractly, the children may indeed learn the instructed knowledge and skills, *but they may do so at the expense of the disposition to use them'*

Lillian Katz
Professor Emeritus of Early Childhood Education at the University of Illinois and Director of the ERIC Clearinghouse on Elementary & Early Childhood Education

We very much hope that you will want to help us. To request more information on the project or to arrange a meeting please contact

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