

# PUTTING CHILDREN FIRST



Action for Children's Arts conference 2012

19 June 2012  
Unicorn Theatre, London

Action for Children's Arts is a national charity speaking on behalf of its members as the national voice of children's arts.

It is an advocate for children's rights under Article 31 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

It aims to promote access for all children (0-12) to all the arts and to support the artists who make work for them.

Charity no. 1114530

[www.childrensarts.org.uk](http://www.childrensarts.org.uk)

## CONFERENCE REPORT

### FREEDOM OF INFORMATION REQUESTS



In preparation for the conference, Action for Children's Arts used Freedom of Information requests to ask the four UK Arts Councils and the BFI what proportion of their grants helps to support the production, performance, exhibition or broadcast of work for which the intended audience is children up to twelve years old.

None of them was able to give a precise answer because none of them collects information in a form that would enable them to do so.



We asked twenty of the UK's national arts organisations what proportion of their budget they spend on the production, performance, exhibition or broadcast of work for which the intended audience is children up to twelve years old.

The answers we received show that most arts organisations spend around 1% of their budget on programming work for this age group.



Children up to twelve years old make up around 15% of the population.

A detailed breakdown of the responses we received and an exploration of the issues they raise were set out in a booklet that was sent to delegates before the conference and is now available on our website – [www.childrensarts.org.uk](http://www.childrensarts.org.uk).

## WELCOME



Vicky Ireland MBE

Delegates were welcomed and speakers introduced by the Chair and Vice-Chair of Action for Children's Arts, David Wood OBE and Vicky Ireland MBE.

Lynne Reid Banks, one of ACA's patrons, gave the opening address.



David Wood OBE



Lynne Reid Banks

Lynne Reid Banks is the author of many books for children as well as grown-ups and now spends part of her time in primary schools helping children with their reading.

Children, she said, need to experience the arts at home as well as at school.

The BBC and other television channels have the responsibility of bringing the arts into the home.

The arts are part of contemporary society, whose values are constantly changing.

Admitting that she was sometimes shocked by what children today are allowed to read and watch, she asked, does it matter *what* children read or only *that* they read?

## CHILDREN'S WELL-BEING AND THE ARTS



Sharon Hodgson MP,  
Shadow Minister for  
Children & Families

**Sharon Hodgson MP** chaired the first session, in which speakers from statutory and voluntary children's agencies offered insights into the factors affecting children's well-being and the place of the arts in children's lives.

**Dr Maggie Atkinson** reminded us that the UK signed up to Article 31 of the UN Declaration on the Rights of the Child when John Major was prime minister.

The only nations not signed up are Somalia and the USA.

Article 31 states that 'every child has the right to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts'.

Children's rights are adult's obligations.

**Dr Pam Burnard** raised a concern that children in the UK are under so much pressure to achieve within a school curriculum that prioritises particular kinds of learning.

Kinaesthetic and experiential activities offer a type of well-being that other aspects of the curriculum cannot.

She referred to research in which, when asked what made them happiest, children said 'art' and 'performing'.



Dr Maggie Atkinson,  
Children's  
Commissioner for  
England



Dr Pam Burnard,  
Faculty of Education,  
Cambridge University

Arts and sport are both significant factors in children’s well-being.

Art improves academic performance and bridges the gap between school and home.

**Elaine Hindal** gave a brief account of the work of the Children’s Society in representing the views of children and young people.

A survey of 8,000 children between the ages of 8 and 16 shows that half a million children are profoundly unhappy.

The reasons include not feeling safe and not being treated fairly.

The statistics are shocking and cause us to ask what drives children’s well-being?

Research suggest a hierarchy of factors.

Family:

- 1 in 10 children had a change in adult members in the family in the last 12 months
- 2 in 10 moved between 2 homes
- warmth of family relationships is the most important factor in a happy childhood
- children need someone to support them when things go wrong.

Autonomy:

- 1 in 10 felt that they could not express their ideas
- 25% didn’t have enough say in how they filled their time
- children must have a say in decisions that affect them.

Poverty:

- of experience, of ambition and of money
- money is a lubricant of family and social relationships
- the arts can enable children to cope better.



Elaine Hindal,  
Campaign Director,  
Children’s Society

**Tom McCall** spoke about a change in attitude that had taken place, leading Newry District Council to take children’s needs more seriously.

Newry is a small city and its goal now is to place children at the heart of what they do.

It aims to be the City of Children by 2014.

They are building a new city and renovating spaces, parks and play spaces designed for children, by children.

The Council has worked with *Sticky Fingers Children’s Arts Festival* to give councillors a practical understanding of working with children.

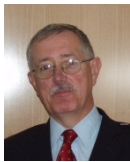
**Dr Roger Morgan** explained that the role of Children’s Rights Director is to consult and ask the views of vulnerable children.

When asked what is most important to their well-being, children say:

1. Being healthy
2. Being loved
3. Having a home
4. Enjoying activities and having fun
5. Feeling happy.

When asked about their needs, they say:

1. To be alive and well



Tom McCall OBE,  
Chief Executive, Newry  
& Mourne District  
Council



Dr Roger Morgan,  
Children’s Rights  
Director, England

2. Learning and education
3. To feel safe from harm
4. To be treated fairly
5. To have a say in their own lives
6. Well-being
7. Enjoyment
8. To be themselves
9. To socialise with others.

He said that it was striking how similar their answers were when asked what made them unhappy and how different when asked what made them happy: “Happiness could be a million things”.

In preparing for the conference, Dr Morgan asked his focus group of 35 vulnerable children how important the arts are to them. All but two said the arts were very important.

In conclusion, he said that we should talk to children and listen to what they say.

## CHILDREN’S ARTS



Jocelyn Stevenson,  
Children’s Media  
Foundation

Jocelyn Stevenson chaired a panel of children’s arts practitioners, asking them to talk briefly about their work and to identify three things that would make a difference.

**Penny Hay** spoke about the work of *5x5x5=creativity*, a charity supporting children’s creativity through partnerships between schools, artists and academics. Its motto is ‘Follow children’s fascinations’.

**Kate Cross** showed a short video about *Schools Without Walls*, a project which aims to break down the barriers between schools and arts organisations by showing how both can be places in which children learn. The video documents the experience of children and teachers when *the egg* (Theatre Royal Bath’s children’s theatre next door) became their classroom for a week.



Will Brenton, Director,  
Wish Films

**Tony Reekie** talked about *Imagine*, an organisation that promotes and develops the performing arts for children and young people in Scotland. A key principle is to let artists set the agenda instead of reacting to the social or educational menu of the day. Although the festival is well established and highly regarded, the current crisis in funding is an ever present threat.



Kate Cross, Director,  
*the egg*

**Will Brenton** spoke too about the difficult financial circumstances in which he and other children’s film makers have to work. The BBC is now putting only 3% of its budget into children’s television and this accounts for no more than 20% of the funding for any one project. The rest has to be found from commercial partners, with inevitable pressure on artistic values. The commercialisation of childhood takes many forms, some less obvious than others and all the more invidious for being hidden.



Penny Hay, Director,  
5x5x5=creativity

#### Key messages for arts organisations...

- Infiltrate schools instead of parachuting in on Friday afternoons.
- Take on the role of incubators for children's arts.
- The fundamental problem is that people think arts for children is inferior to arts for adults.
- Great work for children should just be called great work.
- By ignoring children, arts organisations are putting themselves on death row.

#### Key messages for funding agencies...

- Make sure that funding for children's arts is properly monitored and kept under review.
- Recognise that quality will suffer if children's film and television is forced to seek most of its finance from commercial sources.

#### Key message for everyone...

- Unless we recognise that children are the source of creative innovation, the arts will become dinosaurs.



Tony Reekie, Director,  
Imagine

## INCLUSIVITY



Danny Braverman

After lunch, **Danny Braverman** spoke about inclusivity in children's arts, drawing on his experience as a drama practitioner working with children with disabilities.

Engaging with children in special schools stimulates lateral thinking and creativity.

He often uses the story of The Emperor's New Clothes when working with autistic children. They think outside the box as the little boy does in the story.

1 in 7 children in the UK have some form of special needs. What is their cultural entitlement? What access do they have?

There are two kinds of barriers to access, physical (stairs) and attitudinal (stares). What are we doing to break these barriers down?

The UK is ahead of many other countries, but we're not there yet and the danger now is complacency.

Should autism-friendly performances become the norm, with special performances for people who don't wish to be disturbed?

There are many disabled artists working in the UK who can inspire and empower disabled children. The Paralympics opening ceremony will feature many disabled artists, giving them more prominence than they have ever known.

Something to be proud of. But how do we build on this to achieve total inclusion in the arts?



## SIR KEN ROBINSON – VIDEO ADDRESS



Sir Ken Robinson

**Sir Ken Robinson** began by saying that children’s access to the arts was a perennial issue in which progress often seems painfully slow.

*“Funding for work for children, addressed specifically to them, is at pitifully low levels, given their numbers and their status in our society.”*

He went on to speak about the commercialisation of children’s culture.

*“There’s no doubt that levels of exploitation of the tastes, appetites and impulses of children have gone far beyond where most of us feel comfortable... The commercial assault on young people is changing the perception of childhood.”*

He argued that childhood had become a time of unprecedented stress, referring to over-testing in schools and over-prescription for conditions such as ADHD.

*“A lot of children are being pathologised for being children.”*

He said that children should be thought of, not as half-adults, but as individuals in their own right.

*“It’s a question of persuading our cultural organisations that there’s more to be done than mediating their existing repertory through education programmes. There’s a lot to be done in providing programmes specifically for people in these different age groups.”*

The full video can be seen at [www.childrensarts.org.uk](http://www.childrensarts.org.uk).

## PUTTING CHILDREN FIRST



Philip Spedding,  
Director, Arts &  
Business

**Philip Spedding** chaired a final discussion, inviting contributions from delegates and members of a panel representing a range of interests from all parts of the UK – Aileen Campbell MSP, Peter Duncan, Rhian Hutchings, Mike Kenny and Aideen McGinley OBE.

He began with a question: How do we ensure that *Putting Children First* is not just another report – that it actually makes a difference?

Each of the panellists then took a few minutes to introduce themselves and share their thoughts.

**Aileen Campbell MSP**, Minister for Children & Young People, Scottish Government, spoke about *Creative Scotland*, the national arts funding body, whose aim is to provide creative opportunities for all. The arts, by helping to build imagination and self-esteem, are essential for the country’s economic future. The Scottish government is determined to position Scotland as one of the world’s most creative nations. Its policies aim to strengthen the rights of the child, to empower children and to put creativity at the heart of the curriculum.



Aileen Campbell MSP,  
Minister for Children &  
Young People, Scottish  
Government

**Peter Duncan** said that children were by far the most exciting audience to work for. They get involved and engaged – something we seem to lose in adulthood. He spoke of his time as Chief Scout and



Peter Duncan, actor,  
director, broadcaster

how the scouting movement came into being as a result of one person's vision and energy. *Blue Peter* too was one person's idea which took hold and grew. Both were examples of 'putting children first'.

**Rhian Hutchings** said that Wales has been through a very tough time with funding cuts. But there were still opportunities. She admitted to feeling disappointed that, in spite of her efforts, Welsh National Opera still has no work for children in its main programme. She suggested that education departments could be used by the leaders of arts organisations to avoid having to take children seriously as audiences in their own right.



Rhian Hutchings,  
Director, WNO MAX

**Mike Kenny** began by saying that to be human is to be creative. Creativity promotes empathy, which is an essential human quality. Targets need to be treated with caution – they can become ceilings. The focus must instead be on quality. Work must be directed at children, but we must bear in mind that they also need to be able to connect to the world outside of childhood. He offered York Theatre Royal as an example of how an arts organisation can make children integral to its audience all year round, not 'just for Christmas'.

**Aideen McGinley** spoke of her involvement with local government and *Children In Need* in Northern Ireland. The key is to get people talking to each other, enthusing the bureaucrats who in turn inspire the politicians. Get people to work together for the first time and then focus on keeping the momentum going.



Mike Kenny, playwright

Inviting questions and comments from delegates, Philip Spedding asked another question: So where is the problem? Is there a problem at all, if we're all doing so much?

Yes, there is a problem!

A delegate with a background in children's radio pointed out that the BBC has cut down on children's programming by 75% over the last few years, leaving none at all now for the under 7's.

Another delegate questioned the impact of moves to restrict advertising on children's television. What will take the place of commercial funding? Is there room for compromise? Where do you draw the line? Who decides on quality? If the gatekeepers thought children were the most important part of the equation, would we even be having this discussion?



Aideen McGinley,  
Chief Executive, Ilex,  
Northern Ireland

Aileen Campbell said that she didn't believe it was impossible to get funding to the right places. Government recognises that money spent in the early years makes savings later.

Philip Spedding asked another question: What is the best way to persuade governments to provide funding?

We need to provide strong economic arguments in order to secure necessary funding. We should join up with organisations outside the arts to strengthen our argument and make our voice heard.

Aideen McGinley said that we should speak the language of government, which is not always or only about money. We need to find passionate people and get them to work together to put the arts back on the agenda or risk losing a valuable part of our economy.

Aileen Campbell said that government responds to what employers say about the skills people need to find employment in today's economy. People need the capacity to learn and to reflect on what they

have learned, not just be able to pass exams.

A primary school headteacher said that schools should take more risks to prove that their efforts really do make a difference. Government needs to rely on more than just statistics and test results. Schools should work with other organisations to show that the arts do make a difference.

## MICHAEL MORPURGO OBE – GUEST SPEAKER



Michael Morpurgo  
OBE, author

The conference ended with a powerful and moving speech from one of our most popular and successful children's authors.

Illiteracy is the greatest threat to society. We have a right to free speech, to read and write, to think. Freedom of expression defines us. But that freedom is meaningless unless we know how to use it, how to express our thoughts, feelings and ideas.

20% of children are functionally illiterate. Many more have little or no experience of the arts, never go to a theatre to see a play or a gallery to see an exhibition. How do these children have freedom of expression?

We are not truly civilised until freedom of expression is universal. We have fought hard for these rights and the battle is not over yet.

He told three stories (because telling stories was what he did best).

A story about King Alfred's jewel, his most precious gift to his people, literacy.

A story about the closure of Kensal Rise library and how King Alfred's gift was lost.

A story about a librarian, a unicorn, a fire and the boy who helped her save the books.

## NEXT STEPS



Baroness Floella  
Benjamin

Action for Children's Arts is now planning a long-term campaign to persuade funding bodies and arts organisations to devote more of their resources to the production, performance, exhibition and broadcast of works of art for which children are the intended audience.

Our first step will be to establish a working group of **Children's Arts Champions** drawn from a wide range of sectors to help us achieve our aim of persuading the UK arts world to **Put Children First**.

**Baroness Floella Benjamin**, a patron of Action for Children's Arts, has already pledged her support and spoken in the House of Lords about the special importance that the arts have for children and the need for this to be reflected in the arts funding system.

To keep in touch with our campaign, go to [www.childrensarts.org.uk](http://www.childrensarts.org.uk).



The following organisations were represented at the conference by one or more people.

5x5x5=creativity	macrobert arts centre
Abracadabra	Magpie Dance
Academy of Trinity	National Theatre
Act Change	Natural Theatre
Adastra Creative	Oily Cart
AJTC Theatre	Opera North
Almeida Theatre	Oxford Brookes University
Ambassador Theatre Group	Oxford Playhouse
Arts Award, Trinity College London	Paper Balloon Theatre
Artswork	Photo Voice
Association of British Orchestras	Pied Piper Theatre Company
A Thousand Cranes	Playworks
Bath Festivals	Polka Theatre
BFI	Replay Productions
Birmingham Royal Ballet	Rose Bruford College
Birmingham Stage Company	Royal & Derngate Theatre
Bombastic Dance	Royal Opera House
Caboodle Arts Company	Royal Shakespeare Company
Caroline Sheldon Literary Agency	Sidney De Haan Centre for the Arts & Wellbeing
Children's Society	SOLT/TMA
Clwyd Theatr Cymru Theatre for Young People	Sound Start Group
Cultural Learning Alliance	Southbank Centre
Curious Minds	Sticky Fingers Arts
Curve Theatre	Suffolk Arts Link
Egmont	Tell Tale Hearts
Fevered Sleep	Templar Publishing
Globe Education	The Art Room
Glyndebourne Opera	The Prince's Foundation for Children and the Arts
Half Moon Theatre	Theatr Iolo
Hiccup Theatre	Theatre Alibi
Horse and Bamboo Theatre Company	Theatre Bristol
JCC	Theatre Hullabaloo
John Lyons Charity	Theatre Royal Bath
Licketyspit	Travelling Light
Lighthouse Poole	Tutti Frutti
Little Actors Theatre	Unicorn Theatre
Little Angel Theatre	University of Northampton
London Bubble	Wild Rumpus
London Children's Ballet	Writers Guild
M6 Theatre Company	Yellow Earth

