



Froebel Trust Podcast Transcript : Episode 18

September 2025

00:00:03:10 - 00:00:25:00

Colin Kelly

As human beings, we're at our best when we connect with each other. And that's the theme of this episode of the Froebel Trust podcast. It marks the publication of a new Froebel Trust pamphlet titled 'A Froebelian Approach to Connecting with Parents, Families, and Communities: A Starting Point.' You can download it right now by clicking the link in the podcast description.

00:00:25:02 - 00:00:49:24

Colin Kelly

I'm Colin Kelly, and I'm delighted to be joined by the co-authors of that pamphlet. Holli Williams is Head of Schools at Linden Tree Nursery Schools in London. And Rachna Joshi is an early childhood teacher, action researcher and consultant. Holli and Rachna are also Froebel Trust travelling tutors. And later, we'll hear from Fufy Demisse, a senior lecturer in early years at Sheffield Hallam University.

00:00:50:01 - 00:01:13:06

Colin Kelly

Now in this podcast and the pamphlet, the words 'family' and 'parent' are used interchangeably. We recognise every family is unique and as you'll hear in our discussion, includes individuals, same sex couples, adoptive parents, carers, and sometimes across multiple generations. Well, let's get started. And, Holli, perhaps you could take us back to the beginning. How did this pamphlet come to be?

00:01:13:08 - 00:01:16:18

Colin Kelly

And what made you decide it was something you had to get to work on?

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Holli Williams

I contacted Rachna, to see if she would like to write this pamphlet with me. Because I did feel that there was a gap in, specifically Froebelian practice around that connection and conversation with parents, families, communities. And I specifically wanted us to think about that diversity, families as individuals, the relationships that we have with all of our families.

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Holli Williams

And it's not generic, you know, it's very multifaceted. And I'm really thinking about how those principles could be woven through those relationships and the connections that educators have with families. But, you know, something in the pamphlet that we really focus on is the relationships. You know, relationships matter as a principle and unity and connectedness, and it really is about how they fit together.

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Holli Williams

And we use that as our starting point. If you like, to build on to then think about more widely how we can work closely and support educators, in practice on a daily basis with the interactions that they have with families. So it is a starting point because there's so much more that can be said and can be taught.

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Colin Kelly

Well, the thing I really was struck by was that it's full of real life examples and actually actionable steps, things that educators could do, things they could change to bring about those connections. And Holli, when you talk about connection, connection with parents, connection with families, connection with communities, what does that mean and why is it so important?

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Holli Williams

You have to really know your families in order to be able to connect with them in any way whatsoever. It has to be real. It has to be meaningful. And you have to understand the communities of people that you have around you. They have got their own life experiences that they're bringing, and it really is our job to be able to open up those conversations in meaningful ways and really get to know their child in meaningful ways, because only then can we support their child, can we develop those relationships and bonds with those children.

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Colin Kelly

When I think of my early childhood or my son's, I don't ever feel that I was connected to their nursery teachers. Or that when I was that age that they were connected to my parents. Why is it important that the educator is connected not just to the child, but the parents and the wider family?

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Colin Kelly

And even here, Rachna, you're talking about the community as well.

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Rachna Joshi

It's really, really important that there's that three way connection using Eleanor Goldschmeid's 'Triangle Of Trust'. Because when there is that connection, the children are

more able to trust the educator and the family member is more able to trust. And then there's that fertile ground for, learning and developing. That connection is fundamental to everything that we do as educators, because only in that way can we understand children, learn about children, learn about their context, learn about the family, and start where the learner is.

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Colin Kelly

And it's really interesting Holli, I mean, you mentioned the diversity and inclusion and there's reference made to that and there's reference to faith and race throughout the pamphlet. I thought it's interesting that actually Froebel gives us a sort of guide, into all of that, that actually, navigating some of these issues, which are very pertinent just now in our society.

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Colin Kelly

Actually, Froebel seems to have answers to all of that.

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Holli Williams

I think what's so great about the Froebelian approach and really keeps us, you know, wanting to understand more and wanting to know more and wanting to expand more and deepen our understanding is the fact that it is a principled approach. So it's not a method. There's not just one way to do it. So I can't, you know, necessarily imagine that Froebel at his time would be thinking that his approach would be used in this way.

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Holli Williams

But he's given us these tools to really be able to expand our understanding in a way that we can link to our work today. Froebel grew up in a time... that was very... he was very religious. And he talks about unity and the divine and God. And that's not necessarily something that we would focus on specifically now.

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Holli Williams

However, the principles of unity and connectedness, we can use that and we can focus on other areas, thinking about the similarities between one another. You know, we may not live in the same place, have the same backgrounds, we may not even have similar family structures, but we are people and we crave connection, and we want to be social with one another, and we want to get to know each other.

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Holli Williams

So how are we able to use that and harness that in a way to connect to our families? And I think, it's interesting what you were saying, that you didn't feel like your educators or early educators or even your teachers were connected to your family, because actually, I don't think mine were either. But I think in the early years, what we find is, particularly in our

settings, some of these parents that with us and their children come to us when they're six months old.

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Holli Williams

That is a really, really trusting thing that parents and families are trusting us with those tiny babies, the most precious thing in the world that trusting us with. You absolutely need to have that trust. And they need to know that you care about them and are going to care about them as much as they do.

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Holli Williams

And they stay with us from six months through to sometimes they go to school or preschool. So it's like three years that you have and these bonds that you're developing and you're watching these children grow, and it's a really intimate time that you're having with these families. That means that you get to experience a lot of these child's first experiences with them.

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Holli Williams

And when parents leave us some of the comments that they have, they see us like family members. Like that's how closely we work with some of these parents and some of these families, and having a tool that can give educators some of that language and to help them draw on the knowledge of those parents as well, is really key.

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Colin Kelly

Yeah. And Rachna, is the Froebelian approach, as it applies to this connection, does that differ from other practices and other feeds and other philosophies around education?

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Rachna Joshi

I think that the Froebelian approach influences quite a lot of other practices in education. More than we are aware of even. What he writes about is around unity, diversity and individuality. What I think he means by that is the, unity is finding that connection whilst also having that difference and that sense of uniqueness and that individuality and how it connects with those close to you and also the world around you.

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Rachna Joshi

So the Froebelian approach has connections across global contexts. There are connections with indigenous practices in New Zealand and Aboriginal practices in Australia. And kind of the weaving in of tribal practices in South Africa with those Froebelian kind of principles, practices and also things you might see, like the occupations with weaving and sewing, which are all interwoven into a lot of, yeah, global context.

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Rachna Joshi

When you're alongside a family member, a parent and talking about your child, their child's learning, you kind of going, 'hey, do you know what you're seeing there? That's that's actually schema. Have you noticed that at home?' And they might offer something like 'oh my goodness. Yes, I've seen my child, you know, staring at the washing machine going round and round.

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Rachna Joshi

Yes. That's a rotation that really interested in rotation.' 'Have we tried looking at, wheels? Have you tried going on roundabouts?' You know, just that being alongside someone sharing that practice together and building on what the family knows and trusting and knowing that the family is that first educator and valuing kind of everything that they know about their child and tying in what we know about child development and kind of working together.

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Colin Kelly

In the pamphlet there's a really nice example of a child who has two adopted mothers, one that is referred to as mummy, and the other one that's referred to as mama. And you talk about the educator making sure that the familial names are used and that the language is what the child recognises, and it takes into account those particular sets of circumstances.

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Colin Kelly

Do you think it's important when we're going for this connection, that the educator shares something of themselves? Because a connections is a two way thing, isn't it? So if I'm finding out all about you, do I need to give something of me?

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Holli Williams

I don't think you have to, but I think you can, because you are then showing that you understand a little bit about their community, and something about your sexuality isn't always or shouldn't be necessarily like stereotype or stereotypical, so it isn't always visible. I have a son. My son has a mummy and a mama. I'm a lesbian, and I would have no problem in sharing that with a two mum family.

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Holli Williams

In fact, I would embrace it because I would say, you know, I understand, not all of your experiences, because obviously I can't. However, you know, this part and I will make sure that what we do and how we showcase inclusivity and diversity within our setting should be at a very high level, and that everybody should feel comfortable in using terms that recognise and celebrate people's identities.

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Holli Williams

There's another little child at my son's nursery who also has a mummy and a mama, and they were asked as a group, the educators said 'Who do we know here who's got two

mummies?' thinking that they were being very inclusive. And all of the children pointed at the other child and said, 'oh, you know, they've got two mummies.'

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Holli Williams

And the child was distraught. They were like, no, no, no, no, no, I don't. I have a mummy and a mama. So although to you know, to us we would be like, well, you know, what we're doing is we're celebrating, you know, two mummies, two daddies. But what you're also doing there is inadvertently grouping people together in a way that you wouldn't necessarily say, 'who's got parents?'

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Holli Williams

So really thinking about it at that level, because for children that's what it is. It runs that deep for them. So I mean, you know, back to your earlier question, I don't think that it is absolutely necessary, but I think in order to make those connections, you might then want to share a part of your story.

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Colin Kelly

Okay. Holli I want to talk about equity, but I think before we get into that, language is important, isn't it? And it's quite interesting, there's a story in the pamphlet about this idea that, you know, if you call something a food bank, that terminology might put some people off, whereas if you call it a pantry, it draws people in and they might be more likely to take something from it.

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Colin Kelly

So tell me a little bit about the importance of language.

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Holli Williams

eah, absolutely. You're bringing in more of that home language as well. You know, people might have a pantry at home and they might share cooking at home. And it's how can we draw on that and link that. And actually that was a wonderful, pantry that was from a, a nursery in Falkirk. And I just thought it was such a great idea of being thinking more inclusively.

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Colin Kelly

And what else can educators be doing to make sure that every family has equity?

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Holli Williams

I think it's really about knowing what families are going to be joining you, understanding, you know, the communities of families around you. And what we have is we do get some knowledge about the children of families before they start with us. So if we can see that a child is coming to us and they have two mums, or they have two dads, or they're from a single parent family, or, you know, they've moved countries or whatever it is, we can start

to educate ourselves or draw on our past experiences, or talk to our colleagues to see if there is anything that we can do to prepare for that.

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Holli Williams

And then when the child and families come in, you know, being really open and respectful to their experiences, asking them questions about their lives and their families and really getting to know them to help with that transition period into the setting.

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Colin Kelly

I think anyone that has seen the difference these little things make, or maybe even felt them themselves, would want to do that. I guess the challenge is, okay, how do we get there, particularly when early years funding is expanding, ratios are expanding as well. Is there a pressure on educators? Are we asking rather a lot of them to do this and to get this right and how can we make time for these connections?

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Colin Kelly

Because I guess that's what it takes, isn't it?

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Rachna Joshi

I think it is about the time I think that's what you're saying, is that how do we find that time? But actually it takes time. I work in schools, so in September it's quite an intensive time because I need to get to know all these children and families. But it will take time. I won't know everything about them straightaway, just as with any relationship, it evolves.

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Rachna Joshi

But what you want to do is start out in the right way.

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Colin Kelly

Yeah. Holli, how about you?

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Holli Williams

I mean, we we're a private day nursery. You know we're open from 8am until 6.30pm, 51 weeks of the year. So time starved is definitely something that we are. But yeah, absolutely. I agree with everything that Rachna said, you know, really thinking about that settling in process that we have at our setting, how can we harness that time and use it really productively to genuinely get to know these families and thinking individually about your families.

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Holli Williams

You know, a family who is settling their third child with you, you've probably got more of an idea about them and their experiences because you've already built up that relationships with their families. So you approach that differently. Whereas a brand new family who's bringing their child to you for the very first time, who may have come and looked around the setting months before with different staff members around who might be sharing, you know, a little bit of anxiety really approaching that with empathy and understanding.

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Holli Williams

And although we can be very experienced, we shouldn't let that experience get in the way of this family's very, very first time stepping into the nursery.

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Colin Kelly

And so when you're getting to know these families, tell me a little bit about, I mean, I guess they might get shown round, there might be a visit, there might be a conversation. You get that, oh, well, it's mummy and mama or, you know, the they're attached. This little toy rabbit called, you know, Fluuffles or whatever. Does that get written down and then shared among the staff, or is it just in somebody's head like, how much time does it take?

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Colin Kelly

How long's a piece of string...

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Holli Williams

I think the initial stuff, you know, I mean, we touched on some of it in the pamphlet around 'All About Me' forms, you know, starting points, telling us all of that important, fundamental stuff. Who is in your family? Who is in your house? Do you have any pets? You know, have you relocated here? Are there any other special people we should know about?

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Holli Williams

Is there a 'Fluffles' that we need to make sure is always at sleep time, you know, always goes in the bag at the end of the day, things like that. Yes, they're all written down. I mean, we use digital, online, learning journals, which information is all collated and then shared amongst the team. But you generally will have a key person.

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Holli Williams

Settings will use a key person approach. Some settings will assign a key person beforehand, and it's that key person's responsibility to make sure they are developing those relationships. Or they will wait and see if a child gravitates towards a particular person, develops those relationships more naturally, and then they will become, you know, become their key person. And that is the person that families are kind of pointed at, if you like, to know that child specifically. It's the time that you take, but you have to want to. You have to have that desire to develop those relationships with the families and the children that come in, because otherwise, you know, what's the

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Holli Williams

point? We're a very caring profession, and these children genuinely matter to us. That's where it really comes from, that desire to form that connection.

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Colin Kelly

So you said you have to want to now you're both working in busy, busy settings. Is the time there then for those that want it? Or do you think there might be people listening to this who would think, well, that sounds great, I'd love to take that time, but I'm not given that time.

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Rachna Joshi

I just don't think you can do your job as an educator if you don't spend the time to know the children, because that's where you're teaching from. You observe the children, you get to know them, you interact with them, and that's supporting it and extending. You have to know the children really well to be able to effectively teach.

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Holli Williams

Yeah, I 100% agree. And you have to have the support processes in place within your setting to make that happen. And it's the culture that you create and the team that you have and where we are, you know, some of our children are only in two days a week, some children five days a week. So it's like how much time you make sure you're spending with those children who are only in two days a week and, and do you know them as well?

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Holli Williams

And if you don't, how can you get to know them more? And you really need to have that support processes around and the management team around who also make sure that that is a key part of the day to day.

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Colin Kelly

Yeah. And of course, we've acknowledged the pressure on staff and settings, but we also need to talk about the pressure on families too.

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Holli Williams

Yeah. Yeah, absolutely. And you know, as educators we might not recognise all of the, the pressure that families are under. Many families that I encounter, including myself, you know, moved away from local support networks or extended family or grandparents are still working. You know, my parents are still working as the retirement age is increased, and many family members are expected to work full time.

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Holli Williams

Often there's a lot of pressure and information via social media, which can be very overwhelming. So relying on settings is often the only option. And then the relationships therefore that are forming between that educator and that parent and that child, are hugely valued by families. And they start to see these people as an extension of their own family unit.

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Holli Williams

I know I do with my son's key person.

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Colin Kelly

And of course, as human beings, we've got certain I suppose, disciplines and activities that help us connect, help us cross boundaries. Cooking is one that you mention in the pamphlet, and Rachna I know you're particularly particularly interested in connections through music, and that's really fundamental to the Froebel approach, isn't it?

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Rachna Joshi

Yeah. So I suppose music in the way of singing and songs, it was absolutely, really important to Froebel He wrote the mother songs, which were hugely, hugely important to kind of encompass all his work, kind of in one, I suppose, one book. Actually, when you sing with children in your setting, it actually supports educators' well-being as well.

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Rachna Joshi

It develops a connection to the children. But also, you know, there's research that says that when we sing, our heartbeats synchronise and there's that kind of physiological connection that happens as well. And alongside that, there's that kind of movement that comes naturally with music and singing. That's something that Froebel kind of observes in his writing about how children move their limbs and the connection between the limbs and the finger rhymes and the movement games, and how we kind of move with each other and move around each other. Ways to include families with that

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Rachna Joshi

is finding perhaps songs that are sung at home or kind of making those connections between important songs or important music or lullabies that was sung as a child and just kind of being able to bridge that connection between home and school, or home and setting.

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Holli Williams

I think it comes back to how well do you know your families?

So we've had families who, can do Origami and we're like, 'well come in and show us how to do origami and let's do it with children!' You know, origami, paper folding. It's a Froebelian

occupation, you know, linking it all together with our curriculum. And then we've had we have, some, parents who are a pilot.

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Holli Williams

So they've come in and they've shown us all about the planes, and they're talking to us about planes. And then if we have families who speak different languages, if they feel comfortable to come in and read stories in different languages and also sing in different languages, then that broadens our understanding and also gives the other children a little taste in to these are the children and families' worlds, you know, where do they come from?

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Holli Williams

What do those stories and what do those songs really mean to them? So yes, it really does depend on the families that you have. So it doesn't have to be huge. When we're thinking about where are we starting from, you don't have to think massive. You really just have to think about what is going on with that child right now, and how can I support this connection with this family.

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Rachna Joshi

And do you know as well I was thinking about the child. There's always a child in the setting that, never joins in with the singing, but then the parents come and tell us, 'you know, they sing all these songs at home', and I'm like, 'but they never join in. When we act, when we're, you know, when we sing.'

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Rachna Joshi

I never hear them singing, but they're obviously, you know, taking something in and they're probably there's something around. I think there's something around songs and singing that just kind of stays with, with, with everyone. I suppose.

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Colin Kelly

I'm quite interested in this idea of once we've made the connection, these deep connections, what happens when life comes along and these connections change? The pamphlet refers to people from the traveling communities. We're in a world where people sometimes have to leave the country that they're from, and they'll come to this country for a little while and then they might go home.

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Colin Kelly

If we've made these deeper connections, does it hurt more when people then have to leave?

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Holli Williams

Yes, but in a good way. Because, just because it's difficult doesn't mean that you shouldn't then do it. It's almost like, what's that saying? 'Better to have loved and to have lost it than to have never loved at all.' And these families, in that moment, you're making a difference. You're making a difference to that family. And you're making a difference to that child.

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Holli Williams

And you can't possibly understand some of the trauma that these families have been through. But what you can do is you can offer them that safe space, and you can show them that you are genuinely open to listening to them and to supporting them in the best way that you can. If you're unsure how to do that, then you need to go and find a way to do, you need to go and seek out, whether it be from your management team, whether it be from the local authority, you know there are avenues that you can go to to find that support.

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Holli Williams

Building bonds with families is a really, really special thing. They're letting you into that world, really. And if they allow you to do so, then it's a really, really precious and wonderful job that you have, and we shouldn't take that for granted. Childhood lasts a lifetime. Childhood is the spring time of life. You know all of those things. If you can make a difference, just one child and one family, well, then you have done an excellent job.

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Colin Kelly

And what about where children involved in complex situations or big changes at home? Have you any advice about how settings can make sure they get things right during these times?

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Holli Williams

I think what I was thinking about when you were asking that question was, what is the stability and consistency for that child and that family? And what what are we doing, and how are we making sure that when that child is coming into our nursery or our setting, that they are safe and that they have consistency of routine and that they are not given anything or thrown into any situations or circumstances that might be too difficult for them to handle.

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Colin Kelly

Yes, Rachna please go ahead.

00:25:01:00 - 00:25:27:12

Rachna Joshi

We as educators need to know what we're observing in children's play. In children's play, their children might be working out a lot of difficult feelings. In Tina Bruce's '12 Features of Play', one of the features is that, children wallow in their feelings and thoughts and ideas and some of these things that we might be seeing, in children's interactions in their play, might be something that is going on for them at home.

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Rachna Joshi

And so we need to be there to just support and guide them as best we can.

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Holli Williams

And I also just add to that if there are specific difficult circumstances and, you know, if, if key people or management need to go to child protection cases, making sure that those educators are supported in the setting as well, because that can be really difficult. You know, talking about tough circumstances and tough situations. Often we have very little control in those situations. So making sure that educators are supported as well.

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Colin Kelly

Rachna, if there's somebody listening and they're reflecting on their own situation and they feel, look, our relationships are not great, we're not doing enough. We're not listening, we're not observing. We're not we're not building connections. And they want to get better. Where would you suggest they start?

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Rachna Joshi

First, I would start with a bit of self-reflection and being kind of really open and honest with yourself about, what is actually going on with my practice? And what's going on with the way I'm what I'm doing, what I'm doing? I would think about my own relationships and how I might maintain my own relationships, and how I can bring that into the work that I do.

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Rachna Joshi

And thinking about perhaps if there's biases that are kind of unconsciously framing your relationships, trying to find ways to counter those, and questioning why something is making you feel a certain way. So you've started kind of with yourself and then looking at kind of, okay, how am I then, interacting with others? And that includes children and their families and perhaps my colleagues or other professionals.

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Rachna Joshi

I think I said this before, but that is something that we as humans are driven to do. We are driven to connect with others. So really building on those drives that we have and finding ways to start where the children and families are at.

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Colin Kelly

Yeah, I mean, we certainly are driven to connect with each other. I'm wondering, though, sometimes with the normal ups and downs of of life and busy periods at work, I guess educators need to be really honest about the support that they might need so that they can show up every day, be at their best, and make these connections.

00:27:41:24 - 00:28:05:15

Rachna Joshi

Yeah, absolutely. So what Froebel talks about is supporting educators to be really self-aware. And when educators are really aware of themselves, they're able to know what might be difficult and what they might need more support with. And this I'm not trying to romanticise working with children and connecting with families. There is a reality that is really difficult. Relationships aren't easy.

00:28:05:17 - 00:28:28:08

Rachna Joshi

There can be tension between them, but we then draw on our colleagues, we draw on our professional knowledge. We draw on what we can do and what we feel kind of hopeful about. And starting with that. I think a Froebelian approach is a hopeful and positive approach. And so we have to frame ourselves in looking for the good things.

00:28:28:10 - 00:28:35:23

Colin Kelly

Oh, that's a nice way of looking at it. And, Holli, I think you want to come in. There's a story in the pamphlet that I know you're keen to mention.

00:28:36:00 - 00:28:56:16

Holli Williams

In the pamphlet, we talk about understanding different communities. And actually, you know what the educators did is they went to the community and they said, 'how can we support you? What can we do better? How can we help you?' And sometimes that can be difficult depending on you know, you don't know what you're going to get back. But asking the community or asking your families, what can we do better?

00:28:56:18 - 00:29:01:16

Holli Williams

How can we involve you more? Could be a place to just really just get a little bit of feedback.

00:29:01:18 - 00:29:10:04

Colin Kelly

Well, I'd like to ask you both thinking about this podcast and this pamphlet. What impact do you hope that it has?

00:29:10:06 - 00:29:43:07

Rachna Joshi

So I think there's a few things. I think first, we acknowledge that every setting is different and so connecting with families and the community is going to look different for every setting, because it needs to be meaningful and contextual to that space and that time because it's going to change. So all of these examples in the pamphlet are starting points to build upon and draw upon, using that Froebelian approach as that kind of underpinning of how

00:29:43:07 - 00:30:10:24

Rachna Joshi

we do what we do. And also when we work with children and their families, we are finding more about children's first hand experiences. And those first hand experiences, help us to do our job as educators, to help teaching change and help with learning. I hope that educators take this as, not a one size fits all approach, but as a way to think about and reflect on what they do and how they can support their family in their community.

00:30:11:01 - 00:30:13:07

Colin Kelly

And Holli the same to you. What's your hope?

00:30:13:09 - 00:30:48:08

Holli Williams

Well, I think that often the Froebelian principles are focused on the development and learning of young children. But what I'm hoping is that educators can harness these principles, as shown in this pamphlet, in a broader sense. So by understanding that unity and connectedness and those positive relationships as a vehicle to connect with all types of families. So to demonstrate the relevance of the principles today when considering diverse and varied family structures across cultures and societies, where the term family can be made up differently and certainly means something different today than it did when Froebel was alive.

00:30:48:10 - 00:30:57:20

Colin Kelly

Yes, absolutely. And Rachna I suppose maybe a good place to end then, if this is a starting point, what's next?

00:30:57:22 - 00:31:16:01

Rachna Joshi

It's all dependent on context. And that's the great thing about the Froebelian approach is because there isn't a one size fits all. It's what is right for our community, what's right for our children, what's right for our family. And it's up to the educators almost to kind of make it their own.

00:31:16:03 - 00:31:41:02

Colin Kelly

Yes, well, that's the challenge. And I'm sure you'll both be watching closely to see how practitioners do exactly that. Well, now to conclude our podcast, let's hear from Fufy Demissie, senior lecturer in early years at Sheffield Hallam University. Fufy is also Research and Knowledge Exchange Lead at the Early Years Community Research Centre, which has a nursery, and is also attached to the university.

00:31:41:04 - 00:32:04:09

Colin Kelly

And Fufy tells us about how the Froebelian principles of unity and connectedness referenced through Rachna and Holli's discussion just now, and the connections with parents and families are central to the nursery's ethos. Fufy explains how they've taken this one step further and put parents at the heart of their work to make a significant impact on families in areas of deprivation.

00:32:04:11 - 00:32:18:13

Colin Kelly

And I asked Fufy to begin our discussion by telling me a bit about her understanding of dialogic pedagogies and professional learning in the early years, and where she thinks relationships and connections fit into all of that.

00:32:18:15 - 00:32:59:13

Fufy Demissie

So in my role as research and knowledge exchange lead at the Early Years Community Research Centre, which is part of Sheffield Hallam University, I work a lot at the nursery, but the nursery is a special place that's really underpinned by the idea of relationships. So in fact, our catchphrase is 'changing lives through relationships.' When we initially started the nursery, it was primarily focused on improving children's outcomes because it's located in an area of disadvantage, where children didn't have any nursery provision until they were three years old and started accessing nursery provision

00:32:59:13 - 00:33:22:00

Fufy Demissie

So from the age of 0 to 3, they had no access to nursery facilities. So the nursery was initially open to meet that need, the children's needs, access to a high quality curriculum. But, it soon transpired that actually the majority of our work was going to be with the parents and families and the community. Because of the kind of area it is

00:33:22:00 - 00:33:46:09

Fufy Demissie

there were a lot of, social isolation, poverty and kind of inability to work out and access the system, how things work, where to go, you know, which agency to contact for this need or that need. So that's what we were faced with when we opened the nursery. So in fact, that probably has become the primary goal actually, is actually to work with the parents so they're better able to support, their children.

00:33:46:11 - 00:34:11:14

Fufy Demissie

And having said that, we don't work in the traditional way with parents. The parents are not just enrolled. They're not kind of told what's best for them. It's very much designed based on the co-design principles. So everything that we do is based on consultation, genuine, authentic consultation with parents. So that co-design element is really important.

00:34:11:16 - 00:34:21:22

Colin Kelly

Wow. So it's really taking connecting with parents and families to the next step and moving to, I guess, co-production with parents. How does that work?

00:34:21:24 - 00:34:43:10

Fufy Demissie

So some of the things that we have in our nursery is we do home visits, we have training courses and information for parents. We have community events and trips. For example, we

go camping every year with the families in the summer. We have this policy of meeting immediate need so parents, families feel they can walk in and the immediate need is addressed.

00:34:43:10 - 00:35:01:23

Fufy Demissie

The right place is found for them. You know where they can go, who they can talk to. We find that when that's met, actually, it enables parents to kind of have better relationships with their children because they're happier settled, aren't they? But the two key things that we do, we think are very unique, the first one is The Breakfast Club.

00:35:02:00 - 00:35:26:10

Fufy Demissie

The Breakfast Club was started by the parents and it's for the parents, so it runs once a week. It's the parents that run it. And any parent, even parents whose children have long gone from the nursery, they know it's there, so they come every week and that's become a real kind of space for not just having breakfast, obviously, but forming relationships, social connections with each other and also the group.

00:35:26:15 - 00:35:45:19

Fufy Demissie

Some members of the group now have started their own community interest group called 'You, Me and Us.' So through that they they're going to apply for grants. You could call it empowering parents. People who are very skilled and knowledgeable, but they don't have the confidence to kind of find their way around things. So actually this has given them a huge confidence.

00:35:45:21 - 00:35:59:03

Colin Kelly

It's great to have that holistic approach to supporting parents, but I'd imagine that there needs to be a huge amount of trust in order for families to engage. So why do you think parents feel that they can trust the setting?

00:35:59:05 - 00:36:24:23

Fufy Demissie

There's a lot of trust and relationships have been built up over the years. And a key factor in that is, the training that all the practitioners have in trauma informed practice. Trauma informed practice us about us recognising that individuals have needs and kind of difficult life, adverse life, early childhood experiences or even recent experiences that needs a relational approach to supporting them.

00:36:25:00 - 00:36:46:16

Fufy Demissie

So that is used with the parents. And the practitioners also use it with the children. So that informs our philosophy, trauma informed practices. So as my colleague Sally Pearce, who started this whole nursery, says, people never say to parents, what's wrong with you? They always say to them, what's happened to you? Relationships are absolutely key to everything we do.

00:36:46:16 - 00:36:51:14

Fufy Demissie

Building trust between parents, families and practitioners and children.

00:36:51:16 - 00:37:15:21

Colin Kelly

Yeah, and that's really important, isn't it? Giving parents the space to share their experiences and getting to know the family's lived experiences that have got them where they are. And starting from that point, I guess that goes back to what Rachna and Holli was saying about the importance of really knowing your families. I think this is a really a great example of knowing them in order to connect with them and starting from where they are.

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Colin Kelly

So are there any tools that practitioners can use to help with all of this?

00:37:21:07 - 00:37:44:24

Fufy Demissie

We use this tool called relationship mapping. So, the practitioners are trained in evaluating, they're a kind of a series of concentric circles. They put every child in a separate sort of concentric circle, and they map how close they feel to that child and how, you know, further away that child feels in terms of that connection to that, to that child.

00:37:45:09 - 00:38:04:15

Fufy Demissie

And then once they've kind of evaluated that, they start planning steps on how to bring that child into a bit closer to the circle. But they don't do that just with the children. They do it with the parents as well. So there's an active strategy of building these relationships, identifying who's out on the periphery of the circle and how do we bring them back in.

00:38:04:15 - 00:38:25:22

Fufy Demissie

So the relationship mapping was developed by Sally Pearce, who's that head of the UCIRC. And it stems from the trauma informed practice. And we feel that that has been the major kind of way into building those strong relationships, thus enabling parents and families to build a confidence and better able to support the children.

00:38:25:24 - 00:38:38:23

Colin Kelly

And what would you say then are the sort of keys to building these good relationships and bringing people in from the periphery? How can people listening to this bring some of what you've described into their setting?

00:38:39:00 - 00:39:04:05

Fufy Demissie

Yeah. So we work, within the overarching framework of the capabilities approach. I don't know if people are familiar with that. The capabilities approach was developed to kind of

theorise what people need to thrive and flourish. So the key elements of that are valuing differences, social justice, living a meaningful life, freedom to achieve well and meaningful opportunities in life.

00:39:04:08 - 00:39:23:09

Fufy Demissie

So we kind of think about what we're trying to do under that overarching kind of set of ideas, but what everyone comes and says. So how do you do it? Can you replicate it in another context? Can you do it in that context? But actually, we always say, no, you can't replicate it because every context is different.

00:39:23:11 - 00:39:49:08

Fufy Demissie

But what you could look at is how we work. The principles of how we approach things. So that idea of whatever your context is or whatever you're trying to do, the idea of building trusted relationships, non judgmental relationship with parents, and genuinely involving them in the decisions that you're taking. We feel that is the most important step. That's what can be if you can replicate it.

00:39:49:08 - 00:40:17:15

Fufy Demissie

And having a trusted people engaging open door policy and building those relationships through in our case, we've done it through The Breakfast Club and through the relationship mapping tool to get to know the parents really well. So there isn't a magic formula. There isn't a magic bullet. The way we train practitioners in the trauma informed practice is a very non-judgmental, open, accepting, approach to relationships,

00:40:17:17 - 00:40:28:21

Fufy Demissie

may have had a role in it or not, we don't know. But we think that it prepares you to be non-judgmental and open minded and not rush to judgment.

00:40:28:23 - 00:40:53:23

Colin Kelly

So what about then maybe a parent or carer who doesn't want that closer relationship, or they don't think they want it, and maybe they think they're quite happy on the periphery?

00:40:54:00 - 00:41:18:00

Fufy Demissie

Yeah. We've got parents like that. Yeah. Parents come to us, rather than us going and sort of chasing and saying, you must come to this, you must come to that. The Breakfast Club is all voluntary. We tell them it's there if they would like to come. But there is a space for every kind of parent - the one who want to be involved, and the ones who are just happy to drop off their kids and go back and pick them up at the end of the day.

00:41:18:16 - 00:41:30:01

Colin Kelly

And from what you've been saying, it sounds as if you're what you're doing hasn't been set up explicitly to be Froebelian But it sounds as if many of the principles are there anyway.

00:41:30:15 - 00:42:02:16

Fufy Demissie

Absolutely. Particularly relationships is kind of the underpinning foundation of the whole nursery. So we often we think we have a very strong starting point to develop other aspect of Froebelian practice. So we're actually doing the course, the modules at the moment. So that's really kind of we're seeing that the, the possibilities of strengthening other elements of, of our, practice, nature play, you know, just lifting it up the quality of those experiences for children.

00:42:02:21 - 00:42:22:15

Fufy Demissie

So we'll do this camping trip, for example, being out in nature. So our curriculum might not be very obviously nature based, but we do things with the parents and families to kind of develop those habits or ways of being in the world that, you know, some people might take for granted, but it can be completely alien to a lot of families.

00:42:22:15 - 00:42:47:10

Fufy Demissie

So this holistic way we approach the education curriculum for children by involving parents and families, kind of has elements of Froebelian practice. Like I say the nature and the importance of of kind of connectedness. We're all connected in that nursery, that unity idea of unity and connectedness. It's just the way we work with that necessary bit of work, the using connected and how we relate to parents.

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Fufy Demissie

So what I'm saying is, I guess, is that the Froebelian elements might not be as obvious in the day to day practice as it might be in a nursery school. But, you know, the way we operate, the way we work with parents, you can see some of those principles at work.

00:43:02:24 - 00:43:27:01

Colin Kelly

I need to ask you about some of the challenges and obstacles that get in the way of these relationships and meaningful connections. Holli and Rachna spoke earlier about the demands on educators. Increasing ratios, time. I suppose it's a case of where do you start? What advice would you give Fufy? Where do you think educators should be focusing?

00:43:27:03 - 00:43:54:18

Fufy Demissie

We know what the nursery context is like at the moment. We know is really challenging funding and finance and everything, and that's all major challenges. But for people who are interested in this kind of way of working, probably the biggest challenge is mindset. It's actually going back and actually really analysing the quality of relationships with parents and addressing that. Our children spend nine months with us. It's a very, very, very short time. They're with the parents all the time, forever.

00:43:54:18 - 00:44:31:23

Fufy Demissie

So they are the biggest influences. So supporting parents, involving them, giving them a voice, empowering them actually means you're indirectly impacting the child in a much more long term basis. So publicising, you know, campaigning, championing for the role of parents and carers in children's learning and development is absolutely fundamental for child development. I would really recommend people look at the relationship mapping tool. We've trialled that with with other settings and people found it as a fantastic reflective tool about their relationships and engagement, not just with the children but also with the parents.

00:44:32:04 - 00:44:46:10

Fufy Demissie

It's just one piece of paper with lots of concentric circles. It looks very simple, but is very powerful in getting people to notice and reflect and maybe change the way they do some things to develop a strong relationship with parents.

00:44:46:12 - 00:45:00:16

Colin Kelly

That's great, and we'll be sure to include a link to that relationship mapping tool in the description for this episode. Well, finally, I guess I'd like to ask what impact you're hoping that this pamphlet will have on educators and children.

00:45:00:18 - 00:45:14:14

Fufy Demissie

Parents and practitioners will be more aware of the importance of the role of the parents and how it can impact on children's learning and development, and what strategies they might use to develop their practice.

00:45:14:16 - 00:45:39:01

Colin Kelly

Well, that's Fufy Demissie Senior lecturer in early years at Sheffield Hallam University. Thanks to Fufy joining me on this episode and my guests from early on. Holli Williams, Head of Schools at Linden Tree Nursery Schools in London. And Rachna Joshi, early childhood teacher, action researcher and consultant. Now, if you haven't already, be sure to download the Froebel Trust pamphlet that Holli and Rachna co-authored.

00:45:39:03 - 00:46:05:05

Colin Kelly

It's called 'A Froebelian Approach to Connecting with Parents, Families, and Communities: A Starting Point' and you can access that via the podcast description along with links to a full transcript, more details on our guests, and additional resources. And that's also all available via the podcast section on the Froebel Trust website. And that's at www.froebel.org.uk. Thank you very much for listening.

00:46:05:05 - 00:46:10:15

Colin Kelly

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