



Media Release

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Early years key to promoting multilingualism and a tolerant society

Young children should be brought up in a learning environment where multilingualism is considered the norm according to professionals writing in *Children in Europe* magazine, published this week by Children in Scotland.

Bronwen Cohen, chief executive of Children in Scotland, said: "Language promotion policies are seldom aimed at young children, although it is precisely this age group that is most open to different languages."

"Children perceive at an early age that languages are valued differently and that hierarchies between languages and the people that speak them exist. A learning environment that fails to acknowledge and value a child's so-called first language can lead them to feel that their ability to speak more than one language is a disadvantage rather than an advantage."

This week saw the closing date for responses to the Scottish Executive's draft Strategy for Scotland's languages. A revised strategy is expected to be published by the Executive at the end of this month. Children in Scotland welcomes the Executive's commitment to valuing multilingualism set out in the strategy, but believes Scotland is missing the chance to ensure positive attitudes to indigenous, minority and migrant languages are encouraged and supported through work with very young children.

Bronwen Cohen said: "To consciously promote and encourage language skill development, professionals, especially those working in the early years need to know more about how children acquire and develop language."

In the new issue of *Children in Europe*, Turkish writer and practitioner Serap Sikcan calls for the diverse languages spoken by young children to be made visible and audible in nursery environments.

She says: "If children feel comfortable with diversity they can begin to reflect critically about what is fair and unfair, about prejudices and injustice. An anti-bias approach invites all children to recognise inequity and to fight it together."

Serap Sikcan will be speaking at a Children in Europe conference in Edinburgh on June 1, "In My own words: services for young children in a multilingual society". She and other speakers will be arguing that more training and support should be provided for teachers, especially those working with young children, to ensure knowledge of more than one language, whatever it be, is valued.

Notes for editors:

- **Children in Scotland**

Children in Scotland is Scotland's national children's agency, bringing together voluntary, statutory and professional organisations and individuals to improve the lives of Scotland's children and their families.

- **Children in Europe**

"In my own words: services for children in a multilingual society", *Children in Europe* magazine issue 12, is published 23 March 2007.

Children in Europe is a joint publication by a network of magazines in 11 languages across Europe. The focus is on services for and work with children from birth to ten and their families. The English language issue of the magazine is published by Children in Scotland simultaneously in eight languages twice a year, in March and September.

www.childrenineurope.org

An international conference with the same title will be held in Edinburgh on 1 June.

A pre-conference seminar with Australian early years specialist Dr Priscilla Clarke will be held on 31 May.

www.childreninscotland.org.uk/eur

Language diversity in Scotland

Language learning is recognised today as important for many reasons: for identity, for culture, and for economic success. But these same reasons put different languages and those who speak them into different hierarchies.

In the UK, languages such as Gaelic and Welsh are considered culturally valuable although often perceived as of limited economic worth. At school, children learn languages considered to have economic value – in England the proposed inclusion in the curriculum of Arabic, Mandarin and Urdu alongside French, German and Spanish has met with praise from the business organisation the Confederation of British Industry, and has been welcomed by others as contributing to social cohesion in an increasingly linguistically diverse country.

Scotland has 137 languages spoken by its residents, but many of those languages are often not seen as having cultural or economic value. It is easy for those who speak such languages to feel devalued and this is especially the case for children.

For more information contact Chris Small-
csmall@childreninscotland.co.uk / Tel 0131 222 2419
or Sarah Burton sburton@childreninscotland.org.uk / Tel 0131 222 2411