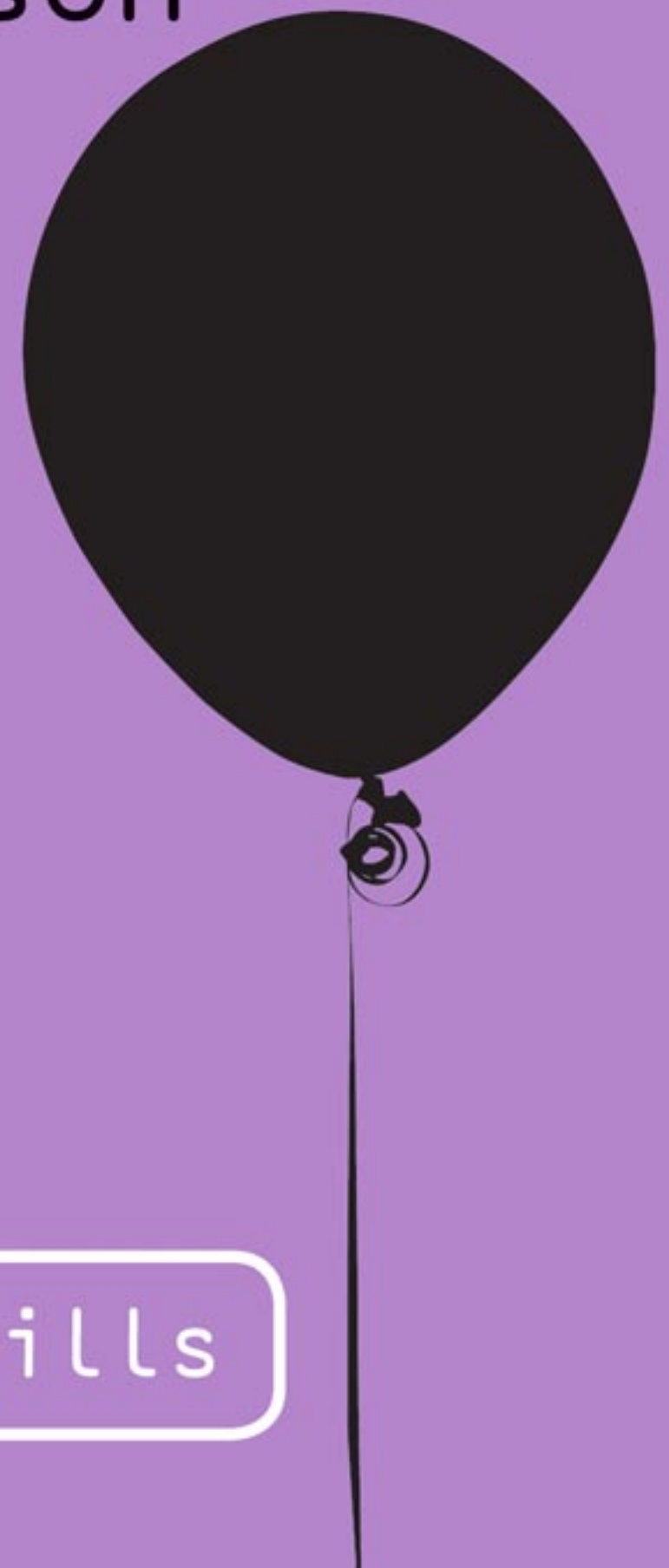


Studying Childhood and Early Childhood

A Guide for Students

Second Edition

Kay Sambell, Mel Gibson
and Sue Miller



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In memory of Naomi

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About the Authors

Professor Kay Sambell has 20 years' experience of teaching students about childhood at university level. She currently works at Northumbria University, where she contributes to the BA Joint Honours degree in Childhood Studies. She has published widely: both in her specialist research area (children's literature), and on her research into students' perspectives of innovative assessment. In 2002 Kay was awarded a National Teaching Fellowship by the Higher Education Funding Council for her work on assessment. She is a well-known speaker, nationally and internationally, on ways of promoting and enhancing student learning. Recently she directed a large-scale government-funded initiative aimed at improving academic literacy in Childhood Studies (the MEDAL project) and is Director of Assessment for Learning Enhancement in Northumbria University's Centre for Excellence in Assessment for Learning.

Dr Mel Gibson has, in collaboration with Kay Sambell, worked on a number of teaching and learning projects including the MEDAL project. She currently works at Northumbria University, contributing to Childhood Studies. Also a National Teaching Fellow, an award won in relation to her innovative work on bringing the 'real world' into the classroom, Mel specializes in research and teaching around young people and media. She is also a well known speaker and consultant regarding visual literacy in picture books, comics and other media. Mel has, for over 15 years, regularly advised libraries, schools and other organizations on young people, reading and visual texts. Mel has published widely in these areas for both professional and academic journals.

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workforce reform issues this entails and has worked in local authorities as a teacher, senior educational psychologist, Children's Services manager and commissioner. She led on the delivery of SureStart Children's Centres in Newcastle and has had 30 years experience of working with maintained, voluntary and private providers of services for children and families. For six years she was a Senior Lecturer at Northumbria University, where she helped to develop and then went on to run the BA Joint Honours degree in Care and Education (Early Years).

Introduction

How to use this book

Here we explain what our book is for, and what it can and can't do for you. It is designed to provide students studying Childhood Studies (CS) and Early Childhood Studies (ECS) in higher education with the means to do better, to be more successful and to work towards achieving the learning outcomes of their courses with greater confidence and insight. We think you'll benefit most if you go through the chapters from start to finish, rather than just dipping into the book. Chapters 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 are all designed to help you approach your assignments productively, by focusing on the various interrelated processes and stages of learning about childhood. Although we have, for ease of reading, teased them out into a number of different 'phases' – making the most of lectures and course materials by becoming an active learner who gets to grips with key course themes; tackling academic reading; producing a good assignment, dissertation or research project; and learning off-campus – they are, in fact, all interwoven.

These chapters are full of examples and illustrative material drawn from real courses, but you will need to use these alongside the actual material being studied on your particular course. The idea is that the examples will help you to understand your tutors' expectations, and also help you to develop strategies for tackling your course's demands. In coming to understand the key themes, issues and questions posed on your specific course, you will improve how you approach learning, and do better in your assignments.

The final chapter focuses attention on what you might want to do after your degree finishes. Thinking ahead can help you make good choices when it comes to, say, selecting topics and settings for an independent study or picking research observation visits, so reading the final chapter at the outset of your course will help you ensure that you don't close any doors for yourself

when it comes to getting your dream job. The final chapter also sets out practical guidance which is designed to help take you through the process of applying for jobs and further study opportunities, and you will probably want to refer to it predominantly in your final year when you will need to make the most of your formal applications. Three years seems a long time at the start of a course, but it soon flies by, and former graduates often say they wished they had started thinking about possible opportunities and using their degree and vacation work to build up relevant experience a lot earlier than they did. This is your chance to learn from their experience, as you'll hear from these 'old hands' throughout the book, who will offer you 'insider information' about how to do well. You'll get some ideas for things you can put into action, from places to start looking for work to ways of presenting what you have learned on your course. In addition, you will hear what some previous students are doing now, what it entails, and how they got to where they wanted to be.

To summarize, then, this book should help you make the most of your time at university by helping you see the point of the degree you are studying and identifying what tutors are aiming to do in creating the courses they have. The book provides you with a set of questions to ask yourself about the degree and what you want to get out of it. These will help you 'tune in' to CS and ECS, in terms of key themes and issues, effective approaches to study, achieving your best in assessment, using your course to build up your curriculum vitae, and selling yourself well in the jobs market.

Why do you need this student guide for studying CS/ECS?

You might be wondering why we don't just outline the content of CS/ECS courses and provide you with a summary of the major points and information you need to know to pass well. One thing is that CS/ECS, like all degrees, just cannot be simplified in that way. Another reason is the rate of change in childhood policy and practice. Further, CS/ECS is quickly becoming recognized as a 'new' subject area or academic field of enquiry and a rich, complex and hugely diverse one. As a consequence, this can make it hard to get to grips with the expectations of your specific course and those who teach on it. It is, however, crucial that you suss this out if you want to do well, both on the course itself and in securing graduate employment.

Traditionally matters relating to children and childhood have been taught in universities as an aspect of several disciplines, all of which have tended to use different ways of studying children, using different methods and drawing on different ideas and principles. Some, such as education or psychology, have concentrated on the child, children or young people. Others, such as

sociology or cultural studies, have concentrated on childhood as an idea or concept. Your course may actually be basically rooted in these sorts of approaches. However, the courses developing in CS/ECS have evolved their own identity and approach, which can be seen as interdisciplinary. This means that they consciously draw on the different perspectives offered by, say, sociology, social history and psychology to think about exciting new ways of theorizing childhood.

This may seem rather abstract, but to make the most of your studies, you need to be clear in your own mind of the value your course places on becoming analytical, critical and reflective, qualities also demanded in the workplace. When national policy places the child at the centre it redefines the ways in which professionals work with and relate to that theoretical child. New policy initiatives, such as the setting up of SureStart Children's Centres and the integration of Children's Services, require critical and creative thinkers who value open-mindedness and innovation.

Many courses set out quite deliberately to specifically prepare students to acquire the skills, knowledge and values of multi-professional Early Years agencies and settings. Often students are taught by tutors from a range of professions in the areas of Health, Education and Social Work. Other courses encourage students to explore different disciplinary approaches to the study of childhood, by engaging with topics as varied as children's media and books, school governance, historical archive material, parenting, social policy and representations of childhood. Students will be taught by academics including historians, literature specialists, cultural studies tutors and geographers.

We would draw your attention to the rich diversity of courses that go under the general name of CS/ECS right from the start, because, to do well, you must learn to identify the specific approach and context of your own course. Our book, therefore, sets out to encourage you to discover the key dimensions of your course thus helping you get off to a flying start. Don't assume that all courses are the same. Thinking about your course's particular outlook, aims and objectives will enable you to understand its specific expectations, allowing you to make the most of your studies, make sense of your prior and personal experiences (which all courses will value and seek to build upon) and achieve your potential. That's why we think you should try to use this book early on in your course.

We believe that thinking about your course as a whole, and even on a module-by-module level, is a fundamental aspect of success on CS/ECS programmes. In our experience students are often surprised by the particular demands of courses, especially if they expect CS/ECS to reflect more practically or vocationally oriented courses studied prior to coming to university, such as the CACHE Diploma in Childcare and Education, or if they already work with children. Consequently, some students arrive at university expecting

their course to consist entirely of hands-on experience with children. Finding themselves, say, to be studying history or policy, means they feel quite lacking in confidence and even motivation, until they grasp why historical approaches to childhood or policy studies are an important aspect of their study. That courses are often rather more academic than practice-based means that far from being an easier option, CS/ECS courses demand that students read widely and work energetically on their research and academic writing skills to achieve good results.

When there is a mismatch between lecturers' understandings and students' assumptions about what it means to study childhood at university everyone has to work hard to minimize that gap. That's precisely what this book sets out to help you do, so that you can make the most of the course on which you have enrolled. It does this through helping you understand what you are expected to do, and offering strategies for undertaking the work.

The difference from vocational courses

Whatever the prevalent nature of your course is, there is no doubt that you will be expected to study different *perspectives* on childhood, explore themes of change and context, respond to questions and take part in debates. As we have already said, the various agendas surrounding childhood and children's lives are shifting: in the law, in social policy and in calls for integrated approaches to the care and education of young children in the UK. The way that CS/ECS courses engage with these agendas is what makes them distinct from those training students to be professional childcare workers such as teachers, nursery nurses or children's nurses.

This book helps you to get to grips with CS/ECS as academic courses, where you'll spend most of your time in a library or lecture room, rather than being out there applying and putting into practice skills that you need to have in a professional role. This does not mean that CS/ECS courses are irrelevant to the real lives of children, but it is important that you grasp the precise rationale for studying childhood in theory, as understanding this will stand you in good stead both during the course and later in the employment market. This is a particular focus for the chapter on working in settings and learning from placements. It is important that you use these 'real world' encounters as learning opportunities – as spaces for reflection, research and theory-building – as opposed to focusing exclusively on practical skills. The chapter is designed to help you think like a researcher, making vital connections between theory and practice.

You and learning at university – getting to grips with independent learning about childhood

This book offers insights into how best to become an effective independent learner, something that will become increasingly important as you move through your degree. Courses will change as you progress from your first to final year, with later years offering you more opportunities to work independently and with less direction from lecturers. This book will help by focusing upon the key learning processes that relate to the study of children's and young people's lives. It will outline effective, and ineffective, ways of going about study, giving you ideas for what to do and things to definitely avoid.

Throughout the book we hope to encourage you to think about the sort of learner you are and the kind of learning you enjoy, and how to develop appropriate study skills that are relevant to CS/ECS. We believe that becoming an effective self-evaluator will be key in your future professional role, indeed, it underpins the EYPS standards. To do this we will emphasize the learning *process* rather than specific content or subject matter. The book works as a 'how to' guide, by enabling you to explore the themes, issues, recurrent questions and approaches contained within your course. Use this book alongside the material you study on your course, and the specific recommended reading.

In particular, **Chapter 1** will help you understand what academic skills and qualities CS/ECS courses seek to develop in their students, and how lecturers try to facilitate that. It will introduce common key themes and issues and enable you to unpack the way that, by taking childhood as a legitimate area for study, they provide opportunities for students to 'see' that there is a wide range of different views and perspectives about what childhood is for and to 'wake up' to these differences. It will explain that the starting point for understanding another's perspective is firstly to recognize your own, and that therefore personal responses and writing can be useful ways of beginning to see, reflect on and understand childhood. It also explains that whatever the specific content or subject matter, most courses will want you, fundamentally, to *think, question, enquire* and *interrogate*. It will enable you to identify the key questions that lecturers want you to get to grips with on *your* course, help you to understand, on the most immediate level, what is meant by 'theory' and what common methods and activities tutors will use.

Chapter 2 then concentrates on reading, and gives worked examples of effective (and ineffective) approaches to reading, finding and using information about childhood. To do well at university, especially in the Social Sciences and Humanities, which tend to be writing-intensive courses, you have to be able to become fluent in the appropriate ways of talking and writing about relevant ideas and concepts in relation to your subject. The best

way to do this is via talking and rehearsing ideas and practising, *before* it ‘counts’ in a piece of work that is going to be assessed. Talking and reading about the main themes, issues and ideas in seminars with fellow students are the first steps to writing effectively and getting good marks, so it’s a mistake to see these formative activities as a waste of time.

Chapter 3 does the same for writing and presenting your ideas formally, for assessment. In our experience, those students who do well are able to see that writing at university requires them to make a transition, and they will invest a lot of thought and energy in making sure they are clear about the differences between their approaches to writing before university, and how to write on their courses. After all, another aspect of doing well is tuning in to how you are going to be expected to learn and to be assessed. This chapter will make you think about your approaches to assessment (building on earlier chapters) and allow you to hear from successful and less successful students, so that you can get the best marks possible.

Chapter 4 helps you benefit from working in settings, whether that is via placements, research observations, visits, research projects or dissertations. Successful students say this is where their learning comes alive, but it takes confidence and skill to apply your analytical and theoretical powers to complex situations. Chapter 4 helps you negotiate some of the practical, ethical and academic challenges you might encounter when learning from the real world.

Chapter 5 highlights some useful strategies for really engaging with theory/practice issues, suggesting that you try to see yourself as a researcher: someone who asks focused research questions and explores issues in depth, recognizing varying perspectives. This chapter gets you to think carefully about the sorts of research you might undertake, including your final-year dissertation, giving you pointers about useful and less effective approaches to tackling independent projects.

Finally, **Chapter 6** asks you to look ahead, during your course, to getting a job and to life after university, helping you to think and plan your studies so that you build up a body of evidence, knowledge and experience that you can capitalize on and use to help sell your skills in the workplace. It will show you how to make the most of the experiences you have to date, equipping you to build on what you already know and are interested in. This chapter will also encourage you to consider, in enough time to do something about it, whether there are other experiences or knowledge you already have or need to acquire (for example, through taking a gap year, through work experience, or through reading) that might help you to hit the ground running while on your course and, importantly, after it finishes.