If it's broke, FIX IT

Joeli Brearley, founder and CEO of maternity rights charity Pregnant Then Screwed, on how she turned her personal fight against discrimination into a national cry for childcare reform.

Interview: Emma Bennett

Two days after Joeli Brearley told her employer she was pregnant, she was sacked over voicemail. Terrified and angry, she considered taking legal action. But after discovering she was having a high-risk pregnancy and could go into labour at any moment, she was forced to drop the case.

"I soon realised my experience wasn't unique," she said. "I set up Pregnant Then Screwed [PTS] to create a place where people could tell their stories anonymously, to show that women are being pushed out of their jobs. Nine years down the line we have advice services that help hundreds of thousands of women, and we're campaigning for change."

As well as campaigning for working parents, Joeli and PTS are strong advocates for the childcare sector, lobbying the Government to reform what is one of the world's most expensive systems. Their campaign culminated in the March of the Mummies in 2022, when 15,000 parents marched across 11 UK cities to demand change.

Underfunded and undervalued

Joeli says childcare providers face several big challenges. "One of the obvious issues is recruitment and retention of professionals. And that boils down to the fact they're paid poverty wages and there's little opportunity for progression and promotion. It's a tough old job and you're often surviving on minimum wage.

"The funded hour schemes the Government has implemented are also not funded at a rate that is sustainable for providers, particularly the 3- to 4-year-old entitlement. A decade of chronic underfunding is causing providers to close, and is eating away at morale because [providers are] counting the pennies just to get by."

She says parents of children with disabilities are also being forgotten. "Only six per cent of local authorities in England say they have provision for children with disabilities, so we're putting the onus on providers to solve that problem when it should be at a government level."



Rescue and reform

So what needs to change? Joeli says the system needs to be rescued before it can be reformed. "We need to increase the 3- to 4-year-old entitlement so that providers can start to rebuild. And we need a workforce strategy to determine how we're going to recruit more professionals and retain them. But ultimately, the whole mechanism the Government has used to try and make it affordable, doesn't work. We need to start from scratch."

PTS has been working with the New Economics Foundation on a model – similar to those in Sweden and Norway – where their parents pay a maximum of five per cent of household income for childcare and providers are given a lot more money. "It doesn't cost the Treasury a whole lot more money, it predominantly benefits low-income families and it is a progressive model because the more you earn, the more you contribute."

Since PTS was founded in 2015, the "motherhood penalty" has got worse, Joeli says. Childcare costs have increased while wages haven't, parental leave pay hasn't kept pace with inflation, and the pay gap between mothers and fathers has grown by 93p an hour since 2020.

Hope on the horizon

But Joeli is hopeful about the future, with the issue being talked about more than

FAST FACTS

Q What might surprise people about you?

A I'm an optimistic introvert. I don't particularly enjoy standing up in front of big groups of people. I'd quite like to just sit at home and hide away in the bath.

Q What's your proudest moment since starting PTS?

A March of the Mummies. Knowing we've got to a point where people are willing to get out of the house with their kids to march with us and shout for change – and seeing that sea of people in London – was an amazing moment.

Q How would your kids describe you in three words?

A Loving. Impatient, which is definitely true. And old.

CAMPAIGNING FOR CHANGE

Pregnant Then Screwed is fighting maternity discrimination by:

1. **Campaigning for reform** to childcare, flexible working and parental leave.
2. **Supporting pregnant women and mothers** to access free legal advice.
3. **Lobbying Government** and contributing to policymaking.

Joeli is part of the Early Education and Childcare Coalition Steering Group, vice-chaired by **Helen Donohoe, Chief Executive at PACEY.** The Early Education and Childcare Coalition unites the voices of all those with a stake in the future of early education and care in England – children, parents, providers, the early education workforce and the wider business community. **earlyeducationchildcare.org**

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ever. "It used to be that you talked about childcare to politicians and they'd look at you like you had two chocolate fingers up your nose," she said. "Now it'll be a battleground for the upcoming election. You're never going to get perfect change overnight. It's always going to be incremental, difficult and messy."

Joeli is driven by the possibility of change. "With the right pressure, we can create change that will make a colossal difference to the lives of so many struggling families.

"We have come up against resistance from the childcare sector because we talk about costs. But this isn't about greed – we know settings aren't raking it in – and we are working to educate parents to understand the issues."

She concludes: "Childcare professionals are doing the most important job in the world. We know most learning happens before the age of 5, so they're literally architects of children's brains. I would love them to keep sight of that." CP

