

A third of pupils 'can hardly communicate' when they start school: Education minister risks fresh clash with nursery chiefs

- Elizabeth Truss's criticism of 'chaotic' nurseries has outraged unions
- She praised a traditional approach akin to France's écoles maternelles
- Tory MPs including Damian Hinds urged minister to 'stick to her guns'

By [James Chapman](#)

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Under fire: Education minister Elizabeth Truss's claim that nurseries are too 'chaotic' has already outraged teaching unions and [childcare providers](#)

Elizabeth Truss risked a fresh clash with nursery chiefs yesterday by saying a third of children [start](#) school without basic language and communication skills.

The education minister's claim that nurseries are too 'chaotic' has already outraged teaching unions and childcare providers.

But yesterday she told MPs there was clear evidence that toddlers who took part in structured sessions led by a graduate were better prepared for primary school.

'It is a very sad fact that 33 per cent of children arrive at school without the requisite communication and language skills to take part in school education,' she said.

In an interview with the Daily Mail, the minister, who is increasingly tipped for a Cabinet post, said too many childcare [settings](#) were 'chaotic' and saw children 'rurning around' with 'no sense of purpose'.

She praised a traditional approach akin to France's écoles maternelles, which studies suggest are more effective academically and produce better adjusted, happier children.

Her remarks came after Ofsted's chief inspector Sir Michael Wilshaw said failing pre-schools face closure if they do not improve quickly.

Tory MPs urged Miss Truss to 'stick to her guns' yesterday. One, Damian Hinds, urged her to 'continue her drive to improve standards in our nurseries'.

Miss Truss told the Commons that 'countries like France . . . have much higher salaries and higher qualifications in early years.

'At the moment, only one third of nurseries have a teacher-led structure,' she said. 'Good providers have high-quality, structured learning from age three which really benefits later on.'



Reading: Miss Truss told MPs there was clear evidence that toddlers who took part in structured sessions led by a graduate were better prepared for primary school (file picture)

Miss Truss's intervention drew an angry response from trade union Unison. Its head of education Jon Richards said: 'This unwarranted attack on "unruly nurseries" suggests Liz Truss would rather that children were seen but not heard.'

'Whilst claiming it wants to boost standards, the Government's plans to reduce the ratio of staff to children in nurseries will have a disastrous impact.'



Tough: Her remarks came after Ofsted's chief inspector Sir Michael Wilshaw said failing pre-schools face closure if they do not improve quickly

Neil Leitch, of the Pre-school Learning Alliance, said: 'It is frankly astonishing that the minister in charge of childcare makes such ill-judged, off-the-cuff statements.'

'The picture the minister paints is not one that would be recognised by anyone who knows anything about child development. Day nurseries are not hothouses of anarchy, as the minister seems to believe.'

'What she sees as the ideal French model is regarded by many French practitioners themselves as dull, and uninspiring for children.'

'Young children are by nature active, energetic and inquisitive. It is these features that good-quality nursery staff nurture and develop through a balance of child-oriented and adult-led activities.'

[Penny Webb](#), a registered childminder who runs Penny's Place in Kidderminster, said: 'I find it rather annoying – no, very annoying – that the early years minister can go on and on and on about early years practitioners needing higher qualifications, needing to do x, y and z to improve outcomes for children – when she herself does not have any formal qualification in early years childcare.'

But Greg Martin, head of the Durand Academy in South London, which operates one of the country's biggest nursery and primary facilities, backed Miss Truss, saying: 'We see nursery school as exactly that – a school, a place to learn.'

'The early years in a child's life are so important for their educational development. That's why we employ qualified teachers at our early years centre, who deliver structured and engaging lessons to children from age three.'

'And the model works: children at Durand, in a socially disadvantaged area of South London, exceed national averages by the time they are in year one.'