

Speech delivered by Barney McNeany, Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People, at the Early Years Awards on 13th June 2006.

Ladies and Gentlemen, Good Evening. Thanks you all very much for inviting me to speak at these important Childcare Champions Awards.

As Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People I am often faced with having to deal with problems that children and young people are facing, usually when the services they are getting are not adequate, not in the right place, at the right time or often just not enough of them. That's an important role we play in NICCY – letting Government know when the services, the policies or the law relating to children and young people are not adequate or effective.

But the part I don't often get to talk about is the real positive impact childcare champions have on children and young people – or about the really 'champion' children and young people there are out there today.

Quite often the media ring the NICCY office asking us to talk about children and young people.



Sometimes they even want to speak to me. My media team assures me it's because of my good looks, but I really think it's just because of the job I do!

When we hear about young people in the media it's usually about the bad things that happen to them, or the bad things they do.

What we don't hear is about the thousands of children working hard in school; we don't hear about the playgroups, nurseries and pre-school and after school settings where children are being supported in their first steps towards fun and learning; we don't hear about the childminder who develops and nurtures the children and young people in their care.

Well, everyone at NICCY thinks these stories should be told. And that's why this evening is such a special event.

It got me to thinking, "What is a champion? What makes a person a champion? What special talent helps make a champion?"

Well I googled the word, no less than Princeton University in the USA told me it was someone:

- who has won first place in a competition
- who fights for a cause
- holding first place in a contest;
- an ace: someone who is dazzlingly skilled in any field



Interestingly it also told me about the 'Champion' Comic featuring:

Kangaroo Kennedy - the Whizbang Bowler

Punch McPhee - the Fighting Seacock

Trapper Pete and his Racing Huskies

Now it was last published in 1955 so even I'm too young to remember it but I am reliably informed it was a weekly read for Gerry Conway until he was nineteen but he can confirm that later.

So to go back to these four definitions of a champion I am delighted that tonight we are here to celebrate your success -every one of you who spend time; give of their care and provide the professional support to make sure that children's lives are better.

Part of our mission at NICCY is about championing. Our job is to:

Promote and safeguard the rights and best interests of children and young people to help them challenge and change the world in which they live.

What that means is that we are a **watchdog** for those rights and that is why our symbol is a watchdog – a **symbol** chosen by children and young people!

Our job is to champion the rights of children and young people.



Part of that role is to help children and young people with concerns they have about their individual circumstances and act as their Ombudsman.

But we also champion children's rights by, as I said earlier, letting Government know when the services they provide are not as effective as they could be. That's why we have consistently advised Government on the inadequate level of provision for children in their early years since we began our work in 2004.

I am very happy that this work has paid off, that they have listened to us, and to the many other organisations and individuals who have been championing the cause of the early years sector.

I'm pleased that they are increasing the number of Pre-school Expansion scheme places, I'm pleased that they are going to end the discrimination against children with a disability or who have special educational needs who are being cared for in voluntary and community settings and who cannot access statutory help to meet those needs. And I'm pleased they are going to legislate to make some sense out of the current arrangements – what my predecessor Nigel Williams called a 'Dog's Breakfast'.

But NICCY will remain watchful to ensure these very important decisions and extra resources reach to the coal face where they are most needed. And so I am going to finish by asking you to keep us in NICCY informed about progress in the early years sector. We need your help to make sure we fully safeguard and promote the rights and



best interests of children and young people in their early years where it's so important. That's why we have been given a prominent monitoring role in the forthcoming 10 year children's strategy.

Can I finish by once again thanking you for asking me here tonight and to saying well done to the children's champions we will meet later. I'd like to finish with a quote from the American Athlete Bruce Jenner I have used in the past which I think sums up what makes a champion:

"If you want to take your mission in life to the next level, if you're stuck and you don't know how to rise, don't look outside yourself. Look inside. Don't let your fears keep you mired in the crowd. Abolish your fears and raise your commitment level to the point of no return, and I guarantee you that the Champion Within will burst forth to propel you toward victory."

Thank you very much for listening.

