

Government funding to creationist nurseries has to stop

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The Government may prohibit schools from teaching creationism as scientific theory, but as Jenna Scaramanga argues, public funds are still being used to introduce pre-school children to religious pseudoscience.

The Government has a clear policy on teaching creationism as science; schools receiving public funds can't do it. This is a wholly sensible approach. Whatever else it may be, creationism is not science, and it's dishonest to tell children otherwise. It is concerning, then, that current policy enables children below compulsory school age to receive public funds to attend creationist institutions.

The Government's "free early education" scheme gives all children aged three and four, and some two-year-olds, 15 hours per week of nursery education. Previously known as the nursery voucher scheme, local authorities can make this funding available to private institutions as long as they have acceptable inspection reports. In the last four years, large numbers of creationist and otherwise extremist religious groups have received funding in this way.

The Department for Education has in general been robust on religious pseudoscience, announcing that [Michael Gove](#) is "crystal clear that teaching creationism is at odds with scientific fact". As a result, Free Schools are not allowed to teach creationism, and all creationist Free School applications have been blocked. This nursery funding, then, is a strange loophole at odds with the general trend of government policy.

The British Humanist Association (BHA) has identified [67 'nurseries of concern'](#) that have received funding since 2010. According to the BHA 40 are either creationist or have associations with extremist religious groups. Two are from the Islamic Shakhsiyah Foundation, which [David Cameron called](#) a "front" for Hizb ut-Tahrir, a radical Islamist group. Thirteen are Charedim, a strictly Orthodox stream of Judaism.

The Christian Schools Trust, an evangelical association which issued a statement in 2009 affirming its support for creationism, has 16 schools which have received funding. [Research published in the same year](#) found that 78% of CST secondary school students agreed with the statement "God made the world as described in the Bible" while just 10% agreed "I accept the idea that living things were made by a process of evolution".

Nine of the schools named use the Accelerated Christian Education curriculum, noted for its emphasis on the most extreme form of young-Earth creationism and famed, [until 2013](#), for teaching in science that the [existence of the Loch Ness monster](#) was evidence against evolution.

It is inconceivable that such pseudoscience would be tolerated from a non-religious group. If anyone suggested that astrology should be taught as science, the idea would never get off the ground. This can only be an instance of religious privilege.

Teaching creationism to very young children is harmful for two reasons. First of all, it implants misconceptions about the nature of science just as the child is forming their first ideas about the world. Changing those preconceptions later is far more difficult than continuing an education that started on the right foot. If public money is going to go to nursery education, it must go to giving children a head start, not a millstone around their necks.

Second, belief in creationism is used to buttress a literal belief in holy texts. Accelerated Christian Education is also known for teaching as science that [homosexuality is 'a learned behaviour'](#) and that women must submit to their husbands. The ACE preschool curriculum [teaches children](#) that "Mama's roles" include "helper, cook, cleans house, washes and irons clothes", while "Daddy's roles" include "protector, provider, leader, hero". For example, [this cartoon](#) from an ACE workbook is indicative of their approach to gender issues and use of religion throughout the curriculum.

In a state-funded institution, teachings like these would violate the [Equality Act 2010](#), and there is no reason they should be excused when public funds go to a religious nursery. Teaching creationism is directly tied to these beliefs in Christianity. Creationism, it is claimed, validates a literal reading of every letter of the Bible as God's Word. Verses condemning homosexuality or supporting gender inequality are supported by the same logic which rejects the theory of evolution. Charedi Jews, too, are known for strict [gender separation](#). In UK law, women and girls have the right to equality; funding must go to nurseries that respect this.

A further concern is that in a number of cases the nurseries receiving funding are attached to schools for older children. For example, [Carmel Christian School](#) in Bristol, one of the BHA's nurseries of concern, takes pupils "ages three to eighteen". In cases such as this, where the nursery is not a distinct entity from the rest of the school, it is possible that the funds could also be used to prop up the entire institution. Indeed, the BHA notes that one prospective parent at Carmel was told the nursery funding had enabled them to lower tuition fees for the whole school.

Adults are free to hold creationist beliefs in Britain. Indeed, it is vital that their right to do so is protected. But when the state provides education to children, its duty is to ensure that the child's rights to be free of discrimination and receive a sound education are upheld.

Please [write to your MP](#) to ask them to ensure that local authorities are instructed not to offer Early Years funds to creationist groups. You can also respond to the government's [consultation on early education and childcare](#).

Jenna Scaramanga

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