

Best Beginnings in the Early Years

Introduction and background

Despite a broad consensus that to improve children's long-term life chances we need to start younger, the education system in England is still focussed on older children. There are still too many countries doing much better than England both in terms of educational outcomes and the wellbeing of children; those which do better than England start better.

This report from the Children's Commissioner has been produced with the assistance of an Advisory Board with wide experience in the policy, practice and politics of the early years. It looks at the current system from the perspective of children and families, asking what is working well, what isn't, and what it would take to bring about change. It makes a number of recommendations for an overhaul of the current system.

Key points

Children who fall behind in early years

- There are 560,000 children under 5 living in households where a parent or carer is experiencing severe mental ill health, substance misuse or domestic abuse. A total of 42,000 under-5s are living in homes where a parent has experienced all of these (the so-called 'toxic trio') in the last year. Over 2 million families with children under 5 are living in poverty, and poverty is rising fastest for the youngest children.
- Last year 71 per cent of 5 year olds were at the expected level of development for all of the early learning goals, which means that 29 per cent were not – this rises to 45 per cent of children who are eligible for Free School Meals. This means that there are 185,000 children each year who are not starting school ready to learn.
- New analysis for this report has revealed a subset of children who are particularly far behind where they should be at the age of 5. Thirteen per cent of children did not meet the 'expected' level on half or more of the 17 early learning goals. This places them at a significant disadvantage as they move into Year 1.
- For this report, a cohort of children who had not met the expected level on half of their early learning goals was tracked through to the end of primary school. It was found that they were doing less well than their peers, not just in terms of education, but also in their social outcomes. For example, children who do less well at 5 are 5 times as likely to end up being excluded by the end of primary school.

The case for investing in the early years

- Parents and carers will always have the most important role to play in their child's development. But there are ways in which governments can do more to help children reach their full potential – and indeed to support parents in this vital role.
- The 'Heckman Curve', conceived by Nobel Laureate James Heckman, shows that the earlier the investment, the greater the return. This means that investing earlier will generally yield greater value for money.
- This does not mean that early years intervention should be prioritised to the exclusion of interventions at later years, but rather that the gains from intervening early, if missed, are more difficult and more expensive to replicate later.
- There are 3 reasons why early years programmes can fail to satisfy a 'business case' and to subsequently fail to receive funding. Firstly, most evaluations indicate whether a programme was effective at improving child outcomes at the end of the intervention. It may take several years and decades for this improvement to feed through into tangible and measurable economic or social benefits. Secondly, the fragmentation of the systems within which early years programmes are delivered can often undermine the case for investing in them. The majority of early years and parenting programmes tend to be commissioned by local authorities, yet the benefits of the programmes known to be most effective accrue to schools. Thirdly, even where programmes are effective at improving children's lives and



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reducing their need for other downstream services, this may not always translate into direct observable 'cashable' savings in public expenditure.

Building on our current early years system

- The current early years system is highly fragmented, with programmes built up at different times by different governments. These include the provision of Children's Centres, the Troubled Families Programme, tax relief for childcare and the expansion of early years intervention. However, despite this increased investment in early years over recent decades, some families are still missing out. There is no single clear point of access for families who need help, and there is large regional variation.
- There are currently two universal frameworks that exist for children in the early years – the Healthy Child Programme and the Early Years Foundation Stage. Each of these sets out their own ambitions for children, and the support that should be in place. The Healthy Child Programme is being refreshed, and the Early Learning Goals of the EYFS have recently been reformed. This can provide an opportunity for the Government to develop one overarching strategy for what we want to achieve in the early years, to be shared by all relevant departments.
- There has been some important joint working recently, with Public Health England and DfE working together on a new speech, language and communication pathway for 0 to 5 year olds. This approach acknowledges that it is almost impossible to separate out the 'health' and 'education' aspects of a child's development, and is the basis of an approach which should be adopted across the whole of the early years. Since 2015 Health Visitors have been the responsibility of Local Authorities (LAs) rather than the NHS, so there should be much more capacity for this kind of integrated working at the local level.
- Some local areas are already beginning to adopt an integrated strategy. One example is the Early Years Delivery Model in Greater Manchester, which has multi-agency pathways to support speech, language and communication; parent and infant mental health; physical development; and social, emotional and behavioural needs.
- Recent research for the Early Intervention Foundation has found that areas which have been particularly effective in closing the early years word gap have focused on ensuring that different parts of the system are working together and integrating assessments between different frameworks.

Identifying and responding to the needs of children

- The Children's Commissioner recently conducted research into the delivery of the Healthy Child programme check, carried out when children are 2 and a half years old. The data revealed wide variation across the country, and the lack of a continuum of support from birth through to 5 in many areas.
- Overall, 80 per cent of children are checked with 20 per cent missing out. However, the number of children missing out rises to 65 per cent in some areas. Furthermore, some local authorities reported that the children who did not receive checks were those in transient groups, who moved between different areas.

- Many local authorities were unable to say which children had been seen as they had been unable to share data held by different agencies. This means that no single organisation can identify how many under-5s in their area have additional needs, and how many are being targeted for help.
- For areas which were able to report whether children received support, results were positive. An average of 76 per cent of children identified as part of the review as having an additional need or developmental delay were referred or received additional support. However, this was not consistent across all areas; only 54 per cent of local authorities were able to report whether children were referred on to additional support after the check.
- Only 9 per cent of the 2 and a half year checks were delivered jointly by health and education.

Recommendations

- A cross-government strategy should be established, led by a Cabinet Minister for the early years. It would set out how the Healthy Child Programme, the Early Years Foundation Stage, Children and Family Hubs, antenatal services and the Troubled Families Programme should be working together. It should also contain clear pathways of support for children and families who need particular help, and clear roles and responsibilities for professionals.
- There should be a guarantee of family support for early years children and their families. This support will be delivered in a co-ordinated way by a range of professionals based in Children and Family Hubs. The hubs would be a centre point of support for children and families. They would act as the gateway to multiple services and the teams within them would be responsible for coordinating early years services and support across the local area.
- The checks which a child receives from health and education before the age of 5 should be made more consistent with each other. There should be additional checks at 3-4 months and one at 18 months to fill the gaps between current reviews. There should be a statutory requirement for the joined-up child development check to be delivered at 2 by health visitors and the child's early years setting.
- A new early years programme would have an expanded offer of 30 hours universal free childcare and early education for all children aged 2, 3 and 4, and 15 free hours for all one year olds. This would be backed by a plan to match the investment other countries achieve in their early years, and ensure quality is high.
- Action should be taken to ensure that staff in early education and childcare settings are valued more highly – both in terms of their pay, and their professional development. Prior to a longer term review of childcare funding, immediate increases to the per child funding rate for early education are needed to increase the pay available for staff and make it a more attractive career prospect.
- In order to better coordinate data, each child should have a unique child number which would allow them to be tracked through the system and across services. The NHS number – which is already assigned to every baby – should be used as this unique identifier.

The full document can be downloaded from:

<https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/cco-best-beginnings-in-the-early-years.pdf>