

Child Poverty and Life Chances consultation

Early Childhood Forum response

The Early Childhood Forum (ECF) is a coalition of 61 professional associations, voluntary organisations and interest groups united in their concern about the well-being, learning and development of young children from birth to eight, their families, and the practitioners who work with them. ECF aims to bring together partners in the early childhood sector to promote inclusion and challenge inequalities, and to champion quality experiences for all young children and families. It is hosted by NCB.

Question 6 – What do you think makes the most difference to the life chances of children?

The early years of a child's life are critically important to their development and have a significant impact on their future life chances and well-being. It is widely acknowledged that that poverty has the greatest influence on children's outcomes and that positive early years experiences give children the best start in life.

The brain grows to 80% of adult size by the age of 3. From neurobiological research we know that during the earliest months of life the right hemisphere of the brain is developing particularly rapidly. This is the functioning area for intuitive skills needed for relationships, emotions and empathic understanding. During this period the majority of the synaptic links between the brain cells are formed; close, loving emotional contact with their main carer is vital for stimulating this synaptic development in the developing infant brain. Consistent, responsive loving care during the first 3 years, enabling the development of a secure attachment, is vital both for healthy emotional development as well as for the formation of an optimal hormone regulatory system and sound brain structure.

There is a strong public, academic, professional and political consensus about the importance and benefits of support for families with young children and a range of services to meet their needs. The evidence (cited below) clearly indicates that good quality early childhood services and consistent loving care within the family are crucial determinants of good life chances. Together these are likely to counter the effects of poverty on children's futures. Moreover, greater investment and support for families and children during the period of early childhood is essential in reducing persistent intergenerational social problems and underachievement.

Midwives, health visitors, GPs, Children's Centres, family and parenting support workers, outreach workers, childcarers and practitioners all have a key role in supporting families during early childhood. This includes working with parents to develop a shared understanding of the importance of consistent loving care and secure attachment, and how it ensures optimum social emotional, cognitive and physical development. The latest report of The Millennium Cohort Study establishes the critical importance of attention to children's early development

and its consequences¹. The study shows that delay in key developmental milestones in their first year was significantly associated with delayed cognitive development at age 5. The importance of early childhood is supported by the recent *Marmot Review*, which identifies the need for investment during the early years to reduce inequality as one of its key policy recommendations².

Factors such as unemployment and poverty are more prevalent in families with a disabled child and there is evidence of difficulties for these families in accessing services. Other research has shown that the combination of disadvantaged circumstances and difficulties in securing access to appropriate services, which are found for the majority of families with a disabled child, are particularly acute for families from minority ethnic groups. Consequently, support services require a high degree of specialist knowledge and flexibility in structure to meet the diverse needs of individual children and families within their cultural community.

Analysis across broad ethnic categories reveals the extent of inequality between children of minority ethnic heritage and their White British peers. This starts from the moment of birth. Infant mortality in Caribbean and Pakistani families is more than double that for White British children. For Gypsy and Irish Traveller families, infant mortality may be up to three times higher than the rest of the population and there is reportedly a higher rate of miscarriages, still births and potentially preventable maternal deaths. Minority ethnic mothers, particularly those in poorer areas are less likely to attend antenatal care and twice as unlikely to attend antenatal classes as white mothers.

A positive home environment can have a significant impact in improving life chances for children from the most disadvantaged families. Parents are children's main carers during the earliest years with support provided by the wider family. The quality of relationships between parents and their young children is the prime factor in a child's social, emotional, physical and intellectual development. The home environment is the most significant aspect of a child's early life in shaping future outcomes. Children thrive when their family life provides consistent, responsive and loving care where talk and play are promoted and valued. Research indicates that children with strong home learning environments are considerably ahead both socially and intellectually by the age of 3, and this advantage is carried through to their formal schooling³. The C4EO early years research review found that young children with supportive and positive family lives achieve better outcomes and this continues into primary school, and this can help to offset the effects of poverty on children's learning and development⁴. The review states that interventions to improve the home learning environment involve culturally sensitive outreach

¹ Joshi, H. and Dex, S. (2010) *Children of the 21st century (Volume 2): The first five years*, Bristol : Policy

² Marmot, M (2010) *Fair Society, Healthy Lives: Strategic Review of Health Inequalities in England Post 2010*, UCL

³ Wheeler, H and Connor J, (2009) *Parents, Early Years and Learning, Parents as partners in the Early Years Foundation Stage – Principles into Practice*, National Children's Bureau

⁴ Coghlan, M et al (2009) *Early Years: Research Review: Narrowing the gap in outcomes for young children*, C4EO

and family support to help parents engage in age appropriate learning activities with their children.

There is considerable evidence that high quality early childhood services have wide-ranging benefits for children and are important determinants of positive outcomes particular for those from disadvantaged backgrounds⁵. These services can help to improve and nurture young children's social skills, emotional development and cognitive capability. The well-respected research project on Effective Provision of Pre-school Education⁶ (EPPE) found that good quality pre-school enhances the development of 3 and 4 year olds and that disadvantage children most particularly benefit from these experiences. The latest findings from the EPPE research, published in 2010, report that children at age 11 still show benefits from their attendance at high-quality pre-schools⁷. Well resourced, high quality provision for children and their families during the early years are an important influence on a child's developmental outcomes, including their later attainment at school, and in their future adult life.

Money spent supporting children and families during the early years is cost-effective because it saves money later, by acting as a preventative measure. A recent New Economic Foundation report highlights the economic and social benefits of early investment and found that for every £1 invested in a Sure Start Children's Centre, £4.60 of social value is generated. Well planned and appropriate early intervention helps to promote social and emotional development, which can significantly improve mental and physical health, educational attainment and employment opportunities. Consistent, responsive loving care during the first 3 years, enabling the development of a secure attachment is vital both for healthy emotional development as well as for the formation of an optimal hormone regulatory system and sound brain structure. This is important preventing criminal behaviour (especially violent behaviour), drug and alcohol misuse and teenage pregnancy.

A reduction in funding to children and parents is counterproductive leading to the further increase in many long-lasting intergeneration social problems and disadvantage.

Question 8 – What further steps can be taken to help local authorities and partners to reduce poverty and improve life chances?

Local authorities should be making effective use of monitoring data (relating to six equality strands), and using this to gain a better understanding of the demographics and needs of their local community. They should also be carrying out equality impact assessments to identify the potential impact of a new service on its residents, and making sure that evaluation is rooted in the development of new programmes.

⁵ UNICEF (2008) The Innocenti Report Card 8

⁶ Kathy Sylva et al, (2004) The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education Project, DfES

⁷ Kathy Sylva et al, (2010) Early Childhood Matters: evidence from the Effective Pre-School and Primary Education Project, DfE

We welcome the Early Intervention Grant in enabling local authorities to pool resources and budgets and to work innovatively to best meet the needs of local children and families. However, we are very concerned that this grant has not been ringfenced so can be earmarked for other uses, and is 10% less than the combined total of previous grant streams available, and further cuts will have a real impact on the lives of children and families. Local authorities have already made considerable efficiency savings, and closures, cuts and reductions in services are already happening. Services that close are unlikely to be replaced in the longer term. Highly experienced staff are also losing their jobs and may leave the sector altogether. This will have a greater impact on families in most need of local early years services, with many no longer able to access local childcare and specialist support.

A recent 4Children survey of children's centre managers identified that 7% are expecting their children's centre to close in the next year and 56% are anticipating providing reduced services. Families, particularly those from disadvantaged communities, greatly rely on the range of services (childcare, parenting support, health visiting, JobcentrePlus etc.) provided by these centres, and removing support will reduce and not improve life chances.

Question 9 – How can the voluntary, community and private sectors contribute most effectively to local approaches to tackling child poverty and improving life chances?

The voluntary and community sector already has a strong presence in local communities - providing services, advice and support - and working closely with local authorities and local businesses. Often they rely on local authority funding, which is being greatly reduced, if not withdrawn altogether. This combined with the fact that local residents are less able to donate or fundraise during the recession is meaning that many local charities are closing. Families that access these services will often find that there is not an alternative available and this will impact strongly on their day to day lives and future life chances, as the preventative work and support systems will not be there to help them.

The withdrawal of services offered by the local authority without having an external funding source in place for the voluntary sector to deliver them will create a gap in support. Such a situation would make it impossible for the Government to deliver on their commitment to the early years and lifting children out of child poverty.

It is essential for all partners to engage with those who have expertise and experience working with children and delivering services on the ground, including the array of 60 organisations represented on ECF. This will enable the sector to be able to inform and drive developments.

Early Childhood Forum Members

4Children

Action for Children

Association of Educational Psychologists (AEP)

Association of Professionals in Education and Children's Trusts (ASPECT)
Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL)
Black Voices Network
British Association of Community Child Health (BACCH)
British Association of Adoption and Fostering (BAAF)
Campaign for Advancement of State Education (CASE)
Children in Scotland (CiS)
Children in Wales (CiW)
Council for Awards in Children's Care and Education (CACHE)
Council for Disabled Children (CDC)
Unite / Community Practitioners and Health Visitors Association (CPHVA)
Daycare Trust (DCT)
Early Childhood Studies Degrees Network
Early Education
Early Years (formally NIPPA)
Early Years Equality (EYE)
Fatherhood Institute
Forum for Maintained Nursery Schools
Full Time Mothers
High/Scope UK
ICAN
KIDS
Learning Through Landscapes (LTL)
Local Authority Early Years Network (LAEYN)
Mencap
Montessori Education UK
National Association of Head Teachers (NAHT)
National Association for Primary Education (NAPE)
National Association of Nurseries in Colleges & Universities (NANCU)
National Autistic Society (NAS)
National Children's Bureau (NCB)
National Campaign for Nursery Education (NCNE)
National Childminding Association (NCMA)
National Day Nurseries Association (NDNA)
National Deaf Children's Society (NDCS)
National Literacy Trust (NLT)
National Network Of Family Information Services (NAFIS)
National Portage Association (NPA)
National Union Teachers (NUT)
Out for Our Children
Parenting UK
Parents for Inclusion
Play England
Preschool Learning Alliance (PLA)

REU (formerly Race Equality Unit)
Refugee Council
Royal National Institute of Blind People (RNIB)
Save the Children (SCF)
Scope
Special Educational Consortium (SEC)
Special Educational Needs Joint Initiative for Training (SENJIT)
Steiner Waldorf Schools Fellowship (SWSF)
Trade Union Congress (TUC)
Training, Advancement & Co-operation in Teaching Young Children (TACTYC)
UNISON
Voice - Union for Education Professionals
What About the Children (WATCH)
World Organisation for Early Childhood Education (OMEP)