

What About The Children?

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'Childcare policy, a potential for harm'
What About The Children? Press Release
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“Science versus Society: Is childcare for the under-threes a taboo subject?” is the question raised in an editorial published this week in ‘Epigenomics’, a highly regarded scientific journal, expressing serious concern about the “adverse effects for some children” of current childcare policy: “These effects are physical and psychological” and, the authors argue, “may be long lasting.....as a result of epigenomic changes, resulting from stressful events, and could be passed on to future offspring at birth”.

What About The Children? has been working over many years, speaking out about the importance of the emotional wellbeing of babies, by providing access to the substantial, growing body of research that explains why the first three years of life, from conception, lay the foundation for emotional, mental and physical health. The ‘Epigenomics’ editorial brings to the debate important new evidence about the .impact of early life stress on infants and the potential for intergenerational transmission of altered genes.

Over recent decades, the 'default' position on childcare policy of successive governments has focused on the provision of 'affordable childcare', with the emphasis on facilitating parents to return to paid work as soon as possible after the birth of their baby. This 'default position' is based more on the economic necessity, requiring both parents to earn a salary, than the emotional needs of babies, the importance to them of secure attachment and the benefits of stable family life. Bowlby's attachment theory has been supported more recently by a raft of neurobiological research, and the work of the ACEs movement (*adverse childhood experiences and early life stress*) has provided further insight into the importance of the first three years and the impact of early life stress and adverse childhood experiences on the rapidly developing infant brain.

There is emerging evidence on epigenetic changes and the risk of intergenerational transmission as a result of early life stress, along with growing scientific evidence about the importance of appropriately responsive care and secure infant/parent attachment for long term physical health and emotional wellbeing. What About The Children? is calling for a fundamental reassessment of 'early years' policy to ensure that it is informed by the science of infant brain development and the latest epigenetic studies, and provides all children with the best start in life, supporting the development of secure infant/parent attachment and reducing the potential of emotional harm.

The extreme challenges of 2020 have laid bare long standing inequalities affecting the lives of children and families, as well as the health of the nation. To fully address these deeply embedded inequalities requires transformative change by government, with long term investment in the emotional wellbeing of children and the lives of their families. Significant adversity in the early years disrupts the development of the infant brain, and other biological systems, undermining the capacity of young children to achieve their full potential.

Ends

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Notes to Editor

Science versus society: is childcare for the under threes a taboo subject? : Denis Pereira Gray Diana Dean Molly Dineen *Epigenomics* 19.08.2020 <https://doi.org/10.2217/epi-2020-0141>

The cost of 'out of home' childcare is now the second biggest expenditure, after rent or mortgage payments, on family budgets. In 2019, the average price of 25 hours of childcare a week for a child under two in a nursery was £127, rising to £174 in inner London, twice as much as the average household spends on food each week(ref). Currently, the UK government spends £3.5 billion to provide 'free childcare' for 3 and 4 year-olds and the most disadvantaged 2 year-olds, while at the same time childcare providers campaign for funding that reflects the true cost of providing the best environment and 'high quality day care' for the youngest children and babies. A number of parental opinion surveys have found that, given a genuine choice, parents would prefer to be their children's main carers for the first three years.

Coram Family and Childcare Survey 2019

The cost of love: financial consequences of insecure attachment in antisocial youth'

Christian J. Bachmann, Jennifer Beecham, Thomas G. O'Connor, Adam Scott, Jackie Briskman, and Stephen Scott. *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 60 (12), p 1343-50: November 2019

What About The Children? is a national charity established in 1993 to raise awareness about the never-changing emotional needs of the under-threes in our ever-changing society. It has no religious or political affiliations. What About The Children? is a member of the First 1001 Days Movement and Early Childhood Forum.

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