

Parenting

Headlines

The foundations for virtually every aspect of human development – physical, intellectual and emotional – are laid in early childhood. What happens during these early years (starting in the womb) has lifelong effects on many aspects of health and wellbeing as well as educational achievement and economic status. The factors influencing children’s outcomes change over the life course but the consistent factor throughout is the role of parents and families.

Parents living in the more socially deprived areas of Kirklees had reduced personal aspirations and were seeking to get through each day as best they could. Despite this, they had high aspirations and expectations for their children. They wanted them to “*do better than I did*”, and get a good education and a good job.

Why is this issue/group important?

Parents are the most important “educators” of their children for both cognitive and non-cognitive skills¹. Giving every child the best start in life is crucial to reducing health inequalities across the life course. The foundations for virtually every aspect of human development – physical, intellectual and emotional – are laid in early childhood. What happens during these early years (starting in the womb) has lifelong effects on many aspects of health and wellbeing – from obesity, heart disease and mental health, to educational achievement and economic status.

Parenting style also makes a difference. Parents who combine high levels of parental warmth with high levels of supervision are more likely to have children at age five who are more confident, autonomous and empathic. On the other hand, a “disengaged” parenting style is associated with poorer outcomes for children¹.

The term “early intervention” is used to refer to the general approaches, and the specific policies and programmes, which help to give children aged 0-3 the social and emotional bedrock they need to reach their full potential, and to those which help older children become the good parents of tomorrow. The rationale is simple – many of the costly and damaging social problems in society are created because children are not given the right

type of support in their earliest years, when they should achieve their most rapid development. If that help is not provided early enough, then it is often too late. In that period, neglect, the wrong type of parenting and other adverse experiences can have a profound effect on how children are emotionally “wired”. This will deeply influence their future responses to events and their ability to empathise with other people².

Adverse childhood experiences can have a detrimental influence on a number of outcomes. Studies show the links between childhood maltreatment, such as childhood abuse, neglect and family dysfunction, and later life health and wellbeing. Adults who have adverse childhoods show higher levels of violence and antisocial behaviour, adult mental health problems, school underperformance and lower IQs, economic underperformance and poor physical health. These factors lead to high expenditure on health and social services, social welfare, and the criminal justice system, as well as lower wealth creation².

Most children who are developing well at the end of their early years go on to exceed expectations in reading and in maths at the end of Key Stage 1. These results also show that children in the lowest achieving fifth in terms of their learning and development at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) are six times more likely to be in the lowest fifth at Key Stage 1. Children’s experiences in their early years provide the essential foundations for both healthy development and their achievement through school. These clear links illustrate why it is important to ensure that children’s early experiences equip them with the skills that they need for life³. The most important influences on children’s early development are those that come from home. Children benefit most when they experience the consistent support and presence of caring adults – carers, parents or other family members – from the earliest possible age. Evidence shows that the most positive impact comes from families in terms of improved outcomes for children. This is followed by access to good quality early years provision which has the next largest impact on children’s development by the age of 5. The evidence strongly shows that this is particularly important for disadvantaged children, and often helps parents to develop effective home learning environments³.

What significant factors affect this issue/group?

There is evidence that relative poverty and low income has a direct impact on parenting and on children’s health and wellbeing. Income is strongly associated with types of

maternal psychological functioning that promote self-esteem, positive behaviour and better physical health in children. For example, children who have low cognitive scores at 22 months of age but who grow up in families of high socioeconomic position improve their relative scores as they approach the age of ten. The relative position of children with high scores at 22 months, but who grow up in families of low socioeconomic position, worsens as they approach age ten. In other words, children of educated or wealthy parents can score poorly in early tests but still catch up, whereas children of worse-off parents are extremely unlikely to do so. There is no evidence that entry into schooling reverses this pattern⁴.

There is strong evidence that children's life chances are most heavily predicated on their development in the first five years of life. Family background, parental education, good parenting, and the opportunities for learning and development together, matter more than money, in determining whether their potential is realised in adult life. The things that matter most are¹:

- A healthy [pregnancy](#).
- Good maternal mental health.
- Secure bonding with the child.
- Love and responsiveness of parents along with clear boundaries.
- Opportunities for a child's cognitive, language and social and emotional development.

The factors with the most impact in the early years include:

- High quality and consistent support for parents during pregnancy.

And in the early years:

- Support for better parenting.
- Support for a good home learning environment.
- High quality childcare.

Other factors impacting on the quality of outcomes for children based on parenting behaviour include [alcohol](#) and [drug misuse](#), mental health, [domestic violence](#) and abuse, disability, and [safeguarding](#). These issues are described elsewhere in the JSNA.

Which groups or communities are most affected by this?

As described, the most important factor identified has been socioeconomic status. High scoring children at 22 months from poorer backgrounds are caught up and overtaken by lower scoring children from wealthier backgrounds as they progress through the school system⁴.

Views of local people⁵

Evaluative research conducted in 2009 in Kirklees⁵ engaged parents of children of a range of ages in describing their experiences of being parents and of the type of support they valued. Results showed that:

- parents living in the more socially deprived areas of Kirklees had few, if any, personal aspirations
- they were often simply seeking to survive and get through each day as best they could.

Despite this, they had high aspirations and expectations for their children. They wanted them to “*do better than I did*”, get a good education and a good job but despite these hopes had few effective strategies due to financial and other constraints. Strong informal networks of close-knit family and friends meant that parents often resisted the idea of any formal support.

Parents had concerns but their family’s health per se was not usually front of mind. Other issues were initially more concerning such as financial hardship, ability to provide for their children, general deprivation of area, children’s personal safety, street crime/gangs, drugs and getting in with the wrong crowd.

For some parents, the words “parenting” and “help” had acquired some pejorative connotations particularly amongst an audience who by definition may be more vulnerable and/or sensitive to criticism. It seemed to imply that they were in some way lacking in their parenting skills and in need of help. As such there was an inherent lack of trust for authorities and of formal support. Only those with very serious issues/problems (youth offending, court orders, etc.) accepted that more formal or intensive support was necessary and/or helpful and overall those who had experienced intensive support felt

positive when receiving the support but disappointed with the length of support and follow-up received.

Some of the support needs identified by parents in Kirklees were already available. Specifically, the services provided by Sure Start Children's Centres were of some interest to those with younger children who felt they could meet their support needs identified within the research, for example around health related support and activities for children. In addition, Children's Centres appeared to work well in challenging perceptions of traditional formal support. Parents identified the need to raise awareness of what is available, address existing barriers to accessing services (e.g. more active encouragement), provide "outreach" work in the community to explain what is on offer and provide this encouragement.

What could commissioners and service planners consider?

To have an impact on health inequalities there needs to be concerted action to address the social gradient in children's access to positive early experiences. Expenditure could be re-focused proportionately across the gradient to ensure effective support to parents (starting in pregnancy and continuing through the transitions of the child into primary and secondary schools), including quality early education and childcare. All families need some information and support during pregnancy and postnatally but some require additional support. One example is the Healthy Child Programme, a universal, preventive programme tailored to the needs of each family with support provided to planners and practitioners to identify the factors in pregnancy and around birth that are associated with health and wellbeing outcomes for a child at five years. This type of universal pre and postnatal support is important because it has no stigma attached and levels of take-up are extremely high.

What could commissioners and service planners consider?

- A shift to a primary prevention strategy which offers substantial social and financial benefits.

- Give the Foundation Years from 0 to 5 (including pregnancy) at least the same status and recognition as primary or secondary stages with an objective which should be to produce high levels of “school readiness” for all children regardless of family income.
- Provide good quality early years education and childcare proportionately across the gradient.
- Rebalance the current culture of “late reaction” to social problems towards an early intervention culture, based on the premise of giving all children the social and emotional bedrock they need to achieve and to pre-empt those problems.
- Combine this with outreach to increase the take-up by children from disadvantaged families.
- Proper co-ordination of the machinery of Local Authorities to put early intervention at the heart of local strategies, including those seeking to raise educational achievement and employability, improve social mobility, reduce crime, support parents and improve mental and physical health.
- Only evidence-based interventions should be supported.

References

1. Field, F. [The Foundation Years: preventing poor children becoming poor adults](#), December 2010.
2. Allen G, [Early Intervention: The Next Steps, An Independent Report to Her Majesty's Government](#), January 2011.
3. Tickell, C. The Early Years: Foundations for life, health and learning – An Independent Report on the Early Years Foundation Stage to Her Majesty's Government. 2011
4. Marmot M et al, Fair Society, Healthy Lives, The Marmot Review 2010.
5. Support For Parents in Kirklees: September 2009. Quaestor/Andrew Irving Associates.

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