

Improving outcomes for young children: can we narrow the gap?

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This article explores the considerable developments in both early years policy and in the provision of services for young children in England since 1997, noting the role that such services have had in informing the broader *Every child matters* agenda. Many challenges remain, however, not least the numbers of children and families who still live in poverty and the continuing gap between those children who do well and those who do not. In examining how this gap can be narrowed, through intervention and support during the early years, the work of the Narrowing the Gap project is described, a project that continues with the Centre for Excellence and Outcomes in Children's Services (C4EO). Whilst high-quality early years services provide a very positive start in life for young children, reducing inequality remains the key priority.

Keywords: early education; parenting; inequality

Introduction

The past 12 years have seen a dramatic increase in services for young children in England, driven by two parallel forces. The first has been the commitment from Prime Ministers and Chancellors through three Labour administrations to reduce and even eliminate child poverty by 2020, a commitment which, until the economic downturn, had driven the increase in childcare as a means of enabling women to return to work and thus increase family income. There has also been a growing awareness of the gap, in terms of overall well-being and achievement, between children who do well and their peers who do not.

The second has been two growing bodies of research, one which has reinforced the importance of high-quality learning for young children, and one which has revisited the importance of early attachments between parents and their children, with a new emphasis on the key role that parents play in all aspects of their children's development.

The combination of the anti-poverty agenda driving the increases in 'day care' and the research into child development and children's learning driving the 'education' agenda has led to a substantial increase in provision, with government investment of well over £20 billion during this period. However, it has also led to tensions between the imperative to increase the quantity of provision whilst ensuring that the quality remains high.

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Policies for young children since 1997

Since 1997 the policy changes in respect of services for young children and their families have been considerable. Responsibility for child care, or day care, services has moved across from the Department of Health to the Department of Education, now renamed the Department of Children, Schools and Families, and in subsequent years a whole range of responsibilities have been brought together within one early years directorate. An initial National Childcare Strategy (DfEE 1998), the 10-year childcare strategy (*Choice for parents, the best start for children*, HM Treasury 2004) and the most recent update (HM Government 2009) have progressively provided for an expansion of nursery education (part-time places are now available for all children of three and four, and there are some pilot schemes for two-year-olds in disadvantaged areas) and for child care from birth to 14. They have also led to the reform of childcare regulation and inspection, improved maternity leave, reforms of the career and training structure of the early years workforce and measures to improve tax credits to make childcare more affordable for low-income families.

As a result of a Treasury-led cross-departmental review of services for children under eight, the first Sure Start local programmes were established in 1998. This was one of the most far-reaching of recent developments and one which provided a blueprint for the broader children's agenda which was to emerge subsequently. Described by the Treasury civil servant responsible for funding Sure Start as a 'radical cross-departmental strategy to raise the physical, social, emotional and intellectual status of young children through improved services' (Glass 1999), it is difficult – some 11 years later – to remember just how innovative this targeted community-based approach was, with its requirement to involve local families in the design of local Sure Start services, and to involve health, education, social services and voluntary organisations in their planning and provision. As Glass wrote:

It is targeted at children under four and their families in areas of high need. It is part of the government's policy to prevent social exclusion and aims to improve the life chances of younger children through better access to early education and play, health services for children and parents, family support and advice on nurturing. (Glass 1999, 257)

The initial 250 programmes were soon expanded into 520 communities, and in turn the local programmes were subsumed into children's centres, now 3000 in number and nearing their final target of 3500, or one in every disadvantaged community.

The 2006 Childcare Act brought together earlier provision, including the requirement to create children's centres, and for the first time placed a duty on local authorities to secure sufficient childcare for working parents (though not necessarily to provide it themselves), and to ensure that services are integrated. Local authorities were also required, through this legislation, to improve outcomes for children and to narrow the gap between those who do well and those who do not.

The commitment to reducing inequalities and optimising children's life chances found early expression in the expansion of child care, but this has not been the only way in which early years services have provided a model for broader reforms. The 2003 Green Paper *Every child matters* (DfES 2003), although originally intended as a response to Lord Laming's report into the death of Victoria Climbié, took prevention as its starting point and accepted the view that to support all children better through well-coordinated mainstream services was more likely to benefit those in need and at risk than the creation of a separate child protection service. The five key themes of the

Green Paper, and of the subsequent 2004 Children Act and 2007 *Children's plan* (DCSF 2007), were strong foundations in the early years; a stronger focus on parenting and families; earlier interventions and effective protection; better accountability and integration locally, regionally and nationally; and reform of the workforce. These themes and the five outcomes, or entitlements for all children – being healthy, staying safe, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution and economic well-being – are all central to current early years policy and provision, but have also driven the wider children's agenda.

The broader national remit, introduced through *Every child matters* and enacted through the 2004 Children Act, has led to the establishment in all local areas of Children's Trusts, bringing together education, social care and health as well as voluntary agencies, the police and probation services and housing to create a more coherent and strategic approach to the provision of all services for children, young people and their families. In those areas where Children's Trusts are working effectively it is already clear that better integrated services, particularly children's centres and extended schools, are meeting the needs of local children in a more rounded way and are beginning to improve outcomes across the board, as well as narrow the gap between those children who are doing well and those who are not.

Evidence-informed early years services

There are a number of key areas of research which have impacted on the development of early years policy in recent years and which have determined priorities in services. Perhaps the most influential of these has been the mounting evidence of the very strong link between the circumstances into which a child is born and his/her adult outcome. Nearly three million children and young people in the UK are still living in poverty. Children from lower socioeconomic groups have the greatest chance of poor outcomes on a whole range of measures, including physical health, emotional health, educational attainment, school attendance and employment opportunities. They are also more likely to commit offences, to be taken into care, to become very young parents and to fail to continue into further education or employment. Moreover, the social class gap opens early and widens swiftly. More able children from poor homes are, by the time they are six years old, doing less well in reading and maths tests than less able children from well-off homes (Feinstein et al. 2007).

There are two key protective factors that research has shown can militate against the risks for children associated with low socioeconomic status. The first and most important of these, as is recognised in all recent policy documents, is a strong and supportive family, where parents are providing a secure and loving home, are interested in and supportive of their children and are sensitive to their needs, and where good relationships are built on the foundations of close early attachments. In their earliest months and years children need a stimulating yet secure and responsive social environment. They need to be loved and to be talked to and listened to, with plenty of opportunities for playing, exploring, talking and following their creative instincts in a safe environment. Extensive evidence now points to the importance of authoritative rather than permissive or authoritarian parenting, where there are clear boundaries and a consistent approach between the adults who are caring for the children. Children who are unable to form secure and dependable attachments to their parents, who find their parents cold or hostile or lacking in empathy, or totally unpredictable in how they respond to them, are likely to find it more difficult to form trusting relationships with

their peers or with their future partners or, in time, with their own children. It is also now evident that these very early experiences have a lasting impact on brain development (see Gerhardt 2004).

Given the importance of relationships within the family, particularly during the early years, it is encouraging to note the growing availability of parenting groups and other support for parents, particularly those who are most vulnerable, through initiatives such as the Family Nurse Partnership, Parenting Early Intervention Pathfinders, Family Intervention Projects and other approaches, many of them supported by the newly formed National Academy for Parenting Practitioners.

The second protective factor is the long-lasting value of good, high-quality early education, where the staff are well trained, and a stimulating and appropriate curriculum is provided for the children that relates to their individual needs and interests. The longitudinal EPPE study, which is investigating the impact of pre-school provision on a sample of 2500 children, has found that children who attended high-quality preschools, employing trained early years teachers, are still showing higher reading and maths scores and better social/behavioural outcomes at age 11 than those who stayed at home or who attended low-quality preschools (Sammons et al. 2008). Perhaps most importantly the EPPE project has found that high-quality provision is of particular value to children from more disadvantaged homes, narrowing the gap in both cognitive and social and behavioural development, especially if there is good parental involvement and what the research describes as a positive home learning environment (Sylva et al. 2004).

The EPPE research has been critical in informing policy of the importance of quality in service provision. It has, for example, underpinned the development of the *Early Years Foundation Stage* (EYFS) curriculum guidance, used as a framework in all early years settings since September 2008 (DCSF 2007). The EYFS creates, for the first time, a statutory commitment to play-based, developmentally appropriate care and education for children between birth and five years of age, together with a regulatory framework aimed at raising quality in all settings and amongst all providers. It is based on four key principles: every child as a competent learner from birth; the importance of loving and secure relationships with parents and/or a key person; the role of the environment in supporting and extending children's development and learning; and a recognition that children develop and learn in different ways and at different rates, and all areas of learning and development are equally important and inter-connected. It recognizes the central contribution that parents make to their children's development, and specifies the integration of child care, education and – where possible – health services.

EPPE has also underpinned the children's workforce strategy (DfES 2005), in which early years was seen as a high priority. This included the intention to train sufficient graduates to ensure that there was at least one in every group setting by 2015, and the introduction of a new Early Years Professional status.

But many challenges remain

Despite the huge strides forward in developing services and trying to create a more equal society, there is still some way to go. Although the EPPE research pointed to the importance of high-quality services, in the rush to expand the quantity of provision, quality can often be put at risk. Much of the recent expansion has been in the private and voluntary sectors, where low levels of funding have often resulted in poorly paid

staff and poor quality of provision. A study of early years provision attended by children in the Millennium Cohort Study confirmed earlier EPPE findings that quality is significantly higher in maintained settings and in settings with a trained teacher than in private and voluntary sector settings (Mathers et al. 2007).

The qualifications of staff are a critical ingredient in securing good outcomes for children, yet despite recent attempts to improve training and qualifications at least a third of those working in the early years are at level 3 or below, and there are few financial incentives to reward improved qualifications, particularly as parents would be called upon to meet the additional costs of better staff pay. The most recent workforce strategy (DCSF 2008) repeats the earlier proposal that all full day care settings should be graduate led by 2015, and also proposes making level 3 the minimum qualification for all early years staff in the same period, but it is not yet clear whether funding will be available to make this a reality. The body charged with improving qualifications – the Children’s Workforce Development Council – has made the creation of the Early Years Professional (EYP), a new graduate profession of equal status to teachers, its highest priority, but there is still uncertainty about the relative roles of teachers and EYPs and, reflecting the split between services, a separate body is responsible for teachers: the Training and Development Agency for Schools. There is also no evidence as yet that there is sufficient funding available to pay EYPs at a similar level to teachers. It is also clear that good leadership is critical to improved quality in services and better outcomes for young children, and although the new professional qualification NPQICL (National Professional Qualification for Integrated Children’s Leadership) is of equivalent status to the head teachers’ qualification, it is not widely held, and unless it is rewarded with equivalent pay then it is unlikely to expand its reach. As a recent report points out, whilst there is now a clearer framework for early years qualifications and greater opportunities for training, the workforce will not attract or retain high-calibre staff unless they can earn comparable wages to the other professionals they are working alongside (Daycare Trust and TUC 2008).

The Early Years Foundation Stage, whilst welcomed by the majority of practitioners, includes a number of learning goals that are not appropriate for such young children, as has been recognised by the House of Commons Children, Schools and Families Committee in its recent report on the National Curriculum (House of Commons 2009). This is exacerbated by the requirements of the 2006 Childcare Act to ‘narrow the gap’. This supposedly commendable objective is having the unintended consequence of creating pressure to skew an otherwise broad and balanced curriculum to meet goals that are not appropriate for all children.

The committee also notes that the EYFS has been devised separately from the National Curriculum, leading to concerns about a lack of continuity between the Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1, and recommends that it be brought within the National Curriculum. There are continuing concerns that the downwards pressure of Key Stage 1 into reception classes, together with poorer adult–child ratios in those classes, is creating a less than ideal situation for many four-year-olds.

Despite the bringing together of ‘care’ and ‘education’ at central government level there is still insufficient integration within services, and particularly a separation between statutory services usually provided within schools and those provided by the private and voluntary sectors. This is perhaps not surprising in a system which is effectively a marketplace in which parents are encouraged to choose between providers to find a nursery that best meets their needs, and where there is an assumption on the part of government that competition between providers will increase quantity and

improve quality. As noted earlier, the Childcare Act 2006 requires local authorities to actively manage this market, working with local private, voluntary and independent sector providers, rather than providing childcare services themselves.

Inadequate funding leading to poor sustainability is another serious issue. Despite the very considerable additional government investment, this only provides for 'nursery education' for 12.5 hours a week in term time. Although this is shortly to be increased to 15 hours a week, it still leaves parents to foot the bill for nursery provision for children under the age of three, for any additional provision that they want before and after the half-day at nursery, and in the holidays. Tax credits for lower income families can make a reasonable contribution towards these costs, but do not cover them all, and they are still so complex to administer that government figures show that only 17% of eligible families are accessing them. Many of the most disadvantaged families, who would perhaps gain the greatest benefit from attending an early years service, are not accessing these services and, as the evaluation of the Neighbourhood Nursery Initiative showed, the services themselves are at risk of closing unless subsidies are forthcoming (Smith et al. 2007). Even those children's centres set up in the neediest areas are struggling to make ends meet unless they admit children from well-off families beyond their catchment areas.

The hope of eliminating child poverty seems also to be diminishing as the economic downturn bites. The Institute for Fiscal Studies estimates that the size of the fiscal stimulus needed in tax credits and benefits for low-income families has now risen to £4.2 billion, but it is unlikely that a figure such as this is possible within the current economic climate, as the recent budget made clear. And as a recent study has pointed out, it is not only the poorest citizens who are affected by an unequal society. Bringing together 30 years of research, Wilkinson and Pickett (2009) argue that the most unequal societies, which include Britain, impact negatively on almost everyone in them. Almost every modern social and environmental problem, from ill health to breakdown in community life, violence, drugs and obesity, is more likely to occur in a less equal society. In more unequal societies, they argue, parents from lower socio-economic backgrounds have lower aspirations and self-esteem, and find it harder to provide the caring and stimulating environment that their children need when they themselves are poor, or stressed or unsupported.

And, finally, government seems to have a confused view of parents. As consumers they are to be given more choices about the services that they want for their children, and are to be involved in planning services. But there is also a strong instrumentalist view of parents as purveyors of better educated and better behaved children, with punishments for those who fail in this task.

Many parents are also being pulled in two directions at once, under pressure to work in order to earn their way out of poverty on the one hand, but on the other being told that parenting is the most important role that they will play, and being made aware that their child's future depends on the quality of the relationships within the family. Balancing work and family life is a challenge for parents of children of all ages, but is particularly acute for parents of young children.

Narrowing the gap

Given the huge impact of poverty on children's outcomes and the potential for positive intervention during the early years, how well are services responding to the challenge to 'narrow the gap'? Britain has one of the longest tails of underachievement in

the world, with considerable numbers – perhaps as many as 20% of children – who do not reach their full potential and whose outcomes across health, education and well-being fall behind those of their peers. Some children are at a particular disadvantage, including Pakistani, Bangladeshi and black non-Caribbean children, and poorer white boys, mixed-race and black Caribbean boys, and Irish travellers. In 2007 the Local Government Association set up a two-year research and development project, funded by the DCSF, whose ambitious purpose was to make a significant difference to our ability to narrow the gap in outcomes between vulnerable and excluded children and the rest of the child population, whilst improving outcomes for all. Our aim, in a nutshell, was to ask the question: ‘What, if applied universally and pursued relentlessly, would make a significant impact on the outcomes of vulnerable groups of children and young people?’ Our focus was on children from birth to 13 and we were interested in narrowing gaps across all five outcomes of Every Child Matters – ‘being healthy’, ‘staying safe’, ‘enjoying and achieving’, ‘making a positive contribution’, and ‘achieving economic well-being’.

In our first year we focused on five key themes or lines of enquiry, largely because of their significance for policy and practice:

- Using the systems and processes brought into being by Every Child Matters to orientate services more towards prevention and early intervention so that fewer children fall behind the rest.
- What must be in place in all local areas to make the difference through engaging with and supporting parents and carers to help their children to succeed?
- What must be in place in all schools to narrow the gap?
- What must be in place in all local areas to narrow the gap through children’s centres and other early years settings?
- What must be in place to narrow the gap through extended services?

In our second year the focus is on leadership and good governance, and how they help to improve services and narrow the gap.

In each of these areas, the project has explored – from mainstream to tier 4 services and from integrated services through integrated processes to integrated strategy – what do we know, from research, from data and from best practice, that can really make a difference to the most vulnerable children? Over 100 local authorities have contributed to the project and many are now using the first-year report (LGA 2008) to improve their children and young people’s plans and their overall strategy.

Of particular interest to those working with very young children are both the ‘twelve golden threads’ that are key to all children’s services, and the evidence concerning effective practice with children under five. The twelve golden threads provide the recipe for whole-system change if we are to meet the needs of our most vulnerable children and families. These are the critical building blocks, the ‘must dos’ for improving outcomes for vulnerable children. They include the need to create high aspirations, both within and for families; recognising the power of communities to support children and families; the importance of working in partnership with parents and families and building on their strengths; ensuring that the views of children are listened to and their participation is supported; the need for stability and continuity in relationships between professionals and parents; the value of extended services and of supporting all children to access them; deepening the integration of services; reshaping the workforce; ensuring there is good leadership and shared vision

and shared behaviour across services; and having effective performance management systems in place.

But what do we know from research and best practice that can effectively narrow the gap for the youngest children, and has the gap been narrowed?

A review of research for the Narrowing the Gap project (Springate et al. 2008), drawing on such seminal studies as the EPPE project (Sylva et al. 2004), concluded that interventions focused on children in their early years do have the potential to improve outcomes that are fundamental to future life chances, as well as narrowing the gap between disadvantaged and other children. Improvements in cognitive development, social/behavioural development and health outcomes can be achieved in the short term, and there is evidence that these outcomes can be sustained into later life.

The review identified four cross-cutting themes relating to successful practice:

- The involvement of parents in any interventions, particularly those which encourage parents to support their children's learning and create what the EPPE project identified as a positive home learning environment. Such interventions can also address family problems which may be impacting negatively on children.
- Interventions which are of high quality and which are delivered by qualified and skilled professionals, using approaches which have a sound evidence base.
- Interventions which meet the specific needs of the individual child and his/her family, usually based on sound assessment to ensure that activities can be tailored to individual need.
- Interventions which build constructive relationships between adults and children, from early attachments between parents and carers in the early months of a child's life, and support for parents as their children grow up, through to good relationships between early years practitioners and children in early years settings and an emphasis on developing social skills.

Although the work of this project is now nearly completed, the focus on early years continues with the establishment of the Centre for Excellence and Outcomes (C4EO). Set up in 2008, the C4EO was established to provide knowledge and data reviews, together with the tailored support needed by Children's Trusts if they are to improve outcomes for children and young people. The first theme chosen by the Centre was Early Years, covering three priorities: effective practices in the early years in narrowing the gap in outcomes for young children; improving children's attainment through a better quality of family-based support for early learning; and improving development outcomes for children through effective integration of early years services (<http://www.C4EO.org.uk>). It is to be hoped that this new sector-led body will be able to contribute to continuing improvements in early years services by building on both research and best practice and sharing this across the country.

In conclusion

There is much for young children and their families to celebrate in what has been achieved over the past 12 years, particularly the huge expansion in services and a gradual coordination of care, education and health to better meet the needs of those

who use the services. There has been a strong commitment to greater social equality and a growing understanding that there is real potential during children's earliest years to narrow the gap in outcomes between children who do well and those who do not fulfil their potential, particularly through effective support for parents and through high-quality early learning experiences in children's centres and other early years settings. But the investment in additional services, whilst substantial, is still insufficient, both in the public funding of services and in improvements in the training and qualifications of the workforce. For children, there is still a lack of clarity concerning the foundation stage as the first phase of education, and a danger that the early years could be separated off and seen as a second-class service with little input from qualified teachers. And for parents there remains the challenge of how to create a better balance between work and family responsibilities.

Britain is still an unequal society, and the overall targets for reducing child poverty seem unlikely to be met. A stronger commitment to policies to address inequality is the key to narrowing the gap – improved early years services can only achieve so much. It has become much clearer how we can narrow the gap, but as public expenditure is squeezed, is there either the political commitment or the resources to do so?

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