



Best Start Partnership

Why early years matter most – An evidence informed briefing paper

A response from the Best Start Partnership to the ‘Social Mobility Report’ produced by Jersey Community Relations Trust

The Jersey Community Relations Trust’s (JCRT) Social Mobility report concludes with the following reference:

By age five, there are significant developmental differences between low, middle, and upper class children’s cognitive and non-cognitive skills.

Greenstone M, Looney A, Patashnik J, Yu M (18 November 2016).
"Thirteen Economic Facts about Social Mobility and the Role of Education"

The Best Start Partnership, see Appendix 1, is well placed to amplify the above and contribute additional/supplementary key findings and recommendations.

Whilst we want the very best start for all of our children, we know that some children start their lives with reduced life chances which may lead to poorer outcomes both in the early years and throughout their lives. This may be because they are less advantaged socially and emotionally or because other risk factors are present in their families which, if unsupported, can lead to a poor start for those children.

This paper makes the following recommendations:

- 1. The social mobility agenda needs to focus on the period between early pregnancy and three years old to reflect the evidence that this is the period with the greatest bearing on outcomes, and a critical period in terms of breaking cycles of poor outcomes.**
- 2. It is vital that the significant contribution of the family and home learning environment to children’s outcomes is recognised and prioritised, and that parents have information about the vital importance of the early years and receive the support they need when they need it.**
- 3. We need to further understanding of how poverty makes it difficult for parents to support their children’s learning and the impact of addressing material deprivation on parents’ capacity to support their children at home, investing in interventions and services that strengthen support for families and children in the early years.**

KEY FINDINGS:

The Early Years are crucial

A child's learning journey is influenced before and begins from birth. Between pregnancy and three years is increasingly seen as a critical period in shaping children's life chances, based on evidence of brain formation, communication and language development, and the impact of relationships formed during this period on children's social and emotional development and subsequently their mental health.

What happens during this period lays the foundation for every child's future health, wellbeing, learning and earnings potential. It sets the groundwork for children's developing emotional wellbeing, resilience and adaptability - the competencies they need to thrive.ⁱ

“The period from conception to the start of school opens a critical and singular window of opportunity to shape the development of a child's brain. At this time, brain connections form at an unrepeated speed, giving shape and depth to children's cognitive, emotional and social development – influencing their capacity to learn, to solve problems and to relate to others. This, in turn, has a significant impact on their adult lives, affecting their ability to earn a living and contribute to their societies . . . even their future happiness.”¹

Evidence is clear that children's early years experiences shape their development, educational attainment and life chances. Children who experience a strong home learning environment, receive high quality health and early childhood education services from conception onwards have a positive attitude to learning when they start school, are more resilient and have better learning, development and health outcomes overall. They are more likely to complete secondary school and hold jobs. They are also less likely to rely on the welfare system and are significantly less likely to become involved in the judicial system. Positive and supportive environments are vital for young children. Children learn most effectively when involved in rich experiences and practical activities through play. Play supports children's holistic development and is one of the most effective ways in which children learn key life skills and form relationships. Its fundamental value is recognised in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Speech, language and communication is both an essential building block for a range of cognitive and social and emotional skills, and predictive of a range of later life issues. Early language skills are very important to children's chances – at primary school, at secondary school and beyond. There is strong evidence to show that these early skills are closely related to:

- children's readiness for school (Roulstone et al 2011, Snowling et al 2011)
- the qualifications they gain at school (Parsons and Schoon 2011)
- their earnings, literacy skills and mental health in adulthood (Parsons & Schoon 2011, Schoon et al 2010a, Schoon et al 2010b).ⁱⁱ

Save the Children has produced compelling evidence on the extent of early language delays amongst children living in poverty and how this impacts on later pre-literacy and literacy outcomes which suggests that the achievement gap is underpinned by income-related gaps in children's language and communication skills, which are already detectable during the second year of life.ⁱⁱⁱ

¹ Early Moments Matter for Every Child (2017), Unicef.

The relationship between children's social-emotional development and language development is reciprocal and intertwined. Evidence shows that social and emotional development are essential for acquisition of speech and language, while speech and language are essential for the development of social and emotional skills in children's language. Together they are the bricks and mortar that comprise the foundation of children's development.^{iv}

Our local data provides the evidence that children are not meeting the communication domain of their development at the 2 year developmental assessment and Early Learning Goals at end of reception.

What parents do, and know, is critical

Babysteps and MECSEH families tell us how they're coping in the early years. Parents are children's first and most important educators. Families provide children with the relationships, the opportunities and the experiences that shape their learning and development. Children who experience responsive caregiving develop secure attachment bonds which provide a solid foundation on which to build emotional wellbeing. Research shows that social class, income, living conditions and parents' own education levels are directly related to child development outcomes. However, the quality of the early home learning environment acts as a significant modifying factor.

Research highlights that the home learning environment in the early years is the largest factor in attainment and achievement. The strength of the home learning environment is based on the quality of parental engagement, interactions and the activities and experiences. It is the quality of the home learning environment that has the most significant impact on children's speech, language, and communication skills and their social-emotional development. Children with strong early home learning environments are ahead in both social and cognitive development at the age of three². They show advanced language ability, higher levels of confidence, co-operation and sociability, and this advantage continues as they progress through school³.

Parents are most able to provide the care and support children need when they have positive relationships themselves, when they are emotionally and financially secure, when they have supportive employers, and when they have supportive family and community networks that support their needs.

In 2020, a study of parents in England found that parents are aware of the importance of their role in supporting their child's learning and development, but that they tend to underestimate the importance of the early years. The report found that parents often find it difficult to prioritise their own wellbeing during a period that can be particularly challenging and that feelings of judgement have a huge impact on both parents and their children.^v

In 2022, The Nuffield foundation's Changing Face of Early Childhood Series detailed striking changes in the lives of families with young children over the last 20 years, as well as some continuities. This report highlights four of the most significant changes and identifies policy goals and recommendations that should underpin an ambitious early childhood strategy.
<https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/publications/bringing-up-the-next-generation>

² Melhuish, E. et al (2017) Study of Early Education and Development (SEED): Impact Study on Early Education Use and Child Outcomes up to Age Three – Research Report

³ Sammons, P. et al (2015) Pre-school and early home learning effects on A-level outcomes. Effective Pre-school, Primary & Secondary Education Project (EPPSE) Research report.

Poverty has a significant impact on children's early learning

Early childhood is a particularly critical period because it is when the family context dominates children's everyday lives, a context that is significantly affected by socioeconomic status. Poverty damages the vital early years of childhood – a time when the foundations are being built for children's future learning, and when the impact of poverty on learning can be the most devastating. Poverty creates barriers (stress, anxiety, limited capacity, material deprivation, limited disposable income for experiences or activities) and puts tremendous pressure on families, which makes it harder for parents to create the conditions or provide the resources and/or activities needed to maximise children's ability to learn through play.

There is strong evidence that household financial resources are important for children's outcomes and that this relationship is causal. Poorer children have worse cognitive, social-behavioural and health outcomes in part because they are poorer, and not just because poverty is correlated with other household and parental characteristics. The evidence of the impact of low income is clearer in relation to cognitive development and school achievement than other aspects of child development.^{vi}

Poverty denies children their right to learn and achieve their full potential. Beyond the individual human cost of the poorest children falling behind early, there is also an enduring cost to our society and economy. One of the main ways poverty influences young children's outcomes is the way it affects parents' ability to create the conditions in which young children learn.

"If we want to make a difference to children's lives, we must empower the people who care for them."

Dr Jack P. Shonkoff, Harvard Centre of the Developing Child

Poverty affects children's learning independently of other influences. A systematic review by Stewart⁴ identified two main explanations of why low-income matters: (i) the family stress caused by low income (ii) the parents' ability to invest in goods and services that promote child development.

Poverty robs families of time, working long hours or having to juggle multiple jobs can mean that the time for play and learning is squeezed out. Children's play can be restricted by a lack of physical space in the home for nurturing play and interactions, therefore limiting children's early learning and development and adding strain to family relationships. Settings have a key role to play through providing information, practical support and developing strategies to support parents to help them engage with the setting and their children's learning. However, children growing up in poverty don't or can't always access early years provision.^{vii}

Exclusion from high quality early years play experiences for disadvantaged children further deepens inequalities in learning, which fosters deeper inequalities in life opportunities. Parents not accessing early years settings are likely to be even less informed about the benefits of play and have less access to guidance, support or resources to support their child's play at home.

The daily challenge of living on a low income also makes it harder for parents to provide the books, toys and resources and have access to activities outside and inside the home that

⁴ Changing patterns of poverty in early childhood [Summary-Changing-patterns-of-poverty-in-early-childhood-Nuffield-Foundation.pdf \(nuffieldfoundation.org\)](#)

should be part of every child's learning. For some families, this can be compounded by parents' lack of confidence and skills to engage and support their children's learning, or their own negative experiences of learning.

The impact of poverty on children's outcomes in the earliest years can be felt beyond the early years, in later childhood and for children's life chances in adulthood. Studies in the UK and internationally show that when a baby's development falls behind the norm during the first year of life, it is then much more likely to fall even further behind in subsequent years, than to catch up with those who have had a better start. Without additional support to overcome early disadvantage, the impact increases at every stage of learning and development, which is more likely to lead to lower paid employment and a higher risk of poverty in adulthood. The transmission to future poverty mainly acts through educational attainment, and this is particularly strong when poverty is experienced at a younger age.^{viii}

Covid has affected young children and their families

The significant effects of child poverty have been intensified by the COVID-19 pandemic, leaving the most vulnerable children and their families facing ever more hardship. Children from disadvantaged backgrounds do far worse on many important measures than their better-off peers, and this gap is evident by the age of five.

The COVID-19 crisis has exposed and amplified existing inequalities facing children. Many already struggling families are in serious financial difficulties following job losses, sickness, or caring responsibilities. This is most pronounced for those families who are already experiencing poverty, in particular lone parents. Closure of parent and toddler, playgroups and some early education and care settings reduced the support available for children's learning and whilst some children experienced rich learning experiences at home with their parents during lockdown, the reality of 'home learning' for our youngest children is that those children whose parents do not have the resources, knowledge skills, confidence, or time to support them fell further behind their peers during this time

In July 2020 the Best Start Partnership produced a briefing paper '*42 Days and counting: Lockdown babies & young children*'. The paper reviewed the impact of pregnancy in a pandemic, babies born into an uncertain world and starting life in a crisis, the impact and key issues for parents-to-be, babies, young children and their families. It is available at <https://beststart.je/news/> and crucially highlights how families were not able to access health and education services for extended periods of time.

Subsequently the Partnership undertook an online survey to connect with parents to further understand their experience. The findings are available at [Impact of Covid 19 survey report | Best Start Partnership Jersey](#)

Recommendations

- 1. The social mobility agenda needs to focus on the period between early pregnancy and three years old to reflect the evidence that this is the period with the greatest bearing on outcomes, and a critical period in terms of breaking cycles of poor outcomes**

We know there is no single programme or approach that can deliver the improved outcomes required to give every child in Jersey the best start in life. Improving child outcomes in the early years depends on an effective local system of support for children and their families. This requires long term funding and a multi-dimensional approach to develop community-led services where parents feel safe, accepted, connected, and able to ask for help, and are

supported by a well-functioning system, which includes effective arrangements for strategy and planning, leading change, delivering effective support, and evaluating progress. This would include collaboration and integration of local services delivered by Government, private and voluntary sectors informed by local data.

2. It is vital that the significant contribution of the family and home learning environment to children's outcomes is recognised and prioritised, and that parents have information about the vital importance of the early years and receive the support they need when they need it.

All parents can enhance their child's progress if they engage regularly in activities that encourage positive social development and thinking. Promoting their skills and capacity will provide the basis for parents to better understand how children learn and ensure that they are active participants in their child's development, enabling the child to become an active learner with a strong attachment and healthy relationships.

There is unequivocal evidence that speech, language and communication are at the heart of inequalities, and that social and emotional development are intrinsically linked, and parenting is the most crucial factor explaining the language gap in the early years. This is the time to act.

There needs to be recognition that confident, skilled practitioners are an essential element of successful parental engagement and support in initial training and continuing professional development.

3. We need to further understanding of how poverty makes it difficult for parents to support their children's learning and the impact of addressing material deprivation on parents' capacity to support their children at home, investing in interventions and services that strengthen support for families and children in the early years.

It is clear from evidence that supporting children to achieve their potential at school starts in the early years. Studies have demonstrated that supporting young children to meet key development milestones in core cognitive skills are important for reducing the impact of poverty on children's learning and development. In fact, studies have shown that, controlling for other factors, the association between poverty and cognitive outcomes is stronger than for socio-emotional and health outcomes.^{ix}

Parents' wellbeing is essential for children's wellbeing and development yet this is easily disrupted for families of young children. To support families on low income, reduce poverty, and the associated stress, we need to ensure that parents experiencing poverty have a voice demonstrating the impact that it is having on their lives and building credible evidence about what can alleviate this.

Listening to parents and children about their experiences will make the case for more resource and capacity to be made available and to encourage government to look at ways in which they can alleviate the material aspects of poverty and tackle the inequalities created by poverty.

Redressing the balance of being born during a pandemic

The current generation of babies and young children have started life with uncertain futures.

Healthy development and emotional wellbeing impacts on learning and other aspects of the child's life now and in the future.

In order for children to be given the opportunity to achieve their aspirations and become the best they can be, they need to be able to access high quality learning experiences within safe, enriched environments. All young children deserve the support of the best quality provision. Children who experience high quality early years provision are well placed to achieve better outcomes in school, to develop better social, emotional and cognitive abilities throughout their lives. Provision is dependent on the commitment of well qualified staff to achieve this level of quality. 'If those working with young children have the necessary skills, knowledge and understanding, they have the potential to offer the formative experience all young children deserve' (Nutbrown, June 2012).

Appendix 1

About the Best Start Partnership

Achieving better outcomes for children and families means working across traditional boundaries between government departments and partner agencies in both the public, private, voluntary and community sectors with parents and their children. The Best Start Partnership offers a new 'whole system' approach by bringing together a wide range of stakeholders in a single body. It has and will continue to draw on the voices of children and families with local representatives from the public, private, community and voluntary sectors to provide unique insights representing the interests of children in the development, implementation and evaluation of government strategy and policy.

The purpose of the Partnership is to:

- represent the interests of children in the development, implementation and evaluation of government strategy and policy
- ensure that early years and childhood policy is co-ordinated, resource allocation is effectively prioritised and high quality practice is embedded across services and organisations
- support and help implement, integrate and monitor delivery plans for relevant outcomes
- support the delivery of the children's plan
- monitor and review the impact of policies and services for children and families.

Best Start Partnership Priorities (2019 – 2023)

A preventative approach to improving children's outcomes is the golden thread that runs through the priorities for improvement.

The priorities are to deliver:

1. Best Start for all: Building strong foundations for children's futures by supporting all children in Jersey to flourish.
2. Best Start Plus: Achieving equity of outcomes for all children.
3. Best Start Together: Recognising the strength of children, families and services working in partnership to achieve the best possible outcomes for all children.

ⁱ <https://parentinfantfoundation.org.uk/1001-days/> (accessed March 2021)

ⁱⁱ Save the Children (2015) Ready to Read [Northern Ireland](#) [England](#) [Scotland](#) [Wales](#) for full discussion of evidence.

ⁱⁱⁱ Save the Children (2015) Ready to Read [Northern Ireland](#) [England](#) [Scotland](#) [Wales](#) and [Early language delays](#) (2011)

^{iv} Law, J., Charlton, J and Asmussen, K. (2017) Language as a Child Wellbeing Indicator, Early Intervention Foundation

^v Ipsos MORI (2020) State of the Nation: Understanding Public Attitudes to the Early Years, The Royal Foundation

^{vi} Cooper, K and Stewart, K (2013) Does money affect children's outcomes? A systematic review. Joseph Rowntree Foundation.

^{vii} Campbell, T., Gambaro, L., and Stewart, K. (2019) *Inequalities in the experience of early education in England: Access, peer groups and transitions*. Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion, London School of Economics

^{viii} See for example, Brooks-Gunn, J. and Duncan, G. J. (1997). The effects of poverty on children. *Children and poverty*, 7 (2), pp. 55–71; Gregg, P., Propper, C. and Washbrook, E. (2008). Understanding the relationship between parental income and multiple child outcomes: decomposition analysis; Kiernan, K.E. and Mensah, F.K. (2011). Poverty, Family Resources and Children's Educational Attainment: The Mediating Role of Parenting. *British Journal of Educational Research*, 37 (2), pp. 317–336.

^{ix} Ibid