

0-5: How Small Children Make a Big Difference

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Alan Sinclair



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Introduction

This paper will demonstrate how vital the early years are to good economics, social mobility, quality of life, and consequently, government plans for modernisation and reform. It explores each of these in turn, and shows why parenting and early-year enrichment make such a big difference.



All Roads Lead to Early Years

There is a direct link between the experiences of early childhood and subsequent adulthood. And, what happens in the very earliest years of life makes the biggest difference. Brain development is most rapid in the months before birth and up to age five. If that is disrupted by drugs, alcohol, smoking, poor diet or stress then today's baby becomes tomorrow's disadvantaged child.

Once born, a child needs someone to love them and to respond to their needs. Even in the seemingly 'best' homes, parents worry about whether they are 'doing it right'. How much more difficult must it be for teenage single parents with multiple burdens? Research shows that support and education in parenting plus well-delivered, enriched day care, pay dividends to the family, the child and society.

If we do not engage with struggling parents and parents to be then, as night follows day, we know that their children will grow into the least healthy adults who are badly educated, cause their neighbours and the police most problems, and will be unemployed and on welfare benefits. In turn they will have children early and repeat the bad parenting. Current practice is to more or less grudgingly pick up the costs through a miscellany of public services from social work to the courts and prisons, hospitals and Jobcentre Plus.

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Schools and teachers are important but our parents, and what happens before we reach school, are more significant. It is estimated that by the age of three, 50% of our language is in place. At five, it's 85%. Language is either there or missing by the time a child starts primary school. And once a child starts primary school, they are only there for 15% of their time.¹

What the theory and practical studies of children's early years show is that there is an alternative. By applying a systematic approach and focusing on root causes rather than symptoms, parents can provide sufficiently loving homes for children to have better lives. But this presents a challenge to central and local government in deciding where and how money is spent.

There is a very big prize for getting this right. Morally, of course, it is right. It accords with principles of equal opportunity. And, on a practical level, early engagement pays a very high rate of return. The dividend is 12-16% per year for every £1 of investment - a payback of four or five times the original investment by the time the young person reaches their early twenties and the gains continue to flow throughout their life.

Early year Investment economically delivers efficiency and equity. It promotes economic growth by creating a more able workforce and reduces costs borne by the criminal justice, health and welfare system. For government of all shades, the challenge now is how, through early years investment, to modernise and reform the public sector. Efficiency in dealing with hospital waiting lists or the number of criminals locked up has blinded us to effectiveness in reducing the number of obese children or the number of youths prone to violent or disruptive behaviour.

We insist on more formal education and training to drive a car than to be a parent. But better parenting is not just for the 'unfortunate' and the 'feckless'. More affluent homes play with fire in outsourcing their babies too early and for too long. A culture of work and status denies parents the space to be with their children. Italian holiday guidebooks might say how enticing the UK is as a place to take children but our attitudes to children need a makeover.

Getting 'early years' right benefits the whole of society. Through economic research, psychology, biology and neuroscience, the answers come out the same: treat what happens in the first years as gold. What is massively encouraging is that improving what we do in early years is already happening but only on a small scale and in disparate places.

¹ Wishart R, Herald, 13 June 2006

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In the UK, we think that young children are the preserve of their mothers. The 'early years', we unquestioningly assume, are about children and mothers playing - not that important, and certainly not something that real men should spend much time on. Our most dangerous assumptions are the ones we do not know we are making.

This explains why, despite our best intentions, we have got it so wrong.

1. Where are we going wrong and can we do anything about it

Focusing on the point of impact

The 'point of impact' obsesses public policy making. But by focusing on impact, we systematically fail to find out and then treat the root causes. Here's an example from my own childhood.

John Daily was eight and my best friend at primary school in Bellshill. We were working on the class newspaper and had been asked to write about a topic that loomed large in our lives: getting knocked down by cars or, more accurately, not being flattened.

'Cars need to be fitted with a bag of a special type of glue, just above the wheels,' wrote John. 'When the driver has to break hard to avoid knocking into a child, the sudden hit on the brake bursts the bag, the specially formulated glue hits the tyre and the car stops dead.' Masterful, especially when accompanied by John's stick-like drawings.

John's problem solving had come up with an ingenious answer. However, he made the common mistake of assuming that the solution would be found literally at the point of impact - forget about traffic calming, speed restrictions and drumming it into children that they need to be wary of all traffic and to look both ways before they cross the road. A child may be forgiven for seeing the 'obvious' solution but the quick fix, the point of impact fix, is too often espoused by society.

The welfare state is rapidly becoming one big ambulance picking up the casualties and patching them up. I live in Glasgow, a city with a violent reputation. Despite a reduction in reported crime, actual knife crime is on the increase. Hospital accident and emergency admissions for violent crime are 2 to 3 times greater than that reported to the police.² I recently attended a presentation given by a consultant doctor describing the medical attention he gave to a man and woman admitted during the past month. I had to look away from the photographs on the screen; the woman had a large open gash that stretched from her front round to her back. In a second slide the man had a flap of skin hanging off the end of his arm - this was apparently his hand. This was a domestic fight and neither party reported it to the police.

For years, the health service has responded by creating what is proportionately the biggest accident and emergency service in the UK. It caters for the spike in knifings, which takes place between 4pm on Fridays and 4am on Sundays. We are 'good' at responding to impact as can be seen from a number of areas of public life.

² Warburton A L and Shepherd J L, *Tackling alcohol related violence in city centres' effects of emergency medicine and police interventions*, Emerg Med Journal 2006, www.emjonline.com
Shepherd J, Cardiff Violence Prevention, Home Office.

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Why have we spent so much public money on 'areas of deprivation', which are as much on the skids as ever despite their new designation as 'regeneration initiatives'? We diagnose poor housing and a mix of social problems including unemployment and set out to tackle both. We allocate money and seek two sets of results: auditable benefits and political kudos. While tangible gains are desirable, they usually mean that programme managers and politicians succumb to the route of least resistance or most easily measurable. That means 600 houses refurbished and 300 new homes built, contracts let, timescales and budgets set and monitored, and construction firms put to task.

Quietly, and over time, the social problems get squeezed and forgotten as we squabble about how much to spend per house and where to start construction. It is much easier to improve houses than people and to audit the results. So, even before we have paid off the interest on the public borrowing, we see the new housing deteriorate because the quick technical fix improved the houses but left the social problems untouched.

Failures are hailed as victories as figures show splendid outcomes. However, they are the wrong measures of outcome and although the professional managers know this they are obliged to conspire, whether willingly or with heavy hearts. Tick the box and meet the target, even if it is the wrong target.

Across the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development, the UK is in the bottom 25% of member countries in getting young people into work, education or training. Periodically, there is a headline or political initiative to tackle school leavers who have earned the acronym NEET (not in education, employment or training). In turn, we have launched a flotilla of initiatives aimed at the point of impact, from Youth Opportunity Schemes to Skillseeker Programmes. We have turned over much of the further education system to stem the effects of years of neglecting and failing young people. Every so often, youth programmes are attacked for being ineffective, and the structures are changed; we blame the programmes for failing young people who have all the odds stacked against them. This is yet another example of intervening at crisis point, when it is too late.

Putting the lifelong back into learning

In education, this failure has been elegantly turned into the very currency of language. Of course people need a chance to learn in later life. However, so much that passes for 'lifelong learning' is an escape clause giving each institution permission to fail. In management and process control, the guiding principle is to get it right first time. A mistake multiplies and becomes progressively more

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expensive to fix as customers are lost or one problem leads to another. Either we scrap lifelong learning or we take it seriously and start from day one.

We would like to see fewer suicides, less alcohol and drug abuse, obesity controlled, safer neighbourhoods and workers with better attributes. But typically, we treat the symptoms and not the causes. We come up with policies for housing and social support; harm reduction and methadone programmes; anti-social behaviour orders and job seeking initiatives. Of course, we have to treat symptoms; people face pain and predicament. But the balance is wrong and we are spending disproportionately on symptoms at the point of impact rather than treating the causes.

Family life

We know that stable families are more likely to produce well-balanced, capable children. But it is not easy. Working parents have a hard time juggling commitments and responsibilities. My purpose is not to add to the guilt, but to help us move beyond our current mindset and the child-minding status quo. Supernanny on television, and bookshelves full of manuals may help some individual parents. But they do not tell us what we are collectively doing to our small people, about culture and norms and nor do they reflect what research suggests.

Listen to the language we use to describe looking after children. We drop them off at 'childcare' on the way to work and pick them up at 5.30. Not dissimilar to what we do with our cars which we leave in the office car park, knowing they will be safe until we pick them up at night. Staff in both places are unlikely to have done well at school, and are on roughly the same (low) wage.

In several childcare centres I visited, managers and staff typically commented, 'I sometimes look into the baby room and wonder about what we are doing'. Children start as early as six weeks old, and for some, it is an 8am to 6pm shift.

Described by the New York Times as the most compelling window into modern family life, a website, soon to be launched in the UK, is in no doubt about its target audience: 'UrbanBaby has revolutionised and simplified the way in which time-consuming parents...'. 'Time-consuming' – great - we no longer need to fret about balancing children, work and a social life. Double-income, middle class families are consumed by time, and that is all right as long as they get the outsourcing of childcare right.

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Too many middle class homes indulge their children with hand-made leather bootees and expensive flashing toys as a demonstration of how much they care. We have created and been encouraged by our culture to think that we can have it all and do it all. But instead of achieving satisfaction and wellbeing, our choices often lead to bad parenting, frustration and disappointment.

'I needed my mum and dad to be there for me' is an often repeated remark made by young people who have come through a blighted childhood, 'and they were not there'. Irrespective of background, children need their mum or dad or a main carer who is there to look out for them.

In the majority of working-age households, both parents work. In one out of six households of working age no one goes to work, creating for the children an environment that is most likely poor in money and poor in culture. Commuting distances are longer. Many people in low-income jobs struggle to keep themselves afloat and have to navigate zero hour contracts, where the working parent does not know from one day or one week to another how many hours they will work or at what time of the day they will work. Higher earners lock themselves into strenuous financial commitments. The consequence is longer hours at work.

We are stealing our children's time. Parents spending the first year or more with their children are seriously undervalued. You will have been party to the conversation, 'And what do you do?' and the glaze of incomprehension or smart change of topic to the response 'I am at home looking after the kids'.

Family members who could provide support now live hundreds of miles away. And the delay in having children means that adoring grandparents if they are still alive are not fit to look after the children.

Outside work, social mores have changed. One in two marriages end in divorce. Our legal system is well engineered at the time of divorce to divide the family assets. We do not, like many other countries have a family counselling and court system that helps to reconcile contact between the children and their mother and father. Children for emotional reasons still want to see both their mothers and fathers. Financial support follows contact, a lesson ignored and contributing to the failure of the Child Support Agency.

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Families face significant social problems. For example, prescription and non-prescription drug taking has soared. Across the UK, there are between 250,000 and 300,000 children between the ages of 0 and 16 with drug abusing parents.³ An average primary school has 400 children. If all the children of drug abusing parents were of primary school age, they would fill 625 schools.

More people report mental health problems than ever before, and judging by the prison population we have an increasing number of criminals. In 1993 the average prison population across England and Wales was 44,500; by 1997 when Labour came into power it was 61,100 and by November 2006 a total of 77,000 people were in custody.⁴

But this is a whole-society problem, not just that of the 'feckless'. It is like the alcohol epidemic we are in the midst of. We all drink too much and there is too much drink around and it is too easily afforded. We need to move the national mean so that we all drink less. Similarly, we need to shift the mean so that parents find the wherewithal and permission to spend more time with their very young children.

Any one of the above causes stress in households with children. Add the cumulative effect of two, three or four of them and you seriously destabilise a household and increase the risk of young children suffering.

A Sense of Urgency

Two major trends, differential fertility and rapidly increasing violent crime create a particular urgency for getting to grips with what happens in the years 0-5. Before we come to that it is not commonly understood just how poor the position of UK children is compared to other European countries.

In *An Index of Child Well-being In the European Union* published in 2006 Jonathan Bradshaw and Petra Hoelscher trawl through the official data of the 25 countries of the European Union. They collect eight clusters of information; material situation, housing, health, subjective well-being, education, children relationships, civic participation and risk and safety. Within each cluster they reach down to examine particular manifestations. For example under 'material situation' statistics are collected on deprivation and workless families. In total 51 statistical indicators are examined and a comparative table produced for each cluster. Below is reproduced the average scores across

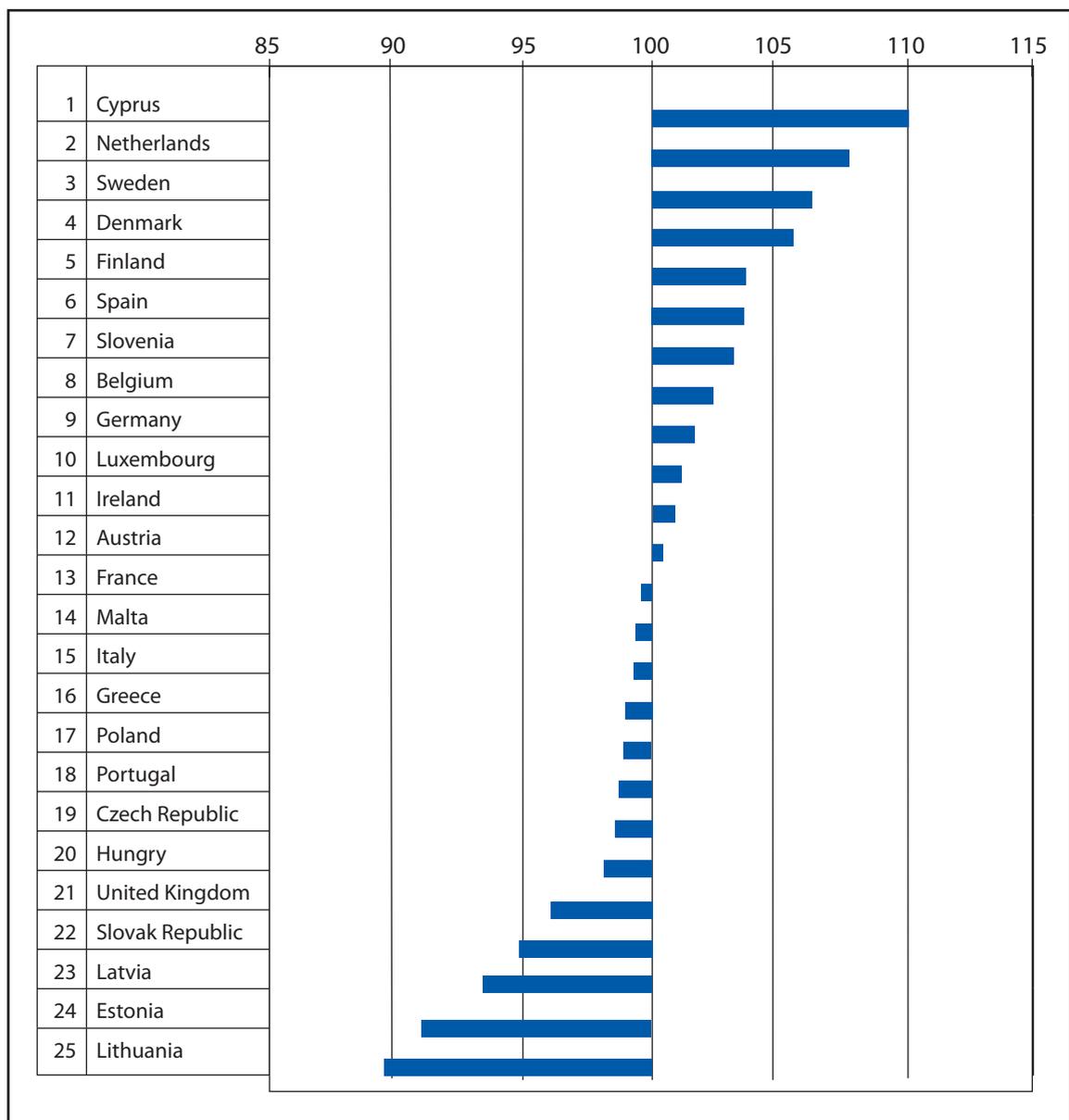
³ *Hidden Harm: Responding to the needs of children of problem drug users*, Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs, 2003

⁴ Home Office Research and Statistics Directorate, Research Findings

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all the domains in order to rank the results. It shows that the top performing countries are Cyprus, Netherlands, Netherlands, Denmark. and Finland. At the very bottom of the league is Lithuania followed by Estonia, Latvia, Slovak Republic, UK and Hungary - apart from the UK a collection of ex-Soviet satellites and client states. This comparative position should shame us into action. However it will likely be the more concrete consequences of what is happening all around us that will spur us into change.

Table 1: An index of child wellbeing in the European Union



Source: Bradshaw J and Hoelscher P, *An Index of Child Well-being In the European Union*, 2006

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As the sixties' swingers metamorphose into SAGA sweeties, we need to make sure there are enough working-age people to keep the economy turning over and to contribute to health and pension payments. However, within this demographic picture, there is a more significant sub plot. Children from poorer-functioning households tend to have children earlier and more often than the offspring of more affluent or stable households.⁵

I recently asked the director of a major charity, specialising in helping single mothers, why the predominately young women had children in the first place. 'Most have never been loved,' he answered, 'and they see this as the way of getting love into their lives.' Single mothers have not experienced Immaculate Conception but many young men do not accept responsibility for the consequences of their sexual proclivity – children. They perpetuate poor parenting and disadvantage.

Say a young woman aged 17 to 20 from a dysfunctional household has two children. In turn, those children are likely to have children young. Within a 40-year time span, that makes four children most likely raised both poor in money and poor in culture. An increasing number of more affluent women have no children or have their first child in their mid thirties. So, in the same 40 years, the more affluent household is likely to have one child. And so the geometric progression continues.

Public debate has taken account of the estimated shortage of people but not enough about differing behaviour and ability. This goes some way to explain why despite the best efforts of the welfare state it cannot adequately cope with the increasing volume of difficult school age children, life-style health problems and criminality.

Violent crime

Violent crime is increasing alarmingly, as police records attest. But even the police acknowledge that while they are getting better at recording violent crime, they are still grossly under reporting the actual occurrence of violence. Accident and emergency department figures for violent crime hugely exceed police records. Its impact is enormous and is estimated to cost more than £20 billion every year.⁶

Violence is not a great respecter of boundaries. Domestic violence represents 25% of all reported violent crime and it occurs right across all social classes. And while gun and knife carriers, almost exclusively men, do tend to live in poorer parts of our cities they practice their trade more widely.

⁵ Joshi and Wright, *Starting Life in Scotland, New Wealth for Old Nations*, Princeton University Press

⁶ Hoskings G, *Violence and What to do about it*, The Wave Report for 2005, www.wavetrust.org

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I went on holiday 27 years ago with an old school friend visiting 1st World War battlefields, climbing hills and camping. He now lives a few hundred miles away but we did manage to have lunch a year ago and he told me with pride about his son's character and achievements; he was about to enter St. Andrew's University to study history. While I was writing this paper the news came through that a man boarded a Virgin train in Lancaster with a woman and three young children. He set about verbally abusing her. His behaviour caught the attention of a young student who looked at him 'the wrong way'. The man stabbed the student to death. Thomas Grant was the student killed, my friend's son.

Violence takes different form; physical, emotional and, in the case of young children, neglect.

If we are to be tough on violence and the causes of violence it helps to know what the causes are and how we identify the risk factors. In a report, *Violence and what to do about it* the Wave Trust correlated a team of international violence experts. Their message boiled down to this; violence results from an interaction between two components, an individual propensity (personal factors) and external triggers (social factors such as overcrowding, bad housing, alcohol). On their own social factors do not cause crime. The experts argue that 'the propensity to violence develops primarily from wrong treatment before age 3.'

To the Wave experts who have studied violent and non-violent societies throughout the world, violence is not inevitable, we are not fated to be violent. Whole societies record no violence. The diagnosis of the causes of violence provides a foretaste of the solution; 'Empathy is the single greatest inhibitor of the propensity to violence. Empathy fails to develop when parents or prime carers fail to attune with their infants. Absence of such parental sensitive caring combined with harsh discipline is a recipe for violent, antisocial offspring.' A recipe of neglect plus harsh discipline is most likely to produce a difficult child and a violent adult. This is especially true for men who strike out. Women are more likely to internalise problems and develop mental health problems, often chronic.

If lack of empathy is the cause of violence, how do we identify the risk factors and act early? Before a baby is born there is likelihood of neurological impairment if the mother smokes, drinks alcohol, uses drugs or suffers stress. By stress I do not mean a bad day at the office, I mean domestic violence or its equivalent. Evidence tells us that domestic violence (almost exclusively perpetrated by men on women) often first occurs and escalates during pregnancy. It is also a risk factor for low

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birth weight, an indicator for postnatal depression and may seriously affect children who witness the abuse of their mothers or who are abused themselves.

Once a child is born the risk factors are associated with young mothers, single parents, neglect and incompetent care, maternal rejection and a mother's mental health. Young children, as well as being a target for physical or sexual abuse, have a ringside seat, as observers of violence.

Young babies learn about the world and interpret what is happening through relationships – for good or bad. Children learn through relationships to speak and say thank you or how to take their turn or how to strike out or how to move away from blows. Poor parenting skills are a strong predictor of anti-social behaviour.

Without a greater commitment to reducing domestic violence we will not reduce youth violence. This couldn't be further removed from the conventional Victorian wisdom 'spare the rod and spoil the child'.

A multi agency tool for case reviews and risk assessment⁷ has been designed and tested for women at risk but now needs to be more comprehensively used. Some health authorities train midwives to engage and win the trust of mothers to establish if domestic violence is taking place. Vulnerable women need help and violent men need to be supported to address their violence.

Institutionally the Home Office, the criminal justice system and the police have to be encouraged to tackle causes and pursue prevention.

There is sympathy in the police for this approach because they know from their own experience on the ground, from the records of their analysts and from hospital accident and emergency services, that while most crime is reducing, violent crime is increasing. We know from the long-term monitoring of disadvantaged children who have gone through good-quality early-year programmes that the most marked improvement is found in reduced criminal and violent activity. Financially this converts to the greatest saving to the taxpayer.

The World Health Organisation has advocated that violent crime be set within a public health model. Violent crime in its causes and effects for perpetrators, victims and onlookers is a public health issue. In Scotland the police have already established a national violence reduction unit,

⁷ Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferences, currently being trialled in different parts of the UK

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which has at its centre the concept of violent crime being seen within a public health model. In England any regional or a national violent reduction unit has still to be created. Violence reduction units could become major drivers of national change in tackling the causes of violence and criminality. The police know more than most what is happening on the streets and behind closed doors.

Recommendation: Establish a violence reduction unit working from a public health model in England or in English regions. This would act as a major driver of change and produce significant long-term savings.

Differential fertility and the increase in violent crime create the urgency for getting 0-5 years right. There are other very good reasons for acting.

The moral and economic arguments for change

It is close on ten years since Labour came into government. It has pledged to abolish child poverty by 2020. Increased in-work benefits and the minimum wage have lifted hundreds of thousands of families out of the worst of poverty. In England, a new and wholly commendable, 10-Year National Childcare Strategy and implementation plan was published in 2005. Sure Start and children centres, which I will return to later, have made a promising start but need to do more to match the scale, management and human complexity of the challenge. In Scotland, the picture has been patchier.

In both countries, parents have the prime responsibility as agents of change. But the state has a role in helping parents be better at parenting. Through risk assessment and outreach work parents who are struggling can be supported. Good day care enriches the experience of children and, if rooted in the community, can support parents and demonstrate appropriate caring skills.

Enriching early childhood experience and supporting parents in the crucial early years is pragmatic, challenging and economically efficient. Such an approach encourages fairness and equity; children have no choice in their parents. And, morally, it is the right thing to do. If we get the early years right, we will help people to look after themselves and, in time, get work. Instead of being a threat on the streets and a cost to the criminal justice system, a drag on their classmates and a liability to the health and the welfare system, they will turn into adults who can contribute positively to society.

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Fixing the problems at source

There is also a big message for government. Systematic analysis of early years and a flow of criminal justice, health, education, and welfare and work problems show that investing in early years pays off. If there is rain coming through your ceiling, you stick a bucket beneath the drips. You then either have to find ever-bigger containers to catch the flow or a roofer or plumber to solve the problem at source. In business, it is not enough to know that you have a cash flow problem; you want to know who is not paying, how the debtor register is being managed or if you have problems in your order book. In government and public sector reform, we need to move beyond exaltation and technical fixes. We need to get into causes and create aspirations that are worth getting out of bed for.

2. The evidence for early years enrichment

Why do some children grow up to be little angels and others to be out and out rogues? Is the way we turn out predetermined or susceptible to influence?

Before going into some of the complexities, let me give you the straightforward answer. Children are a reflection of the world in which they develop. If that world is safe, full of strong relationships, predictable and enriched by conversation and good experiences, the child will grow up to be a self regulating, thoughtful and productive member of society. If, on the other hand, the child's world is chaotic and threatening, devoid of close relationships, stimulation and supportive words, the child is much more likely to be impulsive, violent, inattentive and have difficulties with relationships.

The more we create the right kind of environment for our children with good relationships and appropriate stimulation, the more angels we create and the fewer rogues.⁸

The most important six years in a person's life are up to the age of five.

We really ought not to be born when we are. Our brains and bodies have been busy forming inside the womb, but while we have the requisite number of fingers and toes when we arrive, our brains have not nearly finished taking shape. Stephen J Gold, the eminent palaeontologist and evolutionist, points out that nature has to send us out early, otherwise we would, in evolutionary and physical terms, be well and truly stuck. Longer in the womb and the foetus would grow a head size that would prevent it coming through even the best childbearing hips.

I thought the first five years of a child's life were the most critical. But Professor Vivette Glover, professor of perinatal psychobiology at Imperial College London, persuaded me that the nine months before seeing the light of day absolutely had to be included in this paper, and this is why.

Vivette's words summarise the work of a series of research scientists, '(The) programming hypothesis brings a new perspective to public health. Diseases that were once thought to arise near the time of their manifestation in adult life are now known to have roots in pre- and early postnatal life.'

Prenatal stress results in increased behavioural and emotional problems and impaired cognitive and language development. It can also contribute to Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder.

⁸ Professor Perry B, Maltreatment and the Developing Child: How Childhood Experiences Shapes Child and Culture, Margaret McCain Lecture, 2004

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Out of the one million UK children with emotional and behavioural disorders, Vivette estimates that for 150,000 children, the onset of the problem is during pregnancy and caused by prenatal stress. Screening during pregnancy, backed up by counselling or cognitive behavioural therapy can make a difference, as can sensitive postnatal care.

The Nurse Family Partnership is a programme designed by David Olds of the University of Colorado and, over 27 years, has been implemented in various parts of America. Its evaluation shows reduced child abuse and neglect and less parental alcohol and drug abuse. It targets predominately young, poor, single mothers as early on in pregnancy as possible and has three aims: to improve the outcomes of the pregnancy by helping women improve their prenatal health; to improve the child's health by providing more sensitive and competent care; and to improve parental life by helping parents plan future pregnancies, complete their education and find work.

In three, large-scale, randomised controlled trials the programme has been tested and evaluated with different populations living in different contexts. It has been demonstrated that parental care of children has improved with fewer injuries associated with child abuse and neglect and better emotional and language development. Over a longer period the mothers have fewer subsequent pregnancies, greater workforce participation and reduced dependency on welfare. In late 2006, the welcome news was announced that Child Family Partnership projects would be trailed in the UK.

Jeanne Brooks-Gunn of Columbia and Princeton Universities has carried out an 18-year follow up of the Infant Health and Development Programme that targeted low birth weight and premature babies, especially those weighing three to four pounds or less. Such children usually have a higher risk of behavioural and academic problems. Support groups were made available to parents; in the first year of life they received weekly home visits (cut back to every other week in the second and third years of life) and they participated in centre-based early education.

At age five, the benefits to the very lightest babies began to fade but among the babies marginally heavier at birth, at 18 years of age they were still scoring higher on achievement tests than the children that had not received the services.

Reviewing evidence from her work in the Infant Health and Development Programme and the work of other researchers Brooks-Gunn draws a number of conclusions. First, high-quality, centre-based programmes enhance achievement and behaviour at school. Second, these effects are

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strongest for poor children and for children whose parents have had little education. Third, these benefits continue through primary school and high school years, though they are reduced in high school. Fourth, programmes that are continued into primary school and that offer high doses of early intervention have the most sustained long-term effects.

Recommendation: All pregnant women should be screened for health and social risks. The service should be conducted in such a way as to build trust and confidence. In turn health, social work, police and voluntary organisations have to be available to provide follow up services.

Parenting is the pivotal factor that determines a child's future. Once we realise that then we give parenting the priority it deserves and design what we do accordingly. For example, if we can teach algebra at school, we can teach parenting. Originally devised in Canada but now expanding beyond its borders, the Roots of Empathy programme arranges for a facilitator, a mother and her young baby to visit and engage with young people in school. The aim is to help the children come to terms with empathy and sensitive responsiveness in their own life and as they grow up and become parents. Evaluation results from the University of British Columbia, using a control group, testify to a range of significant improvements in emotional knowledge, social understanding, and pro-social behaviour with peers, and decreases in aggression and bullying with peers.

In the beginning

Teachers and day centre workers sometimes claim they can tell, from day one, which children will succeed and which will fail. Can such a judgement really be made so early on in a child's life?

In 1972, in Dunedin New Zealand, 1,000 children were tested to see if such predictions were false prophecy or searching insight. Nurses carried out a 90-minute observation of children at three. They identified an 'at risk' group on the basis of the children's restlessness, negativity and lack of persistence and attention.

At 21, the 'at risk' group was compared with a control group:

- 47% of the 'at risk' group abused their partners, compared to 10% of the control group
- Three times as many of the 'at risk' group had antisocial personalities
- Two and a half times as many of the 'at risk' group had two or more criminal convictions

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- For the 'at risk' group, 55% of the offences were violent, compared to 18% of the control group, and were more seriously violent, including robbery, rape and homicide
- 30% of the 'at risk' women had teenage pregnancies, with none in the control group.

The predictive powers of the nurses are scarily good, and the study suggests we can tell something about a child's future from how they behave at a very young age.⁹ What is going on in those 0-3 years that causes such radical behavioural differences that they can be so easily spotted by professionals?

A sponge or a child?

In the womb and in the first few years of life, the neural system and the brain change according to use. Dr Bruce Perry, an internationally recognised authority on child trauma and maltreatment, describes how; 'Physical connections between neurons - synaptic connections - increase and strengthen through repetition or wither through disuse...early life experiences, therefore, determine how genetic potential is expressed, or not...During the first years of life, the higher parts of the brain become organised and more functionally capable. Brain growth and development is profoundly "front loaded" such that, by age four, a child's brain is 90% adult size. This time of great opportunity is a biological gift.'

This biological gift of early childhood presents great opportunity for development but also great vulnerability to neglect and inappropriate or abusive care giving.

It is common to refer to children as sponges. That description almost accords with medical and neurological science. If we were more scientifically faithful, we would describe babies and toddlers as growing sponges. A child starts as a small sponge and, as they form a warm loving relationship and take in more and more, the brain expands. This can be vividly seen in images from CT scans that show a larger and different-shaped brain for an average three-year-old, from that of a child who has suffered severe sensory deprivation and neglect.

The images in Figure 1 on the next page illustrate the negative impact of neglect on the developing brain. The CT scan on the left is from a healthy three year old with an average head size. The image on the right is from a three year old suffering from severe sensory-deprivation neglect. This child's brain is significantly smaller and has abnormal development of cortex.

⁹ i. Dunedin Multidisciplinary Health and Development research Unit, University of Otago.

ii. Moffitt and Caspi, *Violence between intimate partners: Implications for child psychologists and psychiatrists*, 1998

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Figure 1: Maltreatment and the Developing Child



Source: The Margaret McCain lectures series, Inaugural lecture by Bruce D. Perry, *Maltreatment and the Developing Child*, 2004

Attachment

John Bowlby, a British psychiatrist, became aware, by observing children and their mothers, that psychiatry was giving too much attention to the child's fantasy world and not enough attention to their real world experiences. In 1944, working in a London child guidance clinic, he carried out a rigorous study from case notes and published a classic paper, *Forty Four Juvenile Thieves, their characters and home lives*. A significant minority of the children had 'affectionless characters', a phenomenon he linked to their histories of maternal deprivation and separation and went on to describe as 'attachment theory'. Attachment in early life is an essential part of a child's development. Failure to form an attachment, or serious disruption to the attachment during the sensitive period of a baby's life, can have serious consequences. In particular, this can cause affectionless behaviour, where an individual is unable to experience guilt or feelings for their victims.

This sounded remote to me until I remembered the interview on Panorama of a young man, in his late teens, who had stabbed a person to death in the street. Did he feel regret or remorse? No, it was bad luck that the guy he stabbed happened to be walking by at that moment.

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A second possible consequence of poor attachment is developmental retardation. There is a critical period in an infant's life for intellectual development, and if the infant is deprived for too long, they will suffer retardation and low intelligence.

Get attachment right and our children form and maintain healthy emotional bonds and relationships.

Sensitive Responsiveness

Attachment was taken a step further by the Canadian Mary Ainsworth who studied children in the family home. She observed the attachment of children through 'The Strange Situation'. In this experiment, there are eight episodes of exposure, which led Ainsworth to categorise children into three types of attachment and to conclude that the major factor of a child/parent attachment is the quality of the care given by the primary carer. Vital to good parenting is what she called 'attunement' or in plain language 'sensitive responsiveness' - that is, how successful the parent or carer is in picking up and responding to the child's signals.

I attended a family centre in one of the poor neighbourhoods of Glasgow where this theory was vividly reproduced. Over a two-hour period, I talked to a group of six women about the assistance they were getting, their circumstances and their children. Later in the day, I reviewed the session with one of the leaders of the centre. I asked her what kept her going and what was her biggest success with the group? She identified one of the women who had a learning difficulty and said, 'It has taken us two years to get her to play with her child.'

She also told me that the challenge in the parenting class, where the rudiments of parenting are taught and reinforced, is that the parents themselves need to be parented. So, it is not just brown hair and big ears that we inherit; we largely reproduce, for good or bad, the way we were brought up.

Psychologists are not real scientists

Watching what children do and drawing conclusions is sometimes dismissed as woolly mumbo jumbo. Real scientists in white lab coats have not had a lot of time for attachment and attunement. However, in the last ten years, advances in neurochemistry have demonstrated that adult levels of the hormone cortisol are affected by what happens before birth and in our earliest years.

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Cortisol is secreted to prepare us for flight or fight. When a baby is upset the brain produces cortisol; in normal amounts this is helpful. However, if the baby is continually overexposed to stress, the brain becomes flooded with cortisol. In effect, the cortisol thermostat gets jammed, permanently, with the smallest stimulus triggering a great secretion or no secretion. Low cortisol levels are associated with alcoholism, detachment and aggression and high with fearfulness and depression.

Babies do not regulate their response to stress on their own, they learn through the repeated experience of being rescued, or not, from distress by others. If a baby gets appropriate adult responses, they learn that people can be relied upon, and their brain produces beneficial amounts of cortisol. By six months, the baseline cortisol level is set for good or ill. Sue Gerhart, a psychoanalytic psychotherapist, in her book, *Why Love Matters: how affection shapes a baby's brain* studies the neuroscience and shows how, through cortisol and serotonin baselines, good parenting is not just a pleasant experience for children but establishes the capacity to develop self-control and empathy. In short, scientific evidence draws a pretty straight line between the kind of love or neglect we receive in infancy and the type of adult we become.

Early influences

Our behaviour is largely learned, and we are more malleable the younger we are. Martin Seligman, the American positive psychologist, came to appreciate, through his experiments with animals and work with children, that helplessness is learned. Animals and people give up without trying if they see that 'nothing I do matters'. Encouragingly, as he demonstrates in *The Optimistic Child*, the converse is also true. Children can be taught appropriate optimism and mastery, and how to have a more authentic understanding of who they are and what they can do.

In 2000, the American Academy of Science completed a two and a half year exercise evaluating and integrating 'an explosion of research in neurobiological, behavioural and social sciences'. This tells us that it is no longer scientifically plausible to debate 'nature v nurture', they are not independent influences. Scientists have shifted their focus to account for the fact that genetic and environmental influences work together in a dynamic way over the course of brain development and the unfolding of human behaviour. At centre stage they place early relationships as a source of support and adaptation or, if those relationships do not work, as the route to risk and dysfunction. Formation of capabilities, complex emotions and essential social skills all take place in the earliest years. In their recommendations, they conclude that we have the capacity to increase the odds of favourable outcomes through planned interventions.¹⁰

¹⁰ *From Neurons to Neighbourhoods*, National Research Council, USA; National Institute of Medicine, USA; Committee on Integrating the Science of Early Childhood Development / National Academies Press (NAP) , 2000

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To summarise: if in the first three years of a child's life there is sensitive care - a good attachment, then children will feel better in themselves, be more resilient and appreciate other people's feelings. The child will have the capacity for empathy. If the relationships that surround the child are working the brain, like a muscle, will take advantage of the correct type of exercise and grow. If there are failed attachments, abuse and neglect we can expect the child to grow into an adolescent and adult who knows no empathy, does not respect rules, is disruptive and prone to violence or mental health problems. Early year engagement and relationships with the carer or family will break the cycle of insecure attachment by building on brain plasticity. Leave it too late and it is so much harder to change, if it can be changed at all.

So far in this section we have been looking at the first three years of life. We will now turn to the next stage - three to five years.

Perry High School

David Weikart was the special education director in Ypsilanti, Michigan in 1962 when desperation drove him into a series of what, in retrospect, were landmark actions. His area of the inner city was poor and mostly black with rampant school failure. Weikart's insight was to design and implement a programme to get ahead of the problem. It was not any old programme; at its core was the belief that children learn best through active experiences and following their own interests. Through play and making choices, children become naturally engaged. In what has now become known as the Perry High/Scope curriculum there are five key groups of experience: creative representation; language and literacy; initiative and social relations; movement and music; and logical reasoning. You will see later how this early year curriculum addresses the very attributes UK employers find lacking in their employees.

Children joined at three, and for two years spent five half days a week following the programme. This was supplemented by a one and a half hour weekly home visit. Teaching staff or nursery workers were all high calibre and tutored in the programme's method to promote child interaction, engage in dialogue and help the children to reflect. After two years, there was no further special input or intervention, and each child was on its own.

At this point, you would take your hat off to David. But he did something else that the rest of us can be grateful for: he identified 123 children whose IQ scores were lower than 90 and randomly assigned 58 of them to a programme group which participated in the curriculum and home visits

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and 65 to another group which received no preschool programme. At the end of the two years, he followed up both groups yearly from three to 11 years and again, as the results became so compelling, at 14,15, 19, 27 and, most recently, at 40.

In the world of research methodology, random assignment and subsequent follow up of the programme and control group provides the gold standard in robustness of results. In this instance, the random assignment means that the children's pre-school experience remains the best explanation for subsequent group differences in performance over the years.

What were the results? School completion rates went up, with 65% of the programme group finishing high school against 45% from the control group who received no intervention. This was a fortunate result for David, who could now keep his job, especially as some of the early studies in the late 1960s were very inconclusive or even pointed to a failure – for example there was no recorded sustainable upward shift in IQ.

Now, 40 years later, the measured benefits released by the programme are staggering:

- It was in crime prevention that the most significant gains were recorded: 28% of the programme group had been sentenced to prison against 52% of the control group; 36% of the programme group had been arrested five times or more against 55% of the control group
- 76% of the programme group were in employment against 62% of the control group
- Median annual earnings were \$5,500 more for the programme group than the control group
- At age 19, only 16% of the programme participants had multiple pregnancies compared to 29% of the control group. At age 27, 8% of the programme group had three or more children outside marriage, compared to 31% of the control group
- Fewer programme males - 17% - reported using sedatives, sleeping pills or tranquilizers against 43% for the control group. No male programme group members reported using heroin against 9% of the control group.

Working with a significantly disadvantaged group of young children and their families part-time for two years, the programme measured major benefits to the criminal justice system, health, educational attainment, employment and reduced dependency on welfare.

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Using inflation-adjusted costs and benefits, discounted at 3%, the economic return from the initial investment of \$15,166 per participant was \$258,000. At age 40, the return was \$17 per dollar originally spent.¹¹

Improvement through enrichment

Three other rigorous USA studies provide further evidence.¹² In the Early Training Project, the Carolina Abcderian Project and the Milwaukee Project, little evidence was found of long-term improvement in IQ but all found positive effects on school and college attainment. Each project varied in the degree to which it involved parents, the age at which children started and the curriculum content. However, the conclusions reached are broadly the same: there is little lasting improvement in IQ but a noticeable improvement in social skills and behaviour. Over time, motivation and social skills reduce the impact on crime, and improve health and job market performance.

But permanent improvement in IQ was found in the Abcderian programme, a programme which uniquely started when children were only four months old.

In each of the above examples, a set of model conditions exists in programme delivery and research rigour. Overall, the number of children involved is small, and the management demands of a quality programme are not too onerous. That said, they show conclusively that through enrichment in early years, children from disadvantaged backgrounds can be given a good start in life. A start that endures, even if there is some fade out, thanks to improved social skills and motivation. Evidence conclusively testifies to the returns being greater for more disadvantaged children.

'They fuck you up your mum and dad'... or do they?

What parents do with their children is more important than who parents are. A good household culture can ride out the effects of poverty. Poor mothers or fathers with few qualifications can improve their children's progress through activities that engage and stretch the child. High quality, pre-school provision has positive and enduring effects on children's intellectual and social development.

These are some of the strongest findings from Europe's largest relevant research project. Conducted in England, the Effective Pre-school and Primary Education Project, designed to

¹¹ Schweinhart L J, *The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study Through Age 40*

¹² Currie, *Early Childhood Intervention Programs: What do we know?*

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investigate the effectiveness of pre-school education, has collected a wide range of background information on 3,000 children, their families and home environments. From 1997 onwards, three-year-olds were drawn from a range of providers; local authority nurseries, playgroups, private nurseries, nursery classes and a sample of 'home' children, without any pre-school group experience. Results gathered when the children entered primary school and at the end of their first and second year of primary demonstrate the beneficial effects of high quality early provision on intellectual development and social behaviour. (See also the EPPE website www.ioe.ac.uk/eppe/projects and Submission from Effective Pre-School and Primary Education Project 3-11 and Appendix A , to the Scottish Parliament.)

In an encyclopaedic *A Literature Review of the Impact of Early Year Provision* produced for the National Audit Office, Professor Melhuish of Birkbeck College, London concludes: 'For provision for over threes, the evidence is consistent that pre-school provision for this age range is beneficial to educational and social development of the whole population. The effects are greater for high quality provision... Disadvantaged children particularly benefit from pre-school provision.'

Experimental evidence and scientific theory both tell us that the early years, from conception to age five, make the big difference in setting up children to succeed or to fail. A large group of children in the UK are born to fail.¹³ It may be inevitable that they are born in poor family circumstances, but we now know that if we take the right steps fewer will fail. If more people grow up able to manage their own lives, they in turn are more likely to be better parents than they would have otherwise been, and are more likely to equip their own children with attributes which contribute to fulfilled and purposeful lives. Perhaps the Jesuits were here first, 'Give us a child till he is seven and he is ours for life'.

With so much evidence, as well as common sense, why have we not tackled this already now? To answer this question, we need to look at a cocktail of politics, finance and economics.

¹³ Wedge P and Prosser H, *Born to Fail*, National Children's Bureau, 1973

3. The political economy of early years enrichment

An interplay of institutional and economic factors has robbed children from the womb to the age of five of appropriate respect and attention.

In a shared house the washing up tends to accumulate in the sink because it is no one's responsibility to do it. Similarly, reducing stabbing in Glasgow and other major cities is not the primary responsibility of the hospitals, schools or police. Likewise, universities, secondary and primary schools are only responsible for improving the education of the young people once they come through their door. They are not charged with increasing the intellectual and behaviour capacity of our community as a whole. All of these institutions would appreciate the benefits of better parenting and early year enrichment but it is not their responsibility. As with the tenants and the dirty crockery, no single institution of local or central government has had a prime responsibility or treated parenting and early year enrichment as a priority.

The collective benefits of getting it right from conception to five have not been realised over time because, on an institutional scale, 'It is not my job.'

A failure to house significant responsibility in any one place means that no one pushes the case or pulls the levers to make it happen. Of course, there are many people who are passionate about early years. But their muscle and the strings they pull in the political arena are insignificant against the muscle of universities, local authorities and the health service all fighting for funds.

There is public and political clamour to increase financial support from the state to keep down the costs to parents of university education. You will not find the public as vociferous about early years, even if it makes more educational sense to invest in them. Nor will you find under-fives taking to the streets or threatening to withhold their baby-teeth smiles.

People working with young children are not accorded a high status, their contribution is not recognised. To get promotion or a higher salary means moving out of early years.

Experience of the policy process across unemployment, regeneration and economic development has led me to create the following hierarchy of what packs the biggest punch in determining what or who comes out on top of political and spending processes:

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- We do it because it is what we have done in the past
- Quick fixes
- The primacy of cost and value
- Who has the biggest elbows and pulls the right strings?
- What will the media say?
- What is urgent or in fashion?
- Cock up: mistake has built upon mistake and it has got us here
- Who hates whom

And only finally evidence. That is evidence as hard unadulterated fact as opposed to evidence adapted or selected to meet a prior ideology or vested interests.

These are the obstacles that early year enrichment faces in moving onto the stage, never mind centre stage.

At present, early years is the Cinderella of policy making and delivery. Resources seem to be allocated more on body mass than on effectiveness of the investment. For a long time it has not been clear who with clout is responsible. Nor do we fall over contenders who will make a fuss and give the concerted push that is needed to offer children the best start.

Politicians from different political parties have started to demonstrate an interest in early years but not sufficiently large in scale to create the desired movement. Public interest needs to rear its head. That this will happen is not too difficult to imagine, as in some sense everyone already knows the decisive nature of 0-5 years. We need to move beyond the perception that early years are just about children playing, and show that investment is good economics, good business and good social policy.

James Heckman and the economics of early years

In 2000, James Heckman of Chicago University received the Nobel Prize in economics for developing the theory and methods for analysing selective samples. Simply, he pioneered ways of

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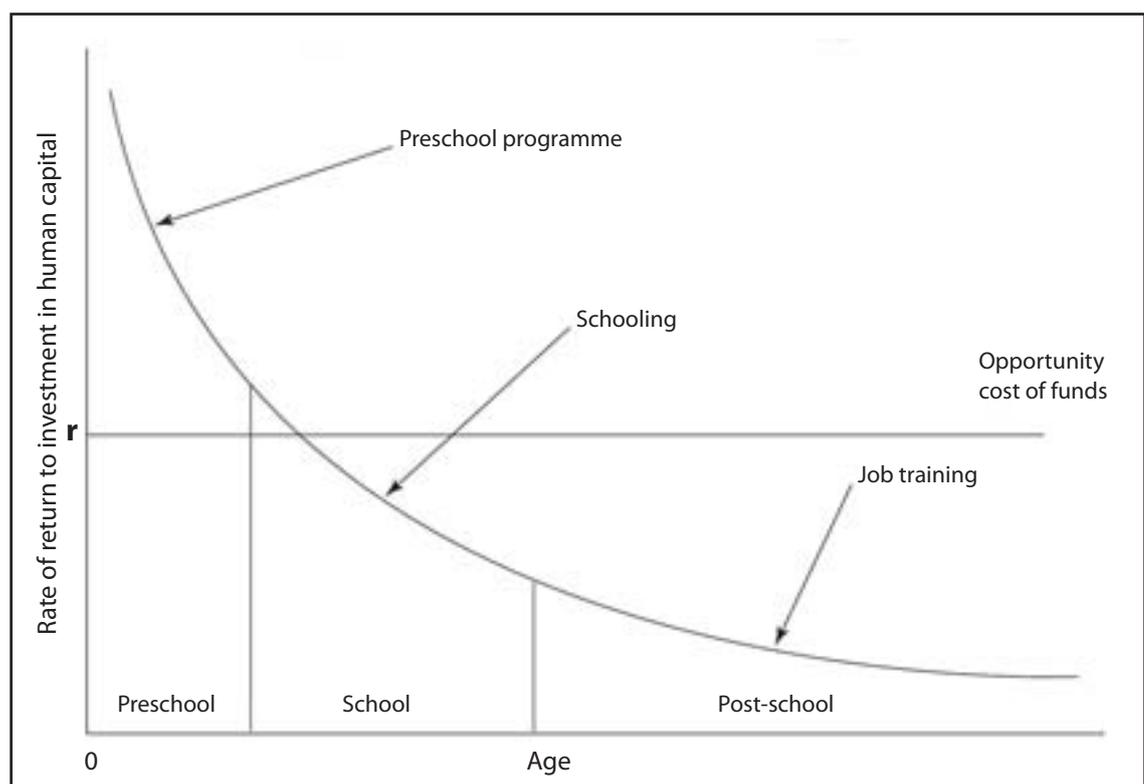
examining large-scale collection of data to see if what people did in practice, over time, confirmed or contradicted what economic theory said they would do. One of his main fields of study and writing has concerned itself with complex data on skills and education.

In a lecture given as part of the Allander series, he argued that skill formation policy should be based on the following basic principle:

‘A major determinant of successful schools is successful families. Schools work with what parents bring them. They operate more effectively if parents reinforce them by encouraging and motivating children. Job training programs, whether public or private, work with what families and schools supply them and cannot remedy twenty years of neglect... skill formation policy should be based on this basic principle.’

He uses the following graph to show the rate of return on money invested in education between the age of 3 and 22.

Figure 2: Rates of return to human capital investment initially setting investment to be equal across all ages



Source: Cunha F, Heckman J J, Lochner L and Masterov D V., 'Interpreting the Evidence on Life Cycle Skill Formation', *NBER Working Paper Series*, National Bureau of Economic Research, Cambridge, MA, USA, May 2005

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This graph summarises the findings of an entire literature as it plots the rate of return to human capital at different ages for a person of a given ability. The horizontal axis represents age and the vertical axis represents the rate of return to investment assuming the same investment is made at each age. Holding everything else constant, the rate of return to a pound of investment made while a person is young is higher than the rate of return to the same pound made at a later age. Early investment is harvested over a longer period of time but also, because of the nature of learning, early cognitive and non-cognitive learning helps to facilitate later learning.

If it is to be successful remedial work for young people coming out of an impoverished environment becomes progressively more costly, the later it is attempted.

For any fixed level of investment, it pays to invest less in the old and more in the young. Heckman derives this graph from data and as such he does not plot rates of return on years 0-3 due to the obvious difficulty of achieving robust test and questionnaire results with babies. Heckman thinks that if he could get reliable results, he would need to redraw the graph to show even greater returns in the first three years of life.

Skill formation is dynamic; skill begets skill, motivation begets motivation. Success breeds success and failure begets failure. It promotes productivity in the economy and reduces social costs met by other members of the community as well as a range of institutions:

‘Early interventions have much higher returns than other later interventions such as reduced pupil teacher ratios, public job training, convict rehabilitation programmes, tuition subsidy (at university) or expenditure on police.’¹⁴

Heckman goes against the educational convention that equates skills with intelligence. Intelligence and behavioural skills determine economic and social success. Both are malleable at an early age but there is evidence that behavioural skills are more plastic and able to be shaped at a later age. Too much education and skills policy focuses on IQ simply because it can be measured.

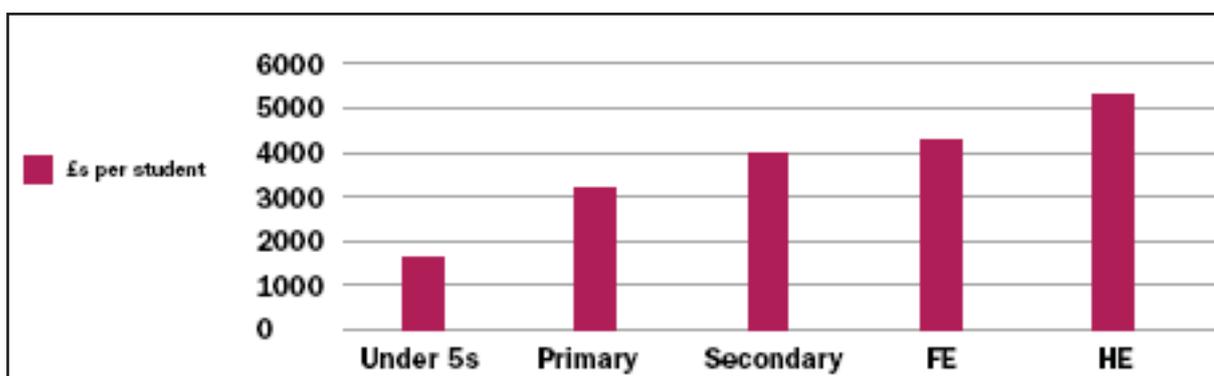
Heckman’s evidence and challenge have profound implications for much private and public investment in children. Early family environments are major predictors of both cognitive and non-cognitive abilities. Families and not schools are the major contributors to inequality in student performance. He argues that we should invest early in children, particularly disadvantaged children, on the grounds of economic efficiency.

¹⁴ Heckman, *Investing in Disadvantaged Young Children is an Economically Efficient Policy*, New York, January 2006; Heckman J and Masterov DV in *New Wealth for Old Nations*, edited by Coyle D, Alexander W and Ashcroft B, Princeton University Press 2005.

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To bring Heckman's analysis into stark relief, look again at the diagram and ask yourself how we allocate public funds across the age range from 0 to 22 years. In the best traditions of education, I will now give you the answer. We spend most per head on university places, followed by secondary school, then primary schools with nursery provision taking up the rear and stopping at three years of age. It could be argued that there is some expenditure from birth to six months through health visitors. What we actually spend is almost the exact opposite to the optimal rate of return plotted by Heckman.

Figure 3: The pattern of public spending on education over the life cycle, 2002/3



Source: Alakeson V, *Too Much, Too Late: Life chances and spending on education and training*, Social Market Foundation 2005

If you are still not convinced, let's turn to the labour market where all of us find a home or suffer the pain of unemployment.

What do employers need?

What do employers want from their workers? What attributes do we want in our children? Is there a difference?

Between 2002 and 2006, 19,000 employers, public and private, of all sizes and sectors across Scotland, were asked how hard they found it to recruit people and what their opinions were of their current employees. Back came the message to Futureskills Scotland that most employers, most of the time, were pleased with the labour market and the education and training system. A similar message emerged from the English employer survey.

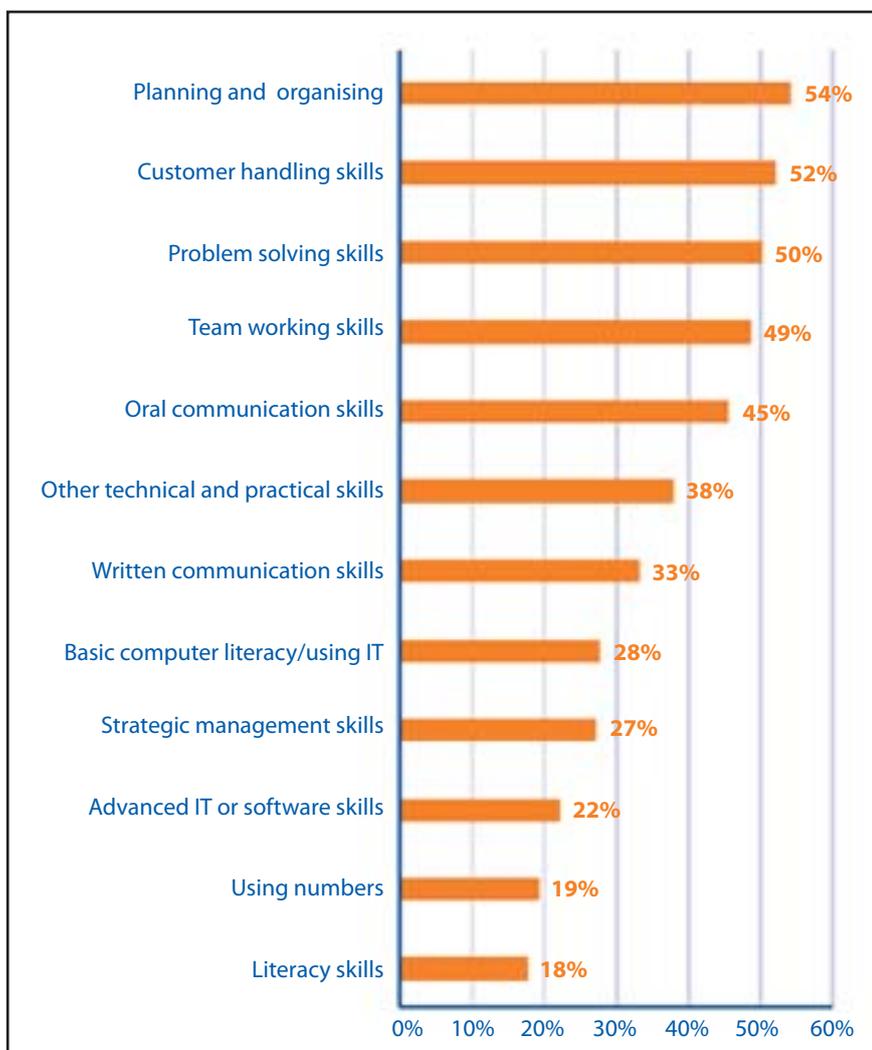
In this happy and reassuring picture there was one large worrying cloud and it was this. Three groups of employers were dissatisfied: growing companies; workplaces that took on school leavers

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and employers of lower skilled workers. To put this into scale, employers judged that one in ten of their employees had weak skills.

What were the deficiencies that concerned employers? Here is what employers who reported skill gaps said.

Figure 4: Skills lacking among employees with skill gaps



Source: Future Skills Scotland, Employer Survey 2004

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In less sanitised language, a large slice of our workforce is not good at talking and listening, working with other people or solving simple problems. Or to put it even more bluntly, it is about people not having the right attitude and behaviour. As employers, or as take-it-or-lump-it consumers, we know this picture to be true.

Stop and look again at the skill gaps identified by employers. In academic speak they would be labelled as non-cognitive skills associated with behaviour more than academic learning. But if you take a second look, you can see the 'skills' gaps referred to by employers are the 'skills' that are needed to navigate life. Speaking, listening, working with others, and problem solving are skills for mastering the workplace and life.

If 'cognitive' is an over-elaborate description, so too is 'skill'. Our most basic attributes as functioning humans are language, knowing how to get on with others and a small dash of initiative.

It is not hard to deduce that, if employers are saying that people they have taken on have less than adequate attitudes and behaviour, then the problem is even greater amongst people not selected by employers, the unemployed. In the last 30 years, more jobs have been created at the higher managerial and at the lower-skilled end of the market, with the middle hollowing out; the hourglass effect. Entry-level jobs are at the lower end of the market and it is the employers of the lower skilled who have expressed the greatest dissatisfaction. Unlike 30 to 50 years ago, today's lower-skilled jobs have more to do with service skills than muscle.

Recent labour market experience across the UK shows how employers have dealt with a tightening labour market. On my most recent overnight visit to London a young woman who served me breakfast came from Uzbekistan. Grateful employers looking for reliable people with the right attitude have scooped up Poles, Lithuanians and passing South Africans. Employers have behaved rationally. Our domestic long-term unemployed are not the answer to employers' dreams. In other cases the hourly rate is not enough to tempt them off their regular, if not very comfortable, welfare benefits.

Public and private employers are the final arbiters and they are telling us by what they do, that they are not in a hurry to employ our fellow citizens. No amount of political exhortation or appealing to the cuddly side of employers is going to change that.

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If one in ten of our current labour force lacks basic attributes and an even greater number of the long-term unemployed have the same set of deficiencies in greater depth, we have to ask why this has come to pass. How come so many people are reaching working age without the fundamental attributes to open an employer's door? Where and at what age do you learn to speak and listen, get on with others and take some initiative?

By now you know, if you only dimly knew before, that we form these critical attributes in the first years of our lives, in the womb, on our parents' knees and before we ever set a tiny foot in a primary school. Our parents speak to us before we can speak back (both as babies and as adolescents), help to separate fighting siblings and engage us in play.

All roads lead to the same place; more emphasis on the home, parenting and early year enrichment.

An economic warning

In late 2006 the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in their 'Education at a Glance' series highlighted a general problem that was becoming more acute for the UK because of 'The significant share of individuals who do not complete upper secondary education'. Their briefing note warns that, 'While a relatively large proportion of young people not holding strong baseline qualifications has been manageable for the UK in the past, when the demand for advanced qualifications was not so great, the limited progress at the upper secondary level may now become a serious bottleneck for further education progress at the higher levels'.

In effect what current employers and the OECD are saying amounts to the same, at the top end of the social and qualification scale the standard reached is good but at the bottom end with the less qualified and people lower down the social ladder there is a problem. It makes life difficult for the employer and the OECD warns that it poses a risk for economic health.

The pay-off and paying for early years enrichment

If we invest in the years from conception to five, the return will be improved behaviour and increased educational attainment or, as economists say, better human capital, one of the key components to increasing gross domestic product and growth. Growth modelling on early years investment by the Brookings Institute leads it to conclude that in the USA, 'Using reasonable

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assumptions, we project that GDP would be \$988 billion larger within 60 years.' This is a very large number. There are also significant social benefits.¹⁵

No one has modelled the dynamic and complex factors that would affect growth in the UK. Initially, if everything else were equal, costs would go up for screening and support during pregnancy through to parenting and enrichment for children from 0 to five and again at 16–18 as more young people stay on at school. Attainment in education would start improving from primary year one with children arriving with better behaviour, motivation and language. Cost savings would start to kick in around age 12 when the criminal justice system and the police would record the first savings. Health savings would start to be realised in the teenage years with first pregnancies occurring later and fewer costs associated with drug and alcohol abuse. From 18 onwards more people would be in work and there would be a fall in the number of young people not in education, employment or training. Tax payments would increase and there would be less of a demand on benefits.

What do the figures tell us?

There is a close parallel between the economic and political reasoning behind the Stern Report on *The Economics of Climate Change* and the case for early year enrichment. In both cases there is market failure, the problem and the opportunity is not something that by itself the market can solve. It is difficult to get to grips with the number of variables over a long period of time. That difficulty need not stop us in our tracks. Both use cost benefit analysis to examine the initial costs incurred set against the monetary value of a flow of outcomes. At one time the view was that parking a young life in childcare was simply a cost, now we know better. Enough rigorous studies have been conducted that we know the parameters that ought to be covered in a cost benefit study:

- Reduction in violent and criminal activity and incarceration costs
- Educational progression and academic achievement
- Behavioural and emotional competence
- Reduction in maltreatment
- Health improvement
- Labour market success
- Reduced welfare payments

¹⁵ Dickens W, Sawhill I and Tebbs J *The Effects of Investment in early education on economic growth*, Brookings Institution, 2006

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There are other benefits that accrue to the child and the parent that have simply not been collected, for example on wellbeing measures or improved parental employment. In addition only one study, the Perry Pre School Programme, looks at impacts beyond the age of 21. This is a very significant omission as most of the major categories for which we are trying to assess the benefits, such as health, employment and welfare dependency, will principally emerge post 21.

Thanks to some exhaustive work by the American Rand Corporation we can feel confident about the knowledge we can glean from the most robust studies. Karoly led the exercise *Early Childhood Interventions: Proven results, Future Promise* and a table S4 'Benefit-Cost Results for Selected Early Intervention Programs' is reproduced in the appendix.

It shows a rate of return, when programmes are targeted at higher risk children and families, of between 3:1 and 7:1 up to the age of 21. The studies at the lower end of the scale - 3:1 - simply stopped collecting data at 15 years of age. Only one study goes beyond 21 years – Perry – and it shows a 9:1 return at 27 years and a 17:1 return at 40 years.

Logically there is no good reason for stopping the clock at 21 years (other than research funds running out) as life goes on and the impact of improved parenting and good childcare in practice run through a life.

Karoly recognises that; 'the evidence indicates that there can be longer-lasting gains in educational progress and attainment, labour market outcomes, dependency and pro-social behaviours... the magnitude of the favourable effects can often be sizeable.' But he posts a warning that even though the rates of returns are very healthy the effects of the early interventions are not large enough to fully compensate for the disadvantage that the children face. In short the interventions radically reduce the gap between very disadvantaged children and the average child. No claim is made that early intervention, in one push, fully eradicates the gap.

Independently Art Rolnick, senior vice president of the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis and Rob Grunewald, economic analyst, have run cost benefit studies over different sets of results and conclude:

'...one critical form of education, early childhood development ... is grossly underfunded. However, if properly funded and managed, investment in early childhood development

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yields an extraordinary return, far exceeding the return on most investments, private or public ... In the future any proposed economic development list should have early childhood development at the top.'

Dysfunctional parenting and children at risk represents classic market failure. It is where the government will get the greatest rate of returns for money invested. Our recommendation is that the government invests substantially in parenting and enriched day care, confident that a rate of return of 3:1 to 7:1 will be achieved by 21 years of age and that the returns will continue throughout life reaching 17:1 or more.

How to Fund?

There is a strong case for police and criminal justice, health and education budgets to be reconfigured to meet early year costs as, in time, their budget areas will be the major beneficiaries.

Another option is to reallocate resources within one budget block, education. If the aim of education is to improve cognitive and non-cognitive skills, then education resources should be distributed in a way that corresponds to the optimal rate of return on investment as described by Heckman.

A similar conclusion was reached without the benefit of Heckman's data and maths by a Royal Society of Arts educational committee, under Sir Christopher Ball in 1994, in a report called Start Right:

'The Royal Society of the Arts 'rule of thumb' ... suggests that (through the educational system) the appropriate provision is one (trained) adult to the number of children (or students) equivalent to double their average age (i.e. class sizes of 6 for three-year-olds, 12 for six-year-olds, and so on). The intention and effect of such a rule is to tilt resources back towards early learning-without making substantial new demands on educational budgets.'

In the past year or more, as I have given talks or held meetings with senior officials in secondary school education and college and university funding bodies, I have found a group of helpful and pleasant people who suffer from temporarily split personalities. They cannot accept what I am saying; they say the facts and arguments do not stack up. On the way out of the meetings or days later, they confess, 'You are absolutely right, we all know it, but we cannot say that because we are here to represent the interests of ...'. You could say they are just trying to cheer me up, but I do not think so.

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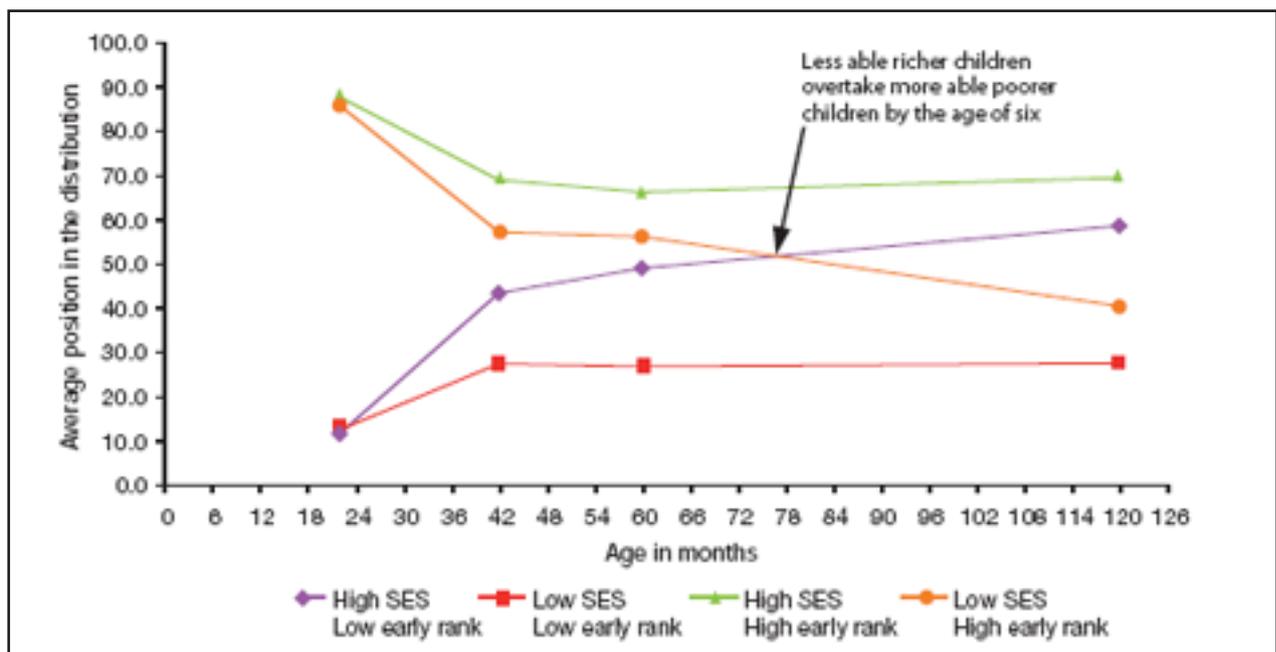
4. Where are we now?

Against the bigger sweep of history, the welfare state and free education are newcomers. The welfare state was designed as a safety net to catch people if they fell. Education, on the other hand, was and is championed by reformers as the means of emancipation, the route through which people improve themselves and get on in the world. This vehicle or promise of mobility has largely failed or, more accurately, as is shown below, stalled in the UK.

What happens at home with their parents or carer is more decisive in directing a child to failure or success than what happens at school. Parents' culture and behaviour; talking or not talking to their children; being there or not there when needed; playing with them or ignoring them; setting boundaries or letting them do what they want; stimulating them or letting them spend their day in a pushchair or in front of a TV screen; having enough money or doing without; it is these factors that determine life's direction.

Post-war baby boomers have, in vast numbers, raised themselves above their working class origins and joined the middle class. It seems to many of us who have made that journey that it was education that provided the missing ingredient. Education was an enabler; there is no denying that. However it was the 'togetherness', the stability, of our parent or parents that allowed us to gain and prosper in that system. Schools help to magnify or reinforce the inequalities sown in children before they come to school.

Figure 5: Socio-economic status and educational outcomes



Source: Fienstein L, *Inequality in the Early Cognitive Development of British Children*, *Economica* 2003

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What this shows is that life chances are very different before children enter the education system. Even when children reach school, by the age of 6^{1/2} the average highly performing child from a low socio-economic group drops below the average performance of a child who was part of the low scoring group but from a high socio-economic group.

From the late 1980s to the early 1990s, there was a rapid expansion in higher education, with 50% of the young people in Scotland starting a degree course and England and Wales on the way to the same percentage. Machin and Gregg at the London School of Economics have looked at who the new people going to university are and conclude; 'a greater share of the rapid educational upgrading of the British population has been concentrated on people with richer parents'. In other words, it is not too surprising that the new entrants to university generally come from better off homes.¹⁶

Nowhere is the myth of mobility as well established as in the United States where, as the folklore goes, any poor boy or girl can rise to be president of the country or a business mogul. Actually, and you have to say this quietly, the economically advanced countries which demonstrate most intergenerational income mobility are Denmark and Sweden, and the countries which show least are the USA and the UK.¹⁷

In the UK and USA, parental income is the biggest determinant of the educational success of their children. Children born poor will grow into poor adults. In Sweden and Denmark there is little correlation between parents and offspring's income. If you are born poor in Denmark and Sweden, the hurdles of moving into adulthood are adjusted to size. Where there is less movement, is for the very, very poor and the very, very rich.

In the UK, the odds that a child of low-educated parents will make it through to completing secondary school is 1: 5, compared to Denmark where the odds are 1:2.¹⁸

Lessons from the north

How have the Scandinavian countries improved life chances for so many of their people? Three mutually reinforcing factors have achieved this. First, having strong growing economies at the top end of the OECD league table. Second, there are a high proportion of women in work. Most women are employed after maternity leave. Third, universal high quality 'pedagogy' for children from 0-6 years with accompanying maternal or paternal financial support, usually for the first 12 months.

¹⁶ Machin S and Gregg P, *A Lesson for Education, in New Economy*

¹⁷ i. Esping-Andersen G, *Social Bases of Changing Income Distribution*; ii. Corak M, *Do Poor Children Become Poor Adults? Lessons from a Cross Country Comparison of Generational Earnings Mobility.*

¹⁸ Ibid

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'Pedagogues' need explaining in Britain but are very much taken for granted throughout Scandinavia. For example, in Denmark over 90% of children attend day-care, a variety of pre-school classes and activities where the emphasis is on play. You would also find pedagogues helping to facilitate play in large playgrounds where children gather. Over 3% of the Danish working population are trained pedagogues - that is in excess of 90,000 people. Pedagogues, although paid about 5% less than teachers, have a high status, and are expected to have experience of life after school before being recruited to do three and a half years of training. They acquire a different range of competencies from teachers, and are trained to see the whole child and focus more on social skills than cognitive skills. Children are stimulated physically, socially and intellectually – without any attempt to teach academic subjects. More intensive help is directed to children who are struggling. One document I read about Danish pedagogues described, using a wonderful euphemism, how extra help was directed to children, 'where there was an insufficient development plan at home'. It might have been the translation but the intention is clear enough.

Parents contribute one third of the costs of the day-care scheme with means-tested assistance available for lower-income parents. Longer hours and more years spent in day-care, plus the closer relationship built up between the trained staff and each child, mean that a significantly stronger contribution is made to the child's emotional and cognitive development than would commonly be the case in the UK or the USA.

Denmark's reasons for choosing this approach included: a desire to improve literacy; using economic resources in a more effective way and alleviating the concentration of disruptive pupils in the first years of primary school.¹⁹ Across the whole of northern Europe, the customary average age for starting primary school is seven. Before then, at day centres and through activities facilitated by pedagogues, children receive different sorts of play and stimulation. They are not fed a hard diet of pressure to attain.

So the defining factors in explaining Scandinavian generational mobility are virtually no child poverty, thanks to single mothers or both parents working and near universal high quality day-care with enrichment.

People in the childcare field who have experienced or read about the Scandinavian model, and its more distantly-related cousins in Finland, Germany and the Netherlands, want to undergo a version of what the Californians call primal therapy. In this process, they re-enact their birth, though this time rather than being born in Birmingham, they come out in Copenhagen.

¹⁹ UK Parliament, Select Committee on Education and Employment, Appendix 41, June 2000

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To others comprehensive day care and engagement in better parenting sounds like the nanny state, quite literally, run amok. Or as an attack on civil liberties; the state poking into areas where it ought not to be. In Scandinavian countries, parental leave in the first years of a child's life is more generous in time and money than in the UK. Parents offered for their children safe and stimulating day care facilitated by pedagogues, accept in overwhelming numbers. It has become the new norm.

If good quality day care and parenting support were more widely available in the UK, parents would come forward. It does not take much for a parent or carer of young children, especially one with a range of burdens, to confess that they are struggling. To intervene in dysfunctional households with the offer of help is not an assault on civil liberties. A person who is hungry needs food; to give them food is the right thing to - an act of kindness. People who are desperately struggling with their children are hungry and need support.

Currently what we do is offer a piecemeal social services intervention, wait for the situation to go drastically wrong then remove the children from their home to protect them from further damage. Babies and children are removed daily from their parents in all our cities and towns, an act that is not challenged as being an affront to civil liberties. How much better for the children and the parents to intervene early and assist the carer do a decent job.

Children have a fundamental right to a decent life. But if this right to a decent life is to be more widespread in practice, it requires engaging early in dysfunctional or risky situations to prevent problems escalating.

The Scandinavian approach is a beacon of good practice and a more muted version exists in Germany and the Netherlands. But what is the recent experience in the UK of parenting and early year enrichment?

The UK and Sure Start

Model programmes like the Perry High/Scope Programme are difficult to replicate on a large scale. They have, however, been instrumental in creating commitment to and contributing some of the design features of the Head Start programme, which has targeted disadvantaged pre-school children, their pregnant mothers and families in the USA. It was first introduced in 1965

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under President Johnson, and has received substantial support from successive Democratic and Republican administrations.

Just before Labour was elected in 1997 Norman Glass, a senior official in the UK Treasury, was in Washington when he decided to do some preparation for the new government. Working from a line in the manifesto about ending child poverty, he used his last day in the American capital to visit several Head Start projects. At the start of the day, he had low expectations and no knowledge of early years work. By the end of the day, he was a convert and became, over the next three years, Mr Sure Start. The Chancellor, the Prime Minister and the Secretaries of State for Education and Health plus senior officials, created a phalanx of support and enthusiasm. Sure Start expanded and a 10-year childcare strategy for England developed.

Today, people are asking, 'Is Sure Start Labour's great legacy or is it a total waste of money?' What prompted this question was the publication of the Sure Start evaluation in late 2005.

In England, Sure Start has run two phases. The first 'trailblazer' phase aimed to build up 60 programmes run by locally based partnerships in deprived areas with up to 800 children. Eligibility was based on residence and not income or family circumstances; costs were about £1,250 per child. The emphasis was clearly on prevention and delivered through centres as well as outreach and home visits.

With only a handful of projects operating in phase two, the government announced its intention to expand to 530 projects. Four years later, in order to bring Sure Start into the mainstream of public expenditure and legislation, the responsibility switched to local authorities, which could decide whether to run Sure Start services themselves, or through a combination of community or private sector companies. By October 2006, there were around 1,000 Sure Start children and family centres across England. The target is to have 3,500 centres by 2010. But along with these changes, came a reduction in spend per child and an increased emphasis on day-care to help women, particularly single mothers, get back to work.

Into this environment with a changing model and rapid growth, a heavyweight team of researchers set out to establish the impact of funding in England. The two strongest messages that came from

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the evaluation were that there was 'no evidence of impact' and '(Sure Start) had beneficial effects on non-teenage mothers...and adverse effects on children of teenage mothers'.²⁰

If you have, by inclination, a dismal outlook, a journalist after a story or an uninitiated observer, you could clearly use this as an opening to say that Sure Start was a total failure. However, you need to stop and think before adopting misleading interpretations.

The important question to ask is; 'When would be the right time to evaluate Sure Start and to conclude that it is a success or a hopeless waste of money?' In fact, the team responsible for the evaluation says as much, 'Because the evaluation was quasi-experimental, cross-sectional, and evaluated the impact of a programme that had been in place for only a few years, the detected effects of (Sure Start) and the conclusions must be treated with caution.'

I am reminded of planting four tiny apple trees in my garden, one for each child who had recently arrived in my wider family. My three-year-old daughter kept me company as I dug the holes and heeled in each tiny tree. Just as I finished, she asked with great expectancy, 'Can we eat the apples now?'

'No evidence of impact' meant that the researchers could not, at the time of the study, find noticeable and robust gains. Earlier, I commented that the first evaluations of that icon of early-year programmes, the Perry Pre School programme, were poor. The passage of time showed the fantastic benefits achieved.

The Prime Minister has publicly had a wobble about Sure Start while remaining committed to 'bring the shut-out into mainstream society'. Sure Start needs time to bed down; to allow the staff, parents and children to get on with what they are doing; and to make the child centres work. Parents are telling us about the support they get and the improvement in their children's behaviour. We should listen.

Continued investment in Sure Start is complemented by the 10-year childcare strategy. It is built round four key themes that reflect critical needs across England: facilitating the childcare market - encouraging public and private delivery organisations; the role of the Sure Start children's centres; the flexible entitlement to early year provision and developing the childcare workforce.

²⁰ Belsky J and Melhuish E et al *BMJ* 16 June 2006

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Praise needs to be heaped upon the strategy and implementation plan that flies under the apt title, 'Every Child Matters'. It heralds a significant shift in the right direction for children in England. One constructively critical charge I would make on the documents is that they do not give sufficient thought and attention to the role of parents, as opposed to the role of daycare. As a result the strategy is comparatively weak on parenting and the steps that can be made to make better parents.

In the Childcare Bill now going through Parliament, statutory force is given to the key commitments of the ten-year strategy including identifying English local authorities as responsible for delivering early years services as well as regulation and inspection. Good practice on early years is being built into law.

The Scottish experience

In Scotland, the Sure Start story is different. Prior to 1997, there was a major pre-5 initiative in Strathclyde Region, which covered almost half of Scotland and this and other initiatives made the child service landscape look more advanced than in England and Wales. But when Sure Start was introduced in Scotland, the fund was not ring-fenced for early years, as in England, nor was there concerted support from the political leadership.

One current Scottish director of education, and one who very recently moved on, have confessed that they liked Sure Start funding because it was not tied to particular activities and it gave them scope to allocate it to what they wanted to do. Sure Start money was allocated to local authorities and spent at their discretion; it could go into early years, education or even roads. The Sure Start evaluation mentioned above did not cover Scotland.

In parts of Scotland, there has been a surge of activity around early years, bringing together education, health, social work, voluntary organisations and the police. Sure Start money made a significant contribution to existing services and opened up new service development. Perhaps the most notable improvements have been in the Highlands where collaboration between the Council and the NHS has produced 'Highland Children 2' and high up in its objectives for the next three years the aim that children should enjoy being young. Other councils like Dundee and West Lothian have raised their game. It has helped, but to the managers facing the challenge square on, it feels like a drop in the ocean.

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In some areas of policy related to early years big steps have been taken, for example in tackling domestic abuse and other forms of violence against women. Prevention, protection and provision are the triple aims of the Scottish Executives policy and Increasingly practice. A major focus has been to establish multi-agency partnerships in all local authority areas bringing together police, health, criminal justice, education, specialist women's services and voluntary organisations. Services for women and children have been developed and expanded through the Domestic Abuse Service Development Fund. Recent developments include publishing a Guidance Note to Children's Services planners and supporting pathfinder pilots to support and intervene to help children affected by domestic abuse.

At the Scottish Parliament, the Education Committee published a document in 2006, a 'Ten Year Vision for Universal Care and Education for Scotland's Children'. It sets out the evidence and rationale for early years work and provides an important milestone. But, as yet, it is only the preserve of the education department, it is not wired into funding or the domains of the different government departments.

In financial service advertisements, it now clearly states that the value of your investment can go up or come down. In post-devolution Scotland, my observation is that, in comparison to England, early years policy and activity has fallen behind. This view is echoed by Daniel Wincott of Birmingham University; 'Particularly since 2002, politics at Whitehall and Westminster have driven early childhood education and care policy forward at an ever accelerating rate and created pressure for further expansion in Scotland and Wales... Westminster may drag the "radicals" and "social Democrats" of Scotland and Wales forward.'²¹

Scotland needs a policy of at least equivalent status to Westminster's 'Choice for Parents: the best start for children: a ten year strategy for childcare'. To achieve this ministers and officials covering education, health and criminal justice need to champion the idea.

Recommendation: Scotland requires a ten-year early strategy similar to England's. To achieve this would require a concerted commitment by senior politicians and officials to create and breathe life into the document, its implementation and supporting legislation. A commitment would need to be made to ensure that Sure Start money was spent as intended.

²¹ *Reshaping Public Space? Devolution and Policy Change in British Early Childhood Education and Care*, Regional and Federal Studies, December 2005

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Modernising and Reforming the State

Modernising government is a central plank running through public service and spending in England and Wales. In Scottish public expenditure circles, the mantra of public service reform is oft repeated. In both cases it means much the same thing; joined-up government, providing a better front line service at reduced cost, using more IT and greater sharing of service functions. It is really quite hard to get excited about a shared personnel service between, say, a local authority and the health board. But if we approach smarter government by giving it a bigger picture and purpose, it will help to motivate and provide direction. If government takes on a role in supporting parents to be better parents and improving day care different services will need to rethink how they operate and cooperate. It will also change the relationship between public service providers and people in the community. By focusing on causes, the early years and parenting, in a systemic way and not just the point of impact, resources will be invested at the point where they get the greatest return. Our welfare state will stop becoming an ever-larger ambulance and do more to stop problems occurring in the first place by improving children's social and educational mobility.

5. What do we do?

The answer is: parents, parents, parents and good day care.

There is much to be optimistic about from the research. A child's brain and development is not an unfathomable black box. What constitutes good parenting is not some lucky dip of caring. Encouragingly, different studies show that greatest gains are made with young pregnant mothers, children and the parents who need the greatest help. Better parenting and childcare is at the root of so much economic and social policy. Up to now, we have failed, as a society, to realise this. By investing now, we can start to enjoy the benefits.

Investing in early years is as close as it gets to magic without being magic. Parenting support and enriched day care, and preferably both together, create children with better behaviour and attitudes who will arrive at school with a capacity to learn. Programmes that continue into primary school have the most sustained long-term effects.²² Some benefits from early years accrue as children and their parents acquire building blocks to improve their lives. Other gains fade over time if no additional help is given. So, primary school teachers, social workers, health, police and voluntary organisations have to pool their knowledge on children and their homes and provide trusting support.

The approach advocated in this paper offers hope to people who are struggling. To the political and policymaking community, it offers the opportunity to provide smarter government by tackling issues in a systemic way, addressing root causes and meeting economic efficiency and improving life chances at the same time.

There are programmes quoted earlier, which improve children's attitudes, behaviour and ability to learn. There are also programmes less well known in the UK and other countries that have made a demonstrable difference. But they take time, and we are at the very blunt end of an accumulation of problems. Real progress is hard earned and can seem unglamorous as the following examples show. But progress, however slow, leads to sweeping gains.

Two Local examples that work

In the Jeely Piece (for those not used to Scottish vernacular this means a jam sandwich) Club in Castlemilk, a large housing scheme in Glasgow, people come to the child centre because it is part of the community and is tried, tested and trusted. Young mothers bring their children in for day-care and, as part of the deal, each parent has a regular slot in the rota where they work alongside well-trained childcare workers. As far as parents are concerned, they are helping out the staff. To

²² Brooks-Gunn J, *Do you believe in Magic? What we can expect from early childhood Intervention Programs*

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staff, this provides an opportunity to demonstrate and teach parenting. They also run 'positive parenting' classes with participants coming through referrals. Parents appreciate the tutoring in basic boundary setting, appropriate behaviour and sanctions and learn from one another in a group. What happens at the Jeely Piece club is exactly the type of service that Sure Start aspires to in its 'children centres'.

At the Dundee Family Project, John Wallace works with families who, thanks to television, are known as 'families from hell' and are on the verge of losing their tenancy rights or being served anti-social behaviour orders. These are the families who up and down the country terrorise the neighbours and have been responsible for creating Westminster's Respect agenda. John allocates a key worker to four families to do outreach work, which aims to stabilise the family's circumstances. Complex family issues and mental health problems feature more than criminality. If there are drink or drug problems, people must be on a remedial or problem management programme. He also has a core block of housing, into which, if circumstances are so desperate or violent, he moves a family for close supervision and to guarantee an immediate response. In order for John and his team to take a family on, the family must acknowledge 'We are what people say we are', for example that their kids are out of control, and commit to seeing through a plan of improvement. Year in and year out the Family Project has seen families turn round, as John says, 'To make not perfect parents but good enough parents.' If this can be done for some of the hardest cases, it can be done for other, less blighted families.

Both initiatives share a common approach, using stealth and a different approach for different types of parents who are struggling. Engagement is a key word, for many people do not respond to the carrot and stick, incentive and compulsion common to many policy prescriptions.

Both work within the community, and have critical relationships with the health service, drug and alcohol programmes, social workers, housing management, speech therapists, community police and others. Parents engage, get support and gain the wherewithal to be better parents to their children.

Parents of all backgrounds want to be better parents; it is elemental to being a parent. Should parenting and child enrichment be available to everyone or should it be targeted?

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Targeting support

We know two things: first, all children would benefit from better parenting and that the most disadvantaged benefit the most. Second, this is the UK and not Scandinavia, which means that although comprehensive early year enrichment makes sense, our style of government and tax system only supports a mixture of the comprehensive and the targeted. For example, we are not far off having a sufficiently comprehensive service for pregnant women and young mothers through hospitals and health visitors. However, we are well away from universal high quality day care.

In deciding whom to target, we have to get down to the fine grain of understanding the different sub groups of young children that make up our more disadvantaged communities. These are the children of parents with learning difficulties; families juggling low-income jobs with variable hours; different ethnic minority groups; whole households out of work, people on incapacity benefit and intending to keep it that way or desperate to find a way to improve their lot; people working in the black economy; many single parent households; people with mental health problems or consumed by drugs and alcohol. Without blinking, we are talking about targeting and enriching the children of up to half of the entire population.

Stick with the Logic

To get the most out of our public spending, expenditure on parenting and enriched day care should be skewed to households most likely to struggle. That means targeting the children of workless households, single parents, and the working poor and in an age creating more alcohol and drug casualties, elderly carers of infants.

Children who lack ability and motivation do not make it through to higher education. Families with a higher income provide a better early environment for their children and create the conditions that encourage performance at school and college. People who attain degrees are, on the whole, more able than those that do not have degree-entry qualifications. Studies show that, on average, even with the increased university intake, people with a degree earn more than those without. Superficially this last point might suggest simply supporting more people through university. But James Heckman takes a different view: 'The return to the marginal student is nowhere near as high as the return to the average student, although many scholars in the United Kingdom often fail to make this distinction ... More sophisticated analyses show declining return for marginal students. Simply put, higher education is not for everyone, and skill formation policy should recognise this.'

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A strong implication is that we need to rethink the policies for subsidising schooling and degree tuition. Family background and abilities formed at an early age play the decisive role in accounting for who does and who does not enrol in college.

If we want more of our population to be fit and ready for work and to contribute to higher productivity then we need to improve what economists call the 'human capital', the attributes and skills of the 50% who, in present circumstances, will not make it through to higher education. The OECD has warned us that our future economic prospects are under threat because of the skill level of this section of our society.

There is a case for a more fundamental realignment of what we do and where we spend. Given that the greatest returns are in the first years of life, as illustrated in the Heckman diagram, we have to reconsider the merit of putting our largest investment per head into secondary schools and degree courses.

If, however, we stick with finding all the expenditure for early years from the education budget, it would require looking seriously at the generous subsidy provided to the 50% of students who go onto do a degree. By investing in the early years of up to 50% of children whom we know are born to fail or at risk of failing, we arrest the differences that will be amplified by the normal education system. We start to secure future productivity and reduce the string of costs to the criminal justice system, health, housing and welfare system. We also improve their wellbeing and that of wider society.²³

Three cheers for early year enrichment

Labour in power has committed itself to making the economy more competitive, improving the productivity of our labour force, ending child poverty by 2020 and improving the worst neighbourhoods in the country. A start has been made through Sure Start and the 10 Year Child Care Strategy. This represents a massive breakthrough. We should give one very loud cheer.

Our other two customary cheers are held back until we address the following:

- Our culture and attitude to children needs to improve so that the earliest years in life are treated as gold. Although there are no simple prescriptions for this it is axiomatic. A cultural change of this nature will be good in itself but also promote a political clamour for appropriate early year enrichment.

²³ *Maintaining Momentum: Promoting social mobility and life chances from early years to adulthood*, Edited Delorenzi S, Reed J and Robinson P, IPPR 2005

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- The scale of expenditure on Sure Start and the screening and support for mothers and carers has to match the scale of the need. Sure Start is at an early stage and needs to mature and grow capacity and capability. We should invest the amount required to do the job properly. Sure Start is a good start.
- Sure Start initiatives need to work with the community and through the community (as the good examples do) and not just provide a clean-nose, clinical childcare service. This should be reflected in the way the market is made to work.
- A lot of stars and unrecognised heroes work in early years but in general, the quality and pay of the staff need improving. As the qualifications of staff improve, we must not lose the great carers who provide love and stimulation to children but do not possess certificates and could be squeezed out: this is a test in managing in-work prior learning qualifications.
- To make a difference in early years needs time and constancy; we are awash with fresh policy initiatives, which last as long as the whim of each new minister or civil servant.
- Delivery too often policy fails because the umbilical link with delivery is not sorted. The mucky, messy problems of real life will always be there to be picked up by people at the sharp end and not the policy makers. To do this right, we need the best from our mixed economy made up of provision from the local authority, private and the third sector.
- Regulatory frameworks and audit are needed to make sure that the funds deliver what they are supposed to do and that standards are met. At the moment, much of the front line delivery feels its knees buckling under the weight of inspection, multiple audits from different bodies and reporting – to the detriment of delivery. A systems and regulatory audit is required and then must be acted upon. It is possible to streamline regulation and reporting.

Once we make these improvements we can give the other two cheers. What is exciting and liberating is that we have a comparatively rich society with so much working right and we also have a greater knowledge about what we need to do to help the children of people who are struggling. By addressing what happens in early years we fit into place a significant jigsaw piece that helps create a better economy and greater well being.

Recommendations

Across the UK

1. Dysfunctional parenting and children at risk represent classic market failure. This is where the government will get the greatest rate of returns for money invested. By investing in parenting and enriched daycare, a rate of return of 3:1 to 7:1 will be achieved by 21 years of age and those returns will continue throughout life, reaching 17:1 or more.
2. We need to maximise the use of current financial allocations to education, health, local authorities and the police and criminal justice bodies so that appropriate good quality parenting and early year enrichment takes place.
3. There should be targeted parenting and day care for up to half of the population with young children who are at risk or have dysfunctional care and the working poor. For the other 50% the Government needs to assist in the formation of the day care market.
4. In order to Implement comprehensive risk assessment all pregnant women should be screened for health and social risks. The service should be conducted in such a way as to build trust and confidence. In turn health, social work, police and voluntary organisations have to be available to provide follow up services.
5. As a way of working we need to engage with parents and carers. It is essential that they become party to the delivery and improvements and are not passive recipients of even more services.
6. The desire is to improve parenting across the UK, to improve average performance in order to establish a new parenting norm , a new culture of parenting.

In England and Wales:

At a national or regional level establish a violence reduction unit working from a public health model.

In Scotland:

Scotland requires a ten year early year strategy similar to England. To achieve this would require a concerted commitment by senior politicians and officials to create and breathe life into the document, its implementation and supporting legislation. A commitment would need to be made to ensure that Sure Start money was spent as intended.

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Conclusion

From your own eyes and your own experience you may have known the importance of getting the earliest years right for your children. Now, as we have seen, the advances in medical science, psychology and economics all lead us to the humbling conclusion of the paramount importance for all children of getting empathy, the right care, attention and experiences between 0-5.

What is greatly encouraging from the theory and practical examples is that with the right parenting or good enough parenting, backed up by enriched daycare, the entire life of the child (and all children) improves.

Improvement in child wellbeing is evident in their behaviour, attainment in education, employment and relationships. What is good for the child is also good for the wider society. At the moment we are struggling as a society to cope with the increases in crime, violence and poor health. Despite the attention given our society has not been good at closing the gap between those doing well and those who struggle. At the same time employers and the OECD tell us that we have a problem with the lower skilled workers. By investing in improving parenting and providing enriched day care we can address equity, life chances and economic efficiency at the same time.

Our public model of continually picking up the pieces when things go wrong is expensive and carries within it the seeds of continued expansion of failure. Getting lives right first time is, as we have seen, within reach. We have the opportunity to correct our market and moral failure by investing in 0-5. It has started to make a difference and the potential is there to make a very big difference.

Appendix

Table S.4: Benefit-cost results for selected early childhood intervention programs

Programme	Type	Age at last follow-up	Programme cost per child (\$)	Total benefits to society per child (\$)	Net benefits to society per child (\$)	Benefit-cost ratio
Follow-up during elementary school years						
CCDP	Combo	5	37,388	-9	-37,397	—
HIPPY USA	HV/PE	6	1,681	3,032	1,351	1.80
IHDP	Combo	8	49,021	0	-49,021	—
Follow-up during secondary school years						
NFP - higher-risk sample	HV/PE	15	7,271	41,419	34,148	5.70
NFP - lower-risk sample	HV/PE	15	7,271	9,151	1,880	1.26
NFP - full sample	HV/PE	15	9,118	26,298	17,180	2.88
HV for at-risk mothers and children (meta-analysis)	HV/PE	Varies	4,892	10,969	6,077	2.24
Follow-up to early adulthood						
Abecedarian	Combo	21	42,871	138,635	95,764	3.23
Chicago CPC	Combo	21	6,913	49,337	42,424	7.14
Perry Preschool (excluding intangible crime costs)	Combo	27	14,830	76,426	61,595	5.15
Perry Preschool (including intangible crime costs)	Combo	27	14,830	129,622	114,792	8.74
ECE for low-income three- and four-year-olds (meta analysis)	Combo	Varies	6,681	15,742	9,061	2.36
Follow-up to middle adulthood						
Perry Preschool	Combo	40	14,830	253,154	238,324	17.70

Source: Karoly L A, Kilburn M R and Cannon M R, *Early Childhood Interventions: Proven Results, Future Promise*, RAND Labor and Population, 2003

Note: All dollar values are 2003 dollars per child and are the present value of amounts over time where future values are discounted to age 0 of the participating child, using a 3 percent annual real discount rate. Numbers may not sum due to rounding; Combo = HV/parent education combined with ECE; ECE = early childhood education; HV = home visiting; PE = parent education.

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The Work Foundation
3 Carlton House Terrace
London
SW1Y 5DG

Telephone: 020 7004 7200

Email: enquiries@theworkfoundation.com

website: www.theworkfoundation.com