

# Joining the dots

A better start for Scotland's children

AN INDEPENDENT REPORT  
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## Preface

Scotland has its problems – and you don't need to look far to find them. Drug and alcohol misuse, poor health and violence - we all know the roll call of Scotland's ills only too well. But Scotland has a great many strengths too – and even greater potential.

For many years I've been fortunate to have the chance to study, practice and explore widely how we can change Scotland for the better. Time and again what has been clear to me is that if we are serious about improving people's lives and building a stronger future for our country we must do more to give children a better start in life.

So when the Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning, Michael Russell MSP, asked me to take a fresh look at this issue and to explore with a wide range of people what more we could do, it was a challenge that I was pleased to accept.

For six months I carried out an intensive process of dialogue and inquiry on the importance of children's early years - actively 'championing' the issue while also considering what more we might do to intensify our national effort. In that time I engaged with more than 1500 people across many walks of life and considered an extensive range of research, comment and opinion. I was keen throughout not just to replicate what others had done, but rather to go out and test ideas, to ask searching questions and to give people an opportunity to share their views and experiences. I am immensely grateful to everyone who engaged with me along the way. Indeed the willingness of people to participate in a different type of dialogue on this issue in itself bodes well for the future and is something that can be built upon.

I have been able to tap into a rich vein of interest, experience and insight and to amass a wide array of material. In the short time available I could not possibly capture here all that I have heard, read or learned - less still address every issue and idea. What I have been able to do is identify common themes - as well as differences - emerging from a range of people's views and to distill some main observations, conclusions and suggestions. I include some feedback from this process of dialogue and engagement as an Annex to this report and, over the coming months, Scottish Government officials will assist in the collation and further examination of this work so that it can be used more widely in the future.

Not everyone will agree with what I have to say but I sincerely hope that this will be a constructive – if at times uncomfortable – contribution to a national discussion which needs to be had, not least given significant reductions in public spending and in the context of a forthcoming Scottish election.

My overarching conclusion is that, even with the pressures that exist, there is much more we can do to give children in Scotland a better start in life. But this will require a genuine and concerted effort and a fundamentally different way of thinking and working. It will also require a degree of collaboration and depth of commitment which has been lacking to date.

“At no age is the desire of knowledge stronger than in childhood”

Robert Owen, Social Reformer (1771-1858)



I was asked to lead a dialogue. I have done that. I was asked to bring forward suggestions for practical action and I have set these out below. I was also asked to help build a consensus and, while I hope I have contributed to this, there is still a long way to go. It is one thing to agree that early years matter – quite another to agree on the actions we should take and another yet to resource and to take these actions. And that is the big challenge – but potentially also the biggest prize.

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**March 2011**



## Introduction

This report is about children's Early Years - why they matter and how we can improve them. But it is about more than that. It is about the kind of Scotland we want to live in. The kind of society we are and aspire to be. It is about what goes on in our homes, families and communities as well as what happens in our schools, nurseries and clinics. It is about what matters to us as human beings and what we can do to support one another – as individuals, as well as through our public services and professionals. It is also about Government, politics, public policy and public services– and how, with increasing pressures on the public purse we can try and do the rights things and do them well.

It is written against a backdrop of the most significant reduction in public spending in a generation. People up and down the land are concerned about their future, their jobs and their public services. Many are struggling with uncertainty, insecurity and real financial pressures. Politicians and public sector leaders are grappling with difficult choices, all in the face of significant public opprobrium. Much has been said about why we are in this situation and many fingers of blame have been pointed. But whether we hold our politicians, our bankers, or the global economic system responsible for the state we are in, the harsh reality is that we are here. And neither blame nor denial will take us forward.

Ensuring that our children get a good start in life, that the right foundation stones are laid, is more important than ever. Strong families and communities are as integral a part of economic recovery as they are an essential plank of a strong society. But the risk is that at a time like this, these are the things that will suffer. The danger is that public services will retrench into 'sticking plaster' solutions, patching up problems when they occur rather than tackling them at source and that people themselves will lose confidence and hope and a sense of powerlessness will prevail.

But it doesn't have to be that way.

The fact is that challenges often prompt us to think afresh, to regroup and embark on a new – and often better - course of action. And that is where we are now.

We owe it not just to our children, but to ourselves, to find a way to navigate our way through these challenging times in a spirit of cooperation and collaboration. Today's children

are the leaders, parents and workers of tomorrow. The public purse may be shrinking, but in our communities, our public services and our businesses, as well as in a plethora of voluntary and charitable organisations and social enterprises, we have a wealth of riches - people, energy, ideas, activities and resource - upon which to draw. We need to work to build a shared awareness and shared commitment around the importance of giving children a good start in life and to channel our combined efforts towards achieving that end.



**Scotland is a small country. We have strong networks and close working relationships. We have a wealth of knowledge and experience, a track record of innovation, a rich culture and our greatest asset – our people. We know how important children’s early years are and have a pretty good idea of what needs done to give children a better start in life. We have masses of research and evidence and heaps of good practice. We don’t need to invent or discover any of this, we need to work together to connect it up – in short, ‘to join the dots’.**

## About This Work

In June 2010, the Scottish Government pledged to renew the national effort on children’s early years. As part of this effort, Michael Russell MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Education and Lifelong Learning, invited me to champion action on children’s early years and to lead a wide-ranging dialogue on how best to take action to improve children’s early years of life. I was tasked with building agreement on the importance of the early months and years of children’s lives and to identify practical ways to improve these given the unprecedented pressures on the public purse.

*My remit was to:*

- *Lead a dialogue to build on the broad areas of agreement across Scotland and Scottish life which exists regarding the critical importance of children’s early life experiences and our shared responsibility to invest in their future; and, in particular, to encourage participation by elected representatives, business and the third sector*
- *Examine what more we can do in Scotland to ensure that children from all backgrounds and circumstances get the best possible start in life by considering how parents, families and communities; employers and businesses; civic and voluntary organisations as well as national and local government and our public services can pool efforts to achieve this;*
- *Challenge the link between poverty and lack of attainment and achievement, focusing on the need to create in children a readiness to learn and prosper no matter their social circumstance;*

- *Assist in building a public consensus around the link between how we prioritise investment in the early years and months of children's lives and how Scotland prospers as a nation;*
- *Bring forward suggestions for practical action to deepen and intensify this effort across Scotland within the context of unprecedented pressures on public expenditure.*

This was a wide-ranging and deliberately unconventional remit. To simultaneously be a champion, lead dialogue, build consensus, examine a big and complex issue and draw out suggestions for practical action was a tall order – not least in a part-time role with minimal time and resource. This was not, as some have described it, a taskforce, commission or review, rather it was an opportunity for a fresh perspective to be developed on the full array of issues affecting children's early years in Scotland.



I came to this project as an independent, informed individual who has grappled with these questions from many different angles. The views I share here draw upon what I have seen, heard and read throughout the course of this project as well as the experiences and insights I have gained over the past 25 years in the study and practice of politics, social policy, management and change. Having worked across national and local government, business, the third sector and academia I am pleased also to have been able to reach across boundaries and to engage in a very wide process of dialogue and listening. It has been an illuminating experience.

This work has had many strands to it, all focussed around the overarching question of what we could do to improve children's early years in Scotland, these included:-

- **Initial Scoping and Exploration** - At the outset I had a series of informal meetings and discussions with a range of people across roles and sectors identifying key concerns, issues and helping to shape my approach.
- **Research and Information Gathering** – Throughout the project I read and researched widely, gathering in a range of information, from research studies and policy documents, to numerous articles, reports and papers, and carried out extensive web based research. I also invited a number of people and organisations to share with me a distillation of their research findings, key issues and opinions.
- **Conferences, Seminars and Events** - I accepted invitations to attend twelve conferences, seminars and events – variously as a speaker, facilitator or participant, and also gathered in summaries of discussion from a number of events I was unable to attend.
- **In-depth, small group meetings and discussions** - I took up invitations, and also initiated, smaller meetings and discussions with a wide range of professionals and practitioners across sectors, as well as parents and community groups.

- **One-to-one meetings, exchanges and contributions** – Through both face-to-face meetings, phone conversations and email, I engaged with a large number of interested individuals in a stimulating exchange of thoughts, ideas and material.
- **Discussion Groups** - Several semi-structured discussion groups took place where the output was captured. This included work with the Association of Chief Officers of Scottish Voluntary Organisations, Learning and Teaching Scotland and the Glasgow Centre for Population Health.
- **Facilitated Dialogue Groups** - Towards the end of the process, and with the support of the Scottish Funding Council, I held a series of facilitated, intensive and interactive ‘knowledge exchange’ sessions with deliberately diversified, informed individuals, digging into issues identified as important, the output of which was formally captured and analysed.
- **Participatory Events with Children and Teenagers** - The Children’s Parliament conducted a consultative exercise with young children which is the subject of a separate report and DVD, and Space Unlimited, with support from SERCO, carried out a project with two groups of teenagers, the output from which is also the subject of a separate report.
- **Capturing People’s Voices** - Working in co-operation with the Children’s Parliament, Support from the Start and Media Co-op, the voices of children, teenagers and parents have been captured on film during this project and so are available to share with wider audiences.

The approach I adopted was pragmatic and relied heavily on the goodwill and, largely voluntary, contribution of a very wide range of people and organisations. I am extremely grateful to all those who engaged with me during this project – more than 1500 individuals. Further acknowledgements and details of the engagement process are contained in an Annex to this report.

I hope that, in itself, this process of dialogue and engagement has helped to raise the profile of Early Years and to encourage discussion, exploration and collaboration which can be built upon in the future.

***I have long believed that we have yet to tap into the full potential of the wealth of knowledge, experience and commitment that exists in Scotland and to bring people and ideas together across traditional divides to lead and drive change. This project has confirmed that to me. I hope that some of my thinking and experimentation in this area will give others confidence to embark on such an approach in the future and to help bring together and channel the immense amount of commitment and enthusiasm which exists for improving children’s Early Years in Scotland.***



## What This Work Can Contribute

There is no shortage of words on pages about why children's Early Years matter. In fact there are reams of material. In many ways the last thing we need is yet another report. From policy documents, research evidence and statistics through to magazine features and commentary – most of us would agree that early childhood is important and that it can play a big part in shaping both the lives of individuals as well as society itself. Human insight and intuition tell us that too. But what is equally clear is that there is much more we – *all of us* - can do to make a positive difference.

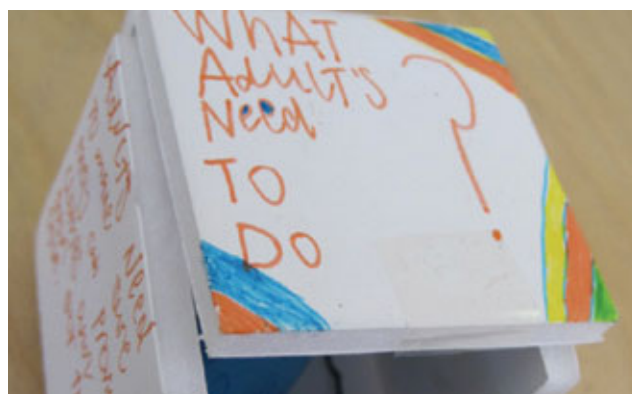
At the heart of this framework is a desire to see investment in early years focused on building success and reducing the costs of failure. This will mean a shift from intervening only when a crisis happens, to prevention and early intervention. In turn, that will mean providing a supportive environment for children and the earliest possible identification of any additional support that may be required. It is not about throwing new money at old problems, or narrow initiatives. It is about a fundamental shift in philosophy and approach that embraces the role of parents and communities and supports them with engaging, high quality services that meet their needs.

The Early Years Framework  
Scottish Government/COSLA, 2008

My guiding principle throughout this work has therefore been to try and 'add value' to what is in many ways a crowded landscape of thinking and activity. I have sought to do that by trying to connect people and ideas and to formulate an overview and depth of insight into this wide ranging issue. I have also tried to reach – and encouraged others to reach – into a different, deeper level of thinking and reflection than might otherwise surface through more conventional process.

Towards that end, I offer here my own articulation of some of the key issues, reflecting and drawing upon what I have heard, and have tried to suggest where we might go from here. To make this vast subject and range of input accessible I have tried to re-frame this discussion and to distill it down to some key themes and messages which will, I hope, provide a useful and accessible basis for further thought, debate and action. I have also attempted to identify throughout suggestions for practical action – some big, some small, some new, some not so new – but all of which might help drive change and improvement. In the time available to me I have only been able to go so far – I hope others will go further.

**I am firmly of the view that we need urgently to create a 'bias for action' and radically shift energy, time and resource from analysis to action and from process to people. We need to recognise that it is people that make the difference and to value and respect the opinions and strengths of children, families and communities themselves. There have been too many warm words: we need change. There has never been a greater need and opportunity to combine our resources better and to invest in our children. Everything that I say here is with that end in mind.**





# The Early Years Matter – FACT

The period before birth and in the early months and years of life has a profound impact on a child's life, on their physical, mental and emotional development and, in turn, their life chances. Our intuition tells us that. A vast body of research and evidence proves it beyond doubt. So investing our time, energy and resource in a child's Early Years makes sense – for the individual, the family, society and the economy.

It is time for us to establish this as a known FACT and move on.

We no longer, for example, debate or dispute that there is a link between smoking and lung cancer. As individuals we exercise choices about whether to act on that evidence, and the fact that evidence exists does not in itself make public policy choices clear cut. However the point is that we do not continually 'rediscover' nor spend time discussing 'the evidence' rather our focus is on what we can do to act on it.

**My contention is that this is where we need to get to in our approach to the issue of children's Early Years in Scotland**

The Early Years Matter.....

- The portions of the brain which control vision, hearing and language development all start developing and peak before a child reaches the age of 18 months old
- Children begin to learn language and literacy even before they speak their first words
- By the age of three, 50% of our language is in place and, by five, its 85%
- By the age of 4, a child's brain is 90% of its adult size
- Like the construction of a house, our brains are built from the bottom up - early experiences literally shape how the brain gets built
- A strong foundation in the early years increases the probability of a healthy happy child - a weak foundation increases the odds of later difficulties, sometimes lasting through the child's life
- The important construction that happens in the early years will help determine the child's future learning capacity, the ability to choose right from wrong, the ability to interact with others, or even the ability to develop trust and respect for other people
- The interactions between a child and parent – or other caregiver – directly affect the architecture of the brain
- Like the process of 'serve and return' in tennis, young children naturally reach out and communicate through babbling and facial expressions – the child smiles, so the adult smiles; the baby coos and the adult reacts.
- Singing, talking or reading to a very young child causes a reaction in the infant that then causes the adult to respond - these positive interactions help build the foundation for future learning and teach children to have positive emotional connections with other people through their adult lives.
- Prolonged stress in the absence of protective relationships is damaging to the developing brain, and can result in future problems in learning and physical and mental abuse.

I observe that there has been – and continues to be - an enormous amount of time, energy and resource consumed in amassing and articulating evidence on the importance of Early Years – from neuroscience to economic analysis, there is no shortage of evidence. In fact there is a veritable array of reports, research and statistics which make the case for more effort and investment in Early Years and early intervention. We do not need more.

**What we must now do is distill down and translate that knowledge into a language and a form which is accessible, build agreement around a 'core case' for Early Years and work to share this comprehensively and consistently.**



The current Early Years Framework is a starting point and commands widespread support from among key stakeholders and practitioners but, like most Government policy documents, is little known or understood outside these circles. It has also become clear to me that, though there is a broad basis of agreement around the importance of children's Early Years and the direction of travel of national policy, drill a little deeper and there is a range of different – and often competing – views, perspectives and priorities – even different 'languages' across many of the different stakeholders. So too is a great deal of thinking and discussion locked up within policymaking, professional and practitioner forums, often in silos, and frequently with a degree of complexity that is unhelpful – and, frankly, often unnecessary.

The Case for Investing in Early Years – Some Recent Reports

Backing the Future, Why investing in children is good for us all, Action for Children/New Economics Foundation, 2009

Deprivation and Risk: the case for Early Intervention, Action for Children 2010

The Foundation Years: Preventing poor children becoming poor adults: Report of the Independent Review on Poverty and Life Chances, Frank Field MP, 2010

Early Intervention: The Next Steps, Graham Allen MP, 2010

Interventions for Promoting Early Child Development for Health: An Environmental Scan with Special Reference to Scotland, Scottish Collaboration for Public Health Research & Policy, 2010

Some of the most powerful, direct and compelling messages I have heard during the course of this work have been when parents and young people themselves are given a voice – or, when people are encouraged to 'take off' their professional or 'expert' hats and 'talk human'. We need to do this more. This is no time for people to be precious about their particular perspective, pet project, sectoral agenda or hobby horse. This is an issue upon which expertise and knowledge abounds across society and needs to be shared. There needs to be a common language and a common ground.

***It's time for a common sense consensus.* People with a passion and interest in this issue need to come together – across sectors and, critically, involving parents and communities - to build that 'core message' around which people can unite and which can be widely conveyed and understood across Scottish society. This should not involve another elaborate consultation exercise, rather it requires people to get together around the table to work together to identify key messages and priorities around which action and agreement can be built. My work over recent months convinces me there is both a need and appetite for this and that there is no shortage of people keen to contribute.**

## Scotland Can Do Better

Most children in Scotland get a good start in life and most parents do a pretty good job. But all of us could do more and do better. Raising a child is one of the most important things many of us will ever do and, as individuals and as a society, we need to place a higher premium on the act of parenting and supporting young children. We need to build a wider shared responsibility in our communities and across the country for giving children a good start in life. This is a wise investment of time and resource for us all. To avoid problems further down the track, yes, but also to nurture and develop the talent of the future. The stubby, sticky little fingers that are stacking building blocks today could be designing our buildings or bridges in the future.



We need to recognise the harsh reality that despite many laws, initiatives and much public spend there is still a significant number of children whose early childhood experience is poor and we need to do more to turn that situation around. The extent of inequality which persists in our society has a deeply damaging impact on families – and, in turn, the early years of many children’s lives. We must do more to narrow that gap. But so too is there much we can do to create a more level playing field from birth – and even before.

Sometimes that will involve intensive support to parents - and there are ways that we can work to break the cycle of poor parenting that is blighting the lives of many of our children, including many tried and tested programmes and interventions which have been proven to be effective. But where these efforts have been made and it is clear that the child is at risk of continued abuse or neglect, or where their home environment and parental relationship is such that the child’s social and emotional development will be severely impaired, we need to act and act far more quickly than is often the case.

The key is to provide the child with the permanence and stability that they desperately need and to ensure that they get the care, nurture and attention they require in those vital Early Years. Placing an increased focus on the needs of looked after children and the invaluable role of kinship care is vitally important.

But we need to think more widely too – across the population as a whole. There is much to suggest – both in anecdote and evidence – that aspects of our culture are adversely impacting on our children. We need to recognise the imprint that we leave on children through many of our adult behaviours. For example, we have become inured to swearing and aggressive behaviour in our streets, even at the school gates, and often in our homes. Violence – as has been well documented – is all too prevalent and is reflected in behaviours in nurseries, classrooms and playgrounds from an early stage. And our relationship with alcohol – again well-rehearsed – has a pervasive and insidious impact in the signals we send to children and, in many cases, damaging effects on our relationships with them.

Sometimes it is even more subtle than that. How often have we heard parents who have travelled abroad with a baby or young child comment on just how much more ‘welcoming’ to children they have found other countries to be? These are complex and sensitive issues, but we should not ignore them.

#### The Financial Impact of Early Years Interventions in Scotland

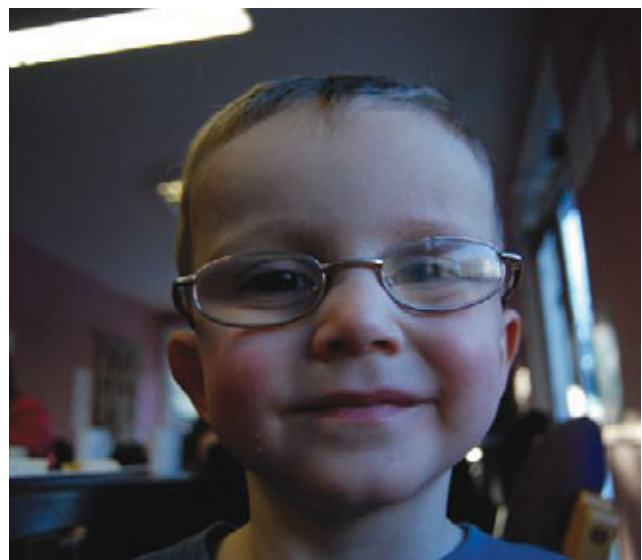
- The short term savings from investing in early years services and support from pre-birth to aged five could be up to £37,400 a year per child in the most severe cases - children who have complex health and social care needs, and approximately £5,100 a year for a child with moderate health and social care needs.
- The potential medium term savings, if interventions from pre-birth to eight are 100 per cent effective, could be up to £131 million a year across Scotland, while in the long term, failure to effectively intervene to address the complex needs of a child in early life could result in a nine fold increase in costs to the public purse.
- A package of effective early years support to reduce the frequency and type of services demanded by children with the most severe needs could have a significant impact on improving outcomes for them and reducing long term costs to the public purse. If earlier, effective support could be given to a child with the most severe needs, resulting in a 10 per cent reduction in the total amount paid out to cover services later in life, this could result in a potential saving of around £94,000 for each individual

Scottish Government, November 2010

**Scotland still has much to do to give children a better start in life. An array of policies and initiatives has not delivered the improvement we would have liked. There is no room for complacency and there must be a willingness to think and work differently in the future – identifying, exploring and tackling deep rooted cultural issues needs to go hand in hand with better and earlier intervention and support. *We need to open up this discussion to a much wider, more reflective conversation than has been done to date.***

## No Time to Lose

From a societal point of view too many trends - such as drugs misuse, domestic abuse and, for many, school attainment - are going in the wrong direction or are not improving at the rate we should expect – not least given the levels of public investment we have made. Scotland is not comparing favourably on many key international league tables on children’s development and wellbeing, let alone wider population measures of health, education and social wellbeing. We need to be willing to acknowledge that much of our effort and investment to date has not been as effective as we would have hoped.



We know - not think, but *know* - that a greater focus and investment on Early Years and early intervention - particularly where a child's needs are greatest - provides a real prospect of turning this situation around. If we don't act now, if we just do more of the same, we will simply stack up problems for the future.

There is a real financial imperative to act too. Public sector budget reductions require us to find new and different ways of working **now**. If we simply try to prop up what has gone before, the risk is that many services will be lost altogether because they are simply unaffordable. In other words adaptation and cost reduction are key to sustaining important early years and early intervention provision. The fact is that many of the professionally-led, largely 'top down', programmes and initiatives favoured in previous years have not achieved the results we would like so it would be just plain wrong to repeat past approaches – especially in such straitened times.

There is also a pressing need to work to reduce demand on public services both now and in the future. We should not need a shred more evidence to tell us that investing in the right support and interventions for children and families *now* is one of the most effective ways that we can achieve this.

Above all else there is a human urgency that should spur us on. There is much in Scotland to be proud of, but frankly many aspects of our culture and behaviours, the level of some of our social problems and, not least, our failure to give some children the most basic level of protection and support should be cause for us to hang our heads in shame. It is not enough just to turn away, to blame the Government of the day or to leave this to others to sort. We can all do better.

**We need to inject a serious note of urgency into our debate and our efforts to give more children a better start in life. That means building a greater shared responsibility, working together more effectively and being focused on doing more now. We need a very clear sense that there is both a financial and, critically, a moral imperative for us to act and act quickly. We need to recognise that if we do not, we will be stacking up problems for the future, and squandering time, money and human potential.**

## Not Everything That Matters Costs Money

Many of Scotland's children suffer significant disadvantages as a consequence of poverty and deprivation. There are also big issues to be addressed about how public money is spent – both now and in the future. But it is important to remind ourselves that an awful lot of the things that really matter to babies and young children are not costly - either to families or to the public purse - but they do take time and effort, and often education, guidance and support. The fact is that many of the things which matter to a child cannot be bought, legislated for nor provided by the State. Much relies on what we do in our homes and families - and parents in particular have a key role to play.

Love, play, sleep, routine, talking, cuddles and bedtime stories may sound soft and fuzzy. They are anything but. Establishing rules and boundaries, teaching right from wrong, good hygiene, healthy eating and so on are vital components of a child's development. Exposure to smoking, drugs and alcohol can have adverse impacts in many ways as does stress and violence. And that list is by no means exhaustive.

- What parents do with their children in the early years matters more than their educational qualifications or type of employment
- Activities such as reading, teaching songs and rhymes, playing with and teaching about letters and numbers, going to the library, going on trips and opportunities to play with other children are related to higher cognitive and social development at the beginning of preschool and still make a difference, though less strongly, at the beginning or primary school

Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) Project

The health and wellbeing of a mother – during pregnancy and even before conception - is vitally important and needs to be more widely promoted, understood and supported. And critically, the need for secure bonding and attachment between a baby and their primary care-giver, usually, though not always, its mother, is of fundamental importance. *It is crucial that everyone, from parents to health professionals to policy makers, understand this.*

**We must do more to raise awareness of the importance of these fundamental needs of babies and young children and provide the knowledge, encouragement, support and services to ensure that more children benefit from good Early Years experiences – in the home and more widely. *The science underpinning these needs may be complex, the message need not be. Moreover, we need to be clear that we cannot just spend our way to giving children a good Early Years experience, it takes time, effort, attention – and love.***

## Building Shared Responsibility

There is a desperate need to build a shared popular understanding of why children's Early Years experiences are so important and how big a part they play both in individual life outcomes as well as the future social and economic success of Scotland. This is a prerequisite to creating a climate and a context which is conducive to decision makers taking spending decisions which support early years investment – perhaps at the expense of more 'acute' or 'crisis' interventions. Parenting support, community groups, antenatal care and the like should not be seen as 'soft options'.

Even more critically, as the Early Years Framework acknowledges, there is a need for transformational change in how we parent our children and in what we do in the family and in the home. It is therefore not enough simply to limit the discussion to what professionals and public services can do; in fact to date we have got this balance quite wrong. Nor is it enough just to say what needs done in a Government policy document and hope it will come to pass.

### 10 Simple Ways to Encourage Learning

1. Be Warm Loving and Responsive
2. Respond to the Child's Cues and Clues
3. Talk, Read and Sing to your Child
4. Establish Routines
5. Encourage Safe Exploration and Play
6. Make TV watching selective
7. Use Discipline as an Opportunity to Teach
8. Recognise that Each Child is Unique
9. Choose High Quality Child Care and Stay Involved
10. Take Care of Yourself

'Getting School Ready', The Foundation for Early Learning, Seattle, USA

Fostering and promoting the benefits of good parenting – which includes the role of mothers, fathers, partners, grandparents and other carers – must be at the heart of developing the potential of our young people. All parents could do more to give their children a better start in life and we need to accept that responsibility. This is not simply a question of social class either; most poorer people make good parents, striving to deal with the many challenges of bringing up children often on very low incomes. In turn many parents with greater material wealth could devote more time and effort to nurturing and supporting their children and do less to compensate – indulge even – through buying more ‘stuff’.

It is hard to talk about these issues – and risky – not least for politicians, but if we are to improve children’s Early Years we, all of us, need not just to look to Government, local authorities or professionals, but also look closer to home. What we do as parents, particularly in the early years of a child’s life, will have a profound impact on the child’s learning and development, their physical and emotional wellbeing and their capacity, right through to adulthood, to relate effectively to other human beings.

Relationships more generally matter a great deal to children in so many ways. One recurrent theme during this project has been a concern to place greater emphasis on the importance of fathers – and indeed their support needs. And the fact that the early years workforce is so predominantly female is not something to be ignored – encouraging more men into childcare, for example, is important. Intergenerational relationships matter too – grandparents, in particular, have a huge contribution to make to a child’s development and, more generally, fostering links between generations can reap rewards for young and old alike.

“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.”

Alan Sinclair

0-5: How Small Children Make a Big Difference, Work Foundation, 2007

We know that Government, health or other professionals simply telling people what to do is not going to get us there. It is so much more powerful when people themselves are in control. Much of our current debate on Early Years is locked up in the world of policy and professionals and is over-laden with jargon and references to the latest policy document, research, tool or process. This needs to change. There can and must be a much more straightforward, ‘human’ discussion about what is going on in our families and our relationships, how that is affecting children and what we can do about it.

***Investing time and effort winning hearts and minds and in building a sense of shared responsibility around good parenting and the fundamental needs of a young child will be far more valuable than yet another policy document, review or more measurement. Having parents themselves in the driving seat of building that responsibility and communicating those messages would be powerful - and more effective than Government and professionally led initiatives and campaigns.***

## Getting Serious About Prevention and Early Intervention

Prevention is always better than cure. That is a simple truth which we should apply widely in our thinking and practice. There is a crying need to shift the balance of effort and investment ‘upstream’ to build a real national effort around support for children and families and indeed to apply the principles of early intervention and prevention more generally. Like many of the issues touched on in this report, it is a ‘no brainer’ with which few would disagree – until, that is, it comes to shifting resource.

Since devolution there has been an ever growing consensus around the compelling case for a preventative approach – and increasingly such a commitment has been embedded in key national and local policies. Yet when decisions have been taken on priorities for investment, that commitment has not been reflected in the choices made. The energy and investment that has gone into addressing, for example, youth offending, antisocial behaviour and criminal justice would have been transformational if applied to early intervention. Similarly, if the oft stated commitment to shift the balance of care towards prevention and primary care had been reflected in the distribution of resources within our care systems, we would now be in quite a different place.

All too often energy, money and public attention defaults back to problems as they occur – crime on our streets, drug misuse, child neglect or abuse. And despite a high degree of Ministerial commitment and cross-party agreement on the importance

of Early Years, our political, public and media debate is far more likely to be dominated by discussion on the number of police than the number of health visitors. Poor literacy is far more likely to be blamed on our schools than recognised as the product of a lack of communication and emotional development in the home as a baby or toddler.

National and local politicians, and other decision makers, and indeed the rest of us as voters and taxpayers, need to decide whether we are really serious about a preventative approach or whether we are just paying lip service to it. There has been no shortage of policies and initiatives that have recognised the many financial and societal benefits of shifting energy and effort ‘upstream’ – and no shortage of evidence in support of investment in prevention and early intervention. The Scottish Parliament’s Finance Committee has recently produced just such a report. The question is are we really up for it?

***There is a real opportunity now as we go into a Scottish Election for all political parties to make a clear and unequivocal commitment to putting prevention and early intervention at the core of policy thinking and public investment in the future. In so doing they would build momentum and achieve a mandate for applying such an approach. Without such a commitment, and the resource allocations to support it, the reality is that we will continue to tinker at the margins. As voters too we have a voice and must be part of driving, demanding and embedding that change.***

“It is universally acknowledged that some of the social outcomes in Scotland are completely unsatisfactory. Moreover, some of the problems described in this report have endured for decades and have remained stubbornly resistant to improvement. However, this report has set out some of the steps that could make a difference at a time of unprecedented pressure on the public finances. In essence, there will have to be a shift from reacting to crises, to a greater focus on prevention and early intervention.”

Report on Preventative Spending,  
Scottish Parliament Finance Committee  
11 January 2011



## Unlocking Resource and Potential

There is both a need and an opportunity for us to be far more creative and more collaborative in providing services and support for children's early years. Not least, we need to make the shift – repeatedly advocated in professional guidance and public policy – but often lacking in practice, to get a better balance in the relationship between professionals, parents and communities.

As is now being increasingly recognised, there has been too great a tendency for professionals and public services to seek to 'treat problems' and to do things 'to' or 'for' people rather than 'with' them – in turn failing to recognise the innate strengths which people and communities possess. Support for an 'assets-based' or 'strengths-based' approach – is now seeping into the language of public policy and professional guidance, but there is a long way still to go to embed such an approach in culture and practice. There needs to be a fundamental shift in thinking and practice so that the strengths, knowledge and experiences of communities, families – and indeed children – are valued and respected more. People need to be – and to feel – more empowered and in control of their lives, wellbeing and decisions that affect them.



Of course our professional workforce is hugely important. The support of, for example, a skilled speech and language therapist at the right time with a young child can be life changing. Health visitors and midwives have a particularly important role to play especially during the key period before and after birth. And high quality childcare and early years education – delivered by qualified, trained staff – can contribute significantly to a young child's development, especially when from a poorer or less stimulating home environment.

However, we need to remember that all of us can support and stimulate the learning and development of a child. You do not need a university degree to encourage a child to play, to stimulate their natural curiosity and creativity or, for that matter, to help out at a local nursery, parents' groups or the like. So too are there many benefits to be reaped from parents supporting other parents – both from giving and receiving.

At a time of budget cuts it is understandable that people are sensitive about the idea of volunteers or other less qualified people apparently 'replacing' graduates and professionally qualified staff. But the fact is we have known for a very long time, long before the spending cuts, that encouraging community and parental involvement and wider volunteer effort **is a good thing to do**, for children *and* for the whole family *and* the wider community.

We need to encourage wider involvement in supporting children and families in a range of settings and circumstances. Where there are barriers – real or perceived – which stand in the way of people working with, and offering support to, young children on a day to day basis, we should take steps to reduce or remove them.

It is increasingly recognised that many well-intentioned measures to protect children – often in response to significant tragic, but isolated, events – have had adverse unintended consequences in our wider culture and behaviours. There is widespread concern that we have fuelled a culture of suspicion and risk aversion through a multiplicity of rules, regulations and checks which in practice discourage the building of healthy, supportive relationships between adults and children. So too are children being denied much needed opportunities to play, learn and explore – and in turn develop their sense of self-reliance and independence – as a consequence of, among other things, parents’ fears of potential abuse, professionals’ fears of blame and organisations’ fears of litigation should a child get hurt or harmed.

The risks of developing a generation of so-called ‘cotton wool kids’ have been recognised. It is important now to work to achieve a better balance between managing risk and affording children opportunity – whether that be in schools, nurseries and public services – or in our streets, parks and wider communities.

There are so many other ways too that our children’s learning and development can be supported if we are willing to embrace and to harness the wealth of resource that exists. Across the country, voluntary and community organisations as well as an array of charities and social enterprises are providing all sorts of support and services to children and families – from childcare services to arts and music projects. There are excellent examples of where, for instance, businesses have provided support – in cash, kind and volunteer support – to develop things like nursery gardens and early literacy projects. Many of our national arts, environment and heritage organisations offer imaginative programmes and learning opportunities for young children. We must value, encourage and support such efforts. Giving children opportunities to, for example, visit a castle, see things made in a local factory or explore their natural environment are experiences which have multiple benefits to a child – and are particularly important when a child may come from a home environment where, for whatever reason, such opportunities are limited.

It is, quite literally, in the national interest to build this kind of shared effort. Indeed, if we are to achieve the aims set out in Curriculum for Excellence, now being rolled out in our schools – that is, to enable each child or young person to be a successful learner, a confident individual, a responsible citizen and an effective contributor – then widening children’s horizons and experiences from an early stage is vital.



We need desperately to unlock the potential of people, families and communities – and, children themselves – and do more to harness wider resource in providing much needed services and support for young children and families. Local employers, businesses and many others can contribute – through financial or material support or volunteer effort. A shared effort is key not only to draw in much needed additional resource but also to build wider human and social capital both now and in the future. We should not resist, but rather encourage and build, a wider involvement in services and support for children and families, recognising that the public, private and not for profit sectors all have a key role to play. There are many excellent examples across the country – we do not need to reinvent the wheel.

“To unleash the latent potential of our people requires that we give them responsibility. The untapped resources of the North Sea are as nothing compared to the untapped resources of our people, I am convinced that the great mass of our people go through life without even a glimmer of what they could have contributed to their fellow human beings. This is a personal tragedy. It’s a social crime. The flowering of each individual’s personality and talents is the pre-condition for everyone’s development.”

Jimmy Reid, Trade Union Activist and Politician, Rectorial Address, Glasgow University, 1971

We need big changes in the way we work – not just because they cost less to the public purse but because they are *the right thing to do*.

## We Need a Bias for Action

Since devolution there has been a plethora of legislation, policies, plans, reviews, working groups and reports on just about every aspect of children’s Early Years – from infant nutrition, to vulnerable families; child protection to parental involvement - there is no shortage of analysis, documentation and guidance. Many research studies have been commissioned; literature reviews compiled and substantial data and evidence amassed. A vast amount of energy and effort has been channelled into discussion, consultation and analysis – much of it needed, lots of it of value, but a great deal of it increasingly rediscovering and rearticulating what has gone before.

There is no shortage of policy, research or analysis on children’s early years. In fact there is a fog which now needs to be cleared. We are in danger of being ‘stuck in a groove’ – and perpetuating a misplaced belief that simply ‘turning the handle’ of policy development and implementation harder will somehow deliver the change we want to see. Paralysis by analysis is also a real phenomenon. We need to create a ‘bias for action’.



“I want to suggest something really radical: let us stop collecting evidence. We do not need any more evidence; we have all that we need. It may be that not everyone knows about it, but many of us do. It could be a matter of trust. We could trust the people that have the evidence to tell us the outcomes. We could trust childminders and people who work with children to get on with the job instead of requiring them to record more of it.”

Dr Suzanne Zeedyk, School of Psychology, University of Dundee, Oral Evidence to the Scottish Parliament Finance Committee Preventative Spend Inquiry, 2 November 2010

It's time to recognise the limitations of 'top down' policy and process as a driver for change, and to question whether this is an acceptable use of diminishing resource. Every new strategy, review, plan or research report costs time and money – something that we rarely stop to consider when initiating such work. Not only are there direct costs involved in developing, writing and producing the latest carefully crafted document; each spawns an industry of consultation, inputs and inward-facing discussion – meetings, conferences and the like - involving many thousands of people hours. This has a serious displacement effect in terms of energy and effort and leads often to inertia among those charged with delivering the change. 'What's the point of doing that, there'll be another new initiative along soon!' is a comment that is frequently heard.

At both national and local level there is a multiplicity of plans, guidance and procedures – too much for the avid researcher to follow, let alone the busy frontline practitioner to read, learn or put into practice. And with many of these, go new processes, forms to fill, data to be collected or targets to be met. This has to stop.

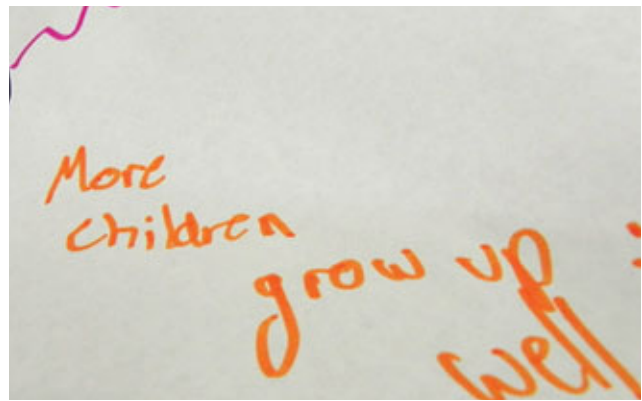
We are now living in a period where vital services are under threat. It is simply unacceptable that we continue to lock up millions of pounds – and I believe it is that much, though no-one has ever costed it – in this kind of inward looking, self-perpetuating activity. More than ever, we need to ensure that every available public pound and ounce of human resource is channelled into delivering services and support on the ground. Bluntly, if the choice is between a policy analyst or a play worker – I know which I would choose.

We do not need new Early Years policy – there is widespread support for the current direction of travel, not least, the Early Years Framework and Getting it Right for Every Child. Continuity is important and much needed – not least to try and build sustainable change, rather than the short termism that often bedevils us. Indeed there should be a presumption against initiating or commissioning new policy and processes. But there is a desperate need to simplify and consolidate the policy landscape and the activities that flow from it. We need to become much more intolerant of 'activity' which creates a veneer of 'doing something' but is not driving change or adding value. Instead there needs to be a concerted exercise to redirect people, effort and resource to driving improvement and to deliver the projects and services that have a meaningful impact on people's lives.

“Violence affects us all, no matter who we are, no matter where we live. Much is made of the need for more police on the streets. But while this would undoubtedly reduce violent crime in the short term, in the long term 1000 health visitors would be more effective than 1000 police officers. Early years education and support is key to reducing violence in the long term. It's the nearest thing to magic without being magic. And that is why it's a vital part of the Unit's work.”

Detective Chief Superintendent John Carnochan, Head, Violence Reduction Unit of Scotland 2008

We need actively to embed a 'bias for action' across all Early Years activities and investment and strip down the process, bureaucracy and endless analysis which consumes valuable time, energy and resource. The Scottish Government should lead in a radical programme of simplification and consolidation. Dramatically reducing and rationalising the policy landscape, and the various work that flows from that, would be an important start. This would have a significant trickledown effect to a host of other agencies and activities.



## This Needs to be a Team Effort

For a small country, Scotland has developed a remarkable propensity to subdivide into a multiplicity of 'boxes'. This is partly reflected in a cluttered public policy and public service landscape and in the practice of Government, both national and local, and also the NHS to develop multiple, parallel strands of policy, activity and investment. Professional demarcations and organisational and sectoral 'agendas' abound – not least in Early Years, which covers such a wide range of interests, professions and sectors. Throughout this project, the issues of silos, divisions and disconnectedness has come up repeatedly as an issue - from the parent seeking support through to the practitioner working to bring about improvement – there is a clear sense that we simply are not joining up either thinking or practice effectively.

In short, if a real national effort is to be built around improving children's Early Years, everyone with an interest needs to work harder to get out of their corners, foster a genuinely collaborative approach, share resources and agree priorities for action. This applies not only to our public services and professionals, but also third sector and community organisations, our academic and research community, politicians and others.

**Unless we acknowledge and tackle the multiple silos, strands of activity and competing agendas and interests that go with them we will simply not achieve our stated aspirations to improve children's Early Years.**

A critical part of delivering improvement is to get better joint working on the ground – between professionals and others working in early years, and in partnership with parents, families and communities. In the medium term – as is now widely acknowledged – there needs to be some rationalisation and consolidation of structures – if for no other reason than ongoing cost and efficiency.



But structural change takes time, is costly and disruptive and does not in itself drive the practices or behaviours which mean that people work together more effectively. Whichever way the public sector is structured there will still be – in Early Years services more than most – professional and organisational boundaries across which people will have to work.

The Early Years workforce comprises a rich and diverse array of people and resource and spans many sectors and professions. It has long been recognised that better integration and joint working is essential both to make best use of that resource and to give children and families the right support when they need it. There is a wealth of knowledge and research on workforce issues and there has been no shortage of ‘central’ initiatives to foster better joint working, multi-disciplinary approaches, shared services, integrated plans etc, as well many strategies and plans on workforce development and on community/service user/parent/client/patient involvement. So too has significant time gone into establishing various partnership structures both within and across sectors. We need to learn from experience. This energy and effort has been well intentioned and has gone a long way to helping us understand the issues but it has not driven sufficient change. Time and again good team working and a truly ‘partnership’ approach takes place on a very localised level – and is usually down to good local leadership, a willingness on the part of key people to work together and usually some element of shared or dedicated resource.

We need to develop a new focus on fostering the culture and behaviours - backed by appropriate systems and rewards - which enable and support people to work together better across boundaries. This requires leadership at many levels both to drive such a change – but also to give permission, ‘let go’ and to release the potential and the creativity which exists both among our professional workforce and in our communities.

This is an area where applying a preventative approach would go a long way. After all we spend significant amounts of time – and money – on what could be described as ‘remedial action’ - trying to get professionals working together after they are qualified – when in fact the root of many of those divisions lies in how they are trained. Surely it would be better not to create so many silos in the first place?

Work is currently underway to develop core skills and training for all those working in Early Years, and a range of steps have been taken to create more integrated education and training. This work needs to be greatly accelerated and the pace and scale of change should be considerably more radical than we have seen to date. There needs to be more practical action - and some serious leaps of faith - rather than another finely crafted review that gathers dust on a shelf.



**The real key to change lies in supporting, encouraging and resourcing professionals and communities to work together at the point of delivery. This requires less control and prescription on how to work – and certainly fewer measures, targets and competing priorities. Rather than yet more centrally driven workforce reviews, more should be done to provide resource, permission and support to the local early years workforce to allow them to redesign fundamentally their working practices and priorities from the ‘bottom up’ and hand in hand with the families with whom they work.**

## Doing What Counts, Measuring What Matters

Over the last two decades, the performance measurement culture has taken root in Government, public services and beyond. There is too much measurement and often of the wrong things. It is not simply that this consumes time, energy and resource in a process of data collection and analysis, it often drives investment and effort towards the wrong priorities and behaviours. Significantly it has become an end in itself rather than an aid to performance improvement.

There are still too many targets – often competing and conflicting – within and across agencies which get in the way. So too has our desire to develop approaches which are informed by evidence, led to an over dependence on research and analysis at the expense of action. For example, how many research reports and conferences do we need to tell us that play is important to children's development? Is the current year-long project to develop national indicators for play really



the best use of time and resource? And will it really make the practical difference necessary in young children's lives? We need more parents to be supporting and encouraging young children to learn - and have fun – through play at home and in their communities – looking for bugs in the park, banging spoons off biscuit tins and building tents from sheets in their living rooms - hardly the stuff that will be driven by Government strategies and measures. There is both a need and an opportunity to turn more energy and effort outwards, to build public momentum around the importance of play and drive more practical improvements on the ground.

And while we should, where possible, measure and evaluate the impact of public investment, this is one area where I would argue we have 'lost the plot'. Do we really need, and can we really afford – either in terms of direct cost or time delay – to construct a business case, do yet another pilot or carry out a formal evaluation on each and every project and activity before deciding whether to roll out the approach or to just get on with a project? We have created an inertia which is becoming crippling. We know a great deal about what works – we need to get on and do more of it.

There is also a real issue about how we evaluate – and value – many community based projects and activities which support parents, children and families. All too often they struggle to articulate and demonstrate their contribution, because it is simply hard to prove the impact that they have. Yet even the most cursory discussion with the people who benefit from such support will testify to their worth. We need to place a greater value on personal testimony – and sheer common sense – in recognising what works and what matters to people.

And when it comes to the well being of society, many of the behaviours and relationships which matter, and do so much to contribute to our human and social capital, simply do not lend themselves to hard-edged short-term quantification. The granddad taking his

grandchild for a walk in the park; the neighbour offering help and support to the young parents next door; the dads who take wee boys out to play football every week or the new mums who get together over a coffee to just meet and talk, together with their babies. Maybe it is time to stop searching for proxies to measure and just accept that we know what matters to us as human beings.

I acknowledge that there are methods, such as SROI (Social Return on Investment) which can help in this area, but I firmly believe that we should spend less time searching for measurement tools and more time getting on and doing what we know needs done.

**The fact is that it is difficult - in some cases nigh on impossible - to quantify the impact of early intervention and support for children and families. It is hard to prove that if that support had not been given there would have been a poorer outcome or to demonstrate short term improvements where change may be generational. But existing evidence, not to mention professional judgement, human intuition and experience - and sheer common sense - can take us a very long way.**



Where data is gathered, or measurement does take place, we should be sure that it is relevant and contributes towards driving improvement. We need too to focus on the big picture. Across local and national government, the NHS, other agencies and partnerships there is, through, for example, Single Outcome Agreements, GPs Quality Outcomes Framework, HEAT targets and the like, all sorts of activity being measured and data collected. Yet we do not have one agreed national measure for child wellbeing or, as some countries do, an agreed standard for assessing a child's readiness for school.

## Time is Precious

We talk lots about money and far less about time. Time matters so much to a young child. Time spent with them, giving them attention, love and nurture. Time to play, time to learn, time to experiment and explore. Time with friends, family and other people and age groups.

Time is profoundly important to young children in another way. Six months or a year might not seem so long to an adult, but if an illness, a language problem or other development need, or indeed abuse or neglect, is left undetected or unattended to for that period of time in these critical formative months and years the impact can be devastating. Or if a mother develops post natal depression and that goes unnoticed, untreated or unsupported, both she, and her child, can lose vital time in establishing the relationship which is so vital. Conversely, early diagnosis, intervention or support can prevent problems and fundamentally improve that child's development and life chances.



“The most dramatic changes in brain structure that take place during the early years of life are seen in the area involved in social behaviour. There is increasing evidence that children’s early experiences can influence the way the brain develops.

The structure of the human brain is highly malleable at birth. Development in key areas of the brain continues from early in the womb until adolescence, but the antenatal period and first years of life (0-3) mark the period of most rapid change. Infant brains develop most rapidly in the first year of life, but development is selective and purposeful. The infant’s instinct is to seek out relationships and the parent’s role is in responding and enhancing the relationship.

Infants who develop a secure attachment can be distinguished from others at 1 year by their ability to show greater positive interactions during play. Insecurely attached infants are at greater risk of problems in emotional development, and children with very poor attachment experiences are at greatest risk of failure to thrive in early years and behaviour problems, lowered self-esteem and schooling difficulties in childhood and adolescence. Children who have had poor attachment experiences are overrepresented in social services referrals and youth justice systems. They are also more likely to suffer anxiety and depression in adult life.”

Dr Harry Burns, Chief Medical Officer for Scotland, Annual Report 2006

We need a much keener sense of time in the life and development of each child. We need to help parents to be alert to problems, encourage them to seek support when necessary and respond quickly when they do so. With each week that passes waiting for a referral, a case conference or a hospital appointment, for example, vital time is lost. And when it comes to the most vulnerable children such delays can, literally, cost lives.

The time of the Early Years workforce is precious too and we should remember that. As indicated already, there is an enormous number of activities and processes which consume their time but do not necessarily ‘add value’ to what they do. We need to do far more to count the costs and to screen out the demands which stand in the way of our Early Years workforce getting on with the job.

**All of this raises a multiplicity of different issues, from child monitoring and surveillance, parental education to procedural issues in dealing with child protection – far too many for me to go into here. Suffice to say that this is an area which merits much more attention and some seriously joined-up, action focussed discussion – critically involving parents and frontline professionals and learning from their knowledge and experience. I am not convinced of the need for further warm words and elaborate articulations of how services could or should work, but rather we need to get closer to understanding how they work in practice. *By acting to simplify and declutter the landscape we can create more time and space, nationally and locally, to address some of these issues.***



## Supporting Families, Developing Communities

It is important that we do not see young children in isolation, but as an integral part of families and communities. There is both a need and an opportunity for us to have a greater focus on all. Throughout this project a recurrent theme in discussion has been the need for us to place a higher value on families and communities – and to return to some of the principles, beliefs and practices which have long since been recognised as important to community development. I would like to suggest one very tangible way we could do this.

Across Scotland there are numerous excellent examples of community based services, projects and centres which make a positive contribution to children and families and the wider community. But this provision is highly variable. Scotland adopted a different approach to England in taking forward the Sure Start Programme over the last decade and, as a consequence, did not go down the road of providing children's centres across the country. In hindsight this was a missed opportunity.

**Where children and family centres work well, and offer a range of childcare, activities, services and support - as well as valuable opportunities for parents to volunteer and to support one another – they can have a major beneficial impact on the wellbeing and development of young children, the family and the wider community. When coupled with effective outreach work they can often engage with parents and children who might otherwise not seek - or be offered - support from which they could greatly benefit.**

It is not too late for Scotland to work to build that capacity – even in the current financial climate. After all what better a focus for real local and national collaborative effort? This is a tremendous opportunity for us to be genuinely enterprising. It's one thing to speak in abstract terms about fostering new partnerships and collaboration, but this is one area where we could work really hard to make it happen – in real time.

Why not set ourselves the goal of seeking to have a major programme of developing children and family centres to serve communities right across Scotland? There is a tremendous opportunity to forge new multifaceted local partnerships and delivery models – to combine public funding with local fundraising, philanthropic giving and charitable support. There are numerous models to build upon - trusts, social enterprises, community interest companies to name but a few. And in most areas, buildings with spare capacity that could be utilised for this purpose.

The links should be made also with wider funding streams and policy objectives not least, for example, work on community learning and development and regeneration. Consider for example the work currently taking place to regenerate town centres. Why should the empty High Street shop not become a children and family centre through collaborative effort and funding from the private, public and third sector – as well support from the community itself? Quite frankly, public spending may be reducing but there is still substantial resource available. But like so many other things, it is often locked in pockets, silos and, as a consequence the impact of public spend is lessened. Also, this is quite frankly **a matter of priorities.**

I firmly believe that one of the most meaningful and practical things we could do to really improve the early years of children's lives in Scotland– and support parents and build stronger communities - *and indeed make best use of the time and skills of many of our early years professionals* would be to work now to develop a new generation of children and family centres across Scotland. This can be done and it should be done – it would be one of the wisest investments we could make. We cannot prove beyond doubt that it would lead to better life outcomes for individual families and children - and in turn reduce costs to the public purse further down the track - but I will put my hand on heart and say that from every ounce of evidence I have seen and personal testimony I have heard, I absolutely believe it would.

## Building Sustainable Services and Support

In the immediate term, steps need to be taken to work creatively and collaboratively to sustain existing support and services to young children and families. Already many of these services are experiencing reductions in funding and the reality is that they often do not have the strong lobby groups or voices that other services do. If we are serious about children and early years we need to create drivers to sustain what exists now– it is always much harder to bring something back once it's gone.



My suggestion is that, building on the existing partnership which exists between the Scottish Government and COSLA in this area, there could be joint agreement about monitoring the impact of budget reductions in Early Years services and an agreement that local authorities take the lead in seeking alternative ways to establish creative, collaborative means of sustaining early years support in light of budget reductions. This could involve social enterprises, private and charitable funding as well as greater volunteer and community involvement.

“The Panel believes that the challenges arising from the projected financial outlook should act as a stimulus for the public sector to review its current delivery models, including consideration of alternatives. Looking ahead, the Panel envisages mainstream roles for the private and voluntary/third sectors as collaborative partners in the delivery of public services.

The Report of Scotland's Independent Budget Review Panel July 2010

I am cautious about advocating legislative change. It is often an ineffective way of driving progress and, if badly crafted or over-prescriptive, can have many unintended consequences. In the current financial environment however there is, and will be, an inexorable pull across the public sector to focus on statutory obligations. **I therefore conclude that consideration should be given now as to how support for a preventative approach and in particular a priority around early years could be enshrined in law via an early Act of the next Parliament. The impact of such a measure, in terms of spending priorities, and the signal it would send are now necessary.**

## A Different Role for Government

It is time to move on from seeing the Scottish Government's role as being about prescribing and codifying change. Rather the Scottish Government has a key role to play in setting the vision and direction and supporting, resourcing and enabling others to take it forward.

Prior to devolution, our widely articulated aspiration was that we would assume greater control over our own affairs and that we would have greater responsibility for our own lives and futures. Instead, the act of bringing Government in Scotland 'closer to the people' has resulted in us taking more and more demands to their door. I know I am not alone in believing that devolution in Scotland has spawned a new dependency culture which is far from desirable.

If we follow the course of events post-devolution, all too often we can observe a pattern which goes something like this: We identify a problem (e.g. childhood obesity, youth disorder, poor literacy) and look to Government to fix it. Typically, Government accepts that challenge; puts in place a process; delivers a strategy; translates that into policy and an (often over-engineered) implementation process and, two or three years on, the problem (not surprisingly) isn't 'fixed'. This then becomes portrayed as a failure of the political leadership of the day so; we change Ministers or Government and start the same process all over again. If ever there was a time to break this cycle, then surely it is now – and where better than in relation to children's early years?

The Scottish Government, local authorities and other public bodies have a key role to lead, to set the direction of travel and to drive investment in the right direction. The UK Government, whose actions and policies sit largely outwith the scope of my work, has a key role to play in addressing the macro economic issues, the tax and benefits system and the distribution of wealth in our society - all of which have a significant impact on the lives and wellbeing of our children. And, it must be said, there is widespread concern about the direction of travel being adopted in these areas at a UK level.

However the State, at any level, can only do so much. In allowing too much responsibility to transfer to professionals, to government and to its agencies we have, inadvertently, disempowered people themselves and this has militated against the very behaviours – in the home, the family and in our communities – which are widely understood to be a vital part of our social and economic well being.



**The Scottish Government could do much more to develop its role as a facilitator and enabler of change - bringing people together, fostering shared approaches and providing the resources to share and to build on learning and experience. This would be more valuable than yet more rearticulation of centrally driven policy or guidance. There is a need generally, to re-craft the role of Government in Scotland, and there is an invaluable need and opportunity to do this in relation to support for children and families. It is an opportunity which should not be missed.**

## Driving Change

If ever there was a time to do more to support and promote the importance of children's Early Years it is now. There is a greater awareness than ever before of the importance of children's Early Years and a growing realisation that effort and attention in this area could reap significant rewards. There is a clear financial and moral imperative to act and a broad basis of agreement around the direction of national policy. The question then is how we drive the change.

Scotland has a fantastic array of people who are passionate and enthusiastic advocates of the importance of children's Early Years. There are also many people who do not work directly in this field but who understand how important children's Early Years experiences are to our country's future and want to make a positive contribution. During the course of this project I have tapped into some of this resource and have established beyond doubt the shared willingness of many people to work together on this issue. I have also established that there is much more to be done to develop a clear, shared vision and aims – there are still too many competing views and priorities, different languages, organisational agendas and the like. There is an absolute need and opportunity now to get people working together to take this national lead.

As I have advocated throughout this report, there needs to be a concerted effort to change fundamentally some of our embedded ways of thinking and working and to foster more meaningful collaboration leading to action. Below I suggest some specific strands of work which could be initiated now to help make this happen.

The Scottish Government should take the lead on driving this work but, critically, its role would be to enable, resource and facilitate discussion and action - not to own, direct or control it. The precise nature and composition of the groups of people required to carry out this work would vary according to the task. This should not entail another protracted process involving all sorts of 'lowest common denominator' consultations, organisational interests and agendas. Rather what is required is a series of in depth, facilitated short life 'action groups' comprising knowledgeable and committed individuals who are able and willing to *take the lead on driving change not, as is so often the case, simply to report back to Government.*

This work should begin now and therefore provide a platform for action for an incoming Parliament and Government – whatever its political composition:-

- **Developing a Common Sense Consensus** – To agree a 'core message' around the importance of children's early years and the things which matter most to young children which could become the basis of agreement for broader awareness raising and 'buy in' – not just among professionals and practitioners, but critically the wider public.
- **Decluttering the Policy Landscape** - To undertake a systematic examination of the range of policy, and associated streams of guidance and activity, which currently exist and to work to distil and consolidate this landscape thus creating greater clarity, focus and shared purpose.

- **Creating a more Child-friendly Scotland** – To consider and explore how Scotland could become more ‘child friendly’ and to develop ideas on how such a drive to work to change our wider culture could be taken forward.
- **Measurement and Evaluation** – To examine the current landscape of measurement, indicators and targets and suggest how this could be dramatically simplified and improved with a view to reducing the burdens of measurement while also identifying key measures of child development and wellbeing which should be introduced.
- **Mapping, Sharing and Building on Effective Practice** – To develop a clear overview – through the range of information and knowledge which already exists – of the range of projects, activities and services which are in place across Scotland and which work effectively to support young children, parents and families; and to consider how this effective practice can be shared and built upon more systematically in future.
- **Simplifying and Consolidating Funding Streams** – To consider the range of actual and potential funding and support which exists for Early Years and early intervention - not only through the public sector, but across a range of third sector and charitable organisations as well as the private sector, and to consider how these resources might be pooled and utilised more effectively in future, including reducing the demands on those seeking funding through the consolidation of information on funding sources and the simplification of application and evaluation processes.
- **Creating a Bias for Action at every level** – To consider how a ‘bias for action’ might be embedded across services and activity on Early Years, both at national and local level, including a concerted effort to translate evidence and analysis to action; reduce the burdens of process and measurement; unlock the potential for greater improvement, innovation and involvement and foster greater collaborative effort -including within the Early Years workforce itself.
- **Championing Improvement in Early Years** - To identify practical steps which might be taken to build leadership and to encourage and support the development of networks of ‘champions’ at both a local and national level and thus build wider shared ownership and momentum around improving children’s Early Years.
- **Sustaining Early Years Support and Services** – To consider how Early Years support and services can be given greater priority; existing provision sustained and capacity built in the future – this should include, among other things, consideration of a possible statutory underpinning for Early Years as well as possible short term measures to sustain existing provision in light of public sector spending reductions.
- **Building and enabling greater parental, community and volunteer involvement** – To identify steps which can be taken to build wider capacity and involvement in providing support and services to young children and families, including identifying and removing barriers which stand in the way of people becoming involved in such activity.

## Extend National Leadership beyond Government and Politicians

Driving change requires leadership at many levels, nationally and locally. It is important that politicians – across parties – are seen to be embedding in their priorities and in their debate a real commitment to prevention and early intervention and an explicit recognition of the importance of children’s Early Years. Broad agreement already exists, but it is a message that needs to be heard far more consistently in debate and translated into decisions.



That leadership responsibility needs to extend beyond Government and politicians too. I suggest an Early Years Alliance be established, comprising people from the public, private, and third sectors – with parents and young people directly involved. This group would help to build capacity and support the development of networks of ‘champions’ across the country to foster ‘collaborations for action’ across Scotland. Part of the role of the Alliance would be to raise public awareness on the importance of children’s Early Years and to do so with the views and voices of Scottish parents and families at the heart.

The Alliance would not be a lobby group, nor a representative body, and neither would it engage in research or policy formulation. Rather it would focus on building and sharing knowledge and awareness and driving practical action across the country. It would also help to create forums where people could come together – across sectors and with parents and communities – to encourage a shared dialogue for action, facilitate learning, build links between people and projects and so help drive change. It would foster more collaborative effort and would draw upon a breadth of people and resource from across a range of organisations – including Scottish Government, local government, NHS, private and third sector organisations. Such an approach would also help to develop and encourage ‘champions’ to write, talk, comment and debate in a range of media and other forums and so stimulate public discussion on key issues such as parenting and children’s learning and development . The Alliance would work also, through a process of dialogue, exploration and agreement, to help consolidate and simplify the strands of activities which are going on so that resources can be pooled and impact maximised.

**I realise that this may be difficult to achieve and that concerted effort, strong leadership and effective facilitation would be required. A real spirit of cooperation would need to be fostered and there would need to be a willingness to put organisational agendas and interests to one side. In this, as in other areas, it will be important to invest in the behaviours and people skills which are necessary to foster this form of collaboration. Part of the capacity building process would be to support and equip champions to do just that.**

## It's not Rocket Science!

Throughout this project I have encouraged people to share their ideas on what practical improvements can be made as well as sharing examples and insights on what is working or could work better in the future. Some of the key themes and ideas are captured above but there are a host of other things that have been suggested along the way. Time and again the phrase 'common sense' has been used reflecting a clear appetite, and willingness, to address the issue of improving children's Early Years in a grounded and practical way.

**This work has confirmed to me is that if you bring people together, give them the time and the space to offer their ideas and suggestions they will have a huge amount to offer. The key therefore is to resource and empower them to take these ideas forward.**

## Conclusion

Much has been said about tough choices in light of public spending cuts, but maybe this is a time not simply to think about tough choices, but to consider what the right choices are – not just in what we do, but in how we do it.

There is an absolute economic imperative for us to tackle the issue of improving children's Early Years with renewed vigour and to think and work differently in the future. But there is an even more pressing social and moral imperative to do better. If we purport to be a caring society, one that cherishes human endeavour, seeks to widen opportunity, nourishes potential and adheres to a notion of 'the common weal', we must ensure that our children get a better start in life and that families get the support they need – not just through formal agencies and professionals, but at our own hand and in our communities.

We need to work more cooperatively and creatively than we have done in the past and to accept shared responsibility, not least as parents, for raising the next generation. We need too to acknowledge where time, energy and effort has been misplaced in the past – to move on from endless analysis and rearticulation of problems; stop rediscovering, time and again, what is important and get on and do the right things.

We must recognise that much of what we have done to date has not achieved what we aspired to. That is not because we have been 'bad people', nor that policymakers or politicians have set out to do the wrong thing. Rather we have tried – but often failed. To recognise that is not, and should not be seen as, blaming – rather it is learning.

Einstein famously said that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. We would do well to remember that. Many of our old ways of working are no longer affordable – but neither are they desirable; many have not been effective. There is a pressing need to draw in a wider range of effort, energy and resource from across sectors, organisations and individuals to support children's Early Years. There is a requirement to value the views, experiences and capacity of people themselves and to 'free up' communities and frontline professionals alike to concentrate their efforts



in constructive ways. And I say with the utmost sensitivity to those who are experiencing cuts in jobs and services, that if there is any silver lining in the current cloud, it is that this could be the catalyst for change which will help us to create a better, more balanced, more supportive society in the future.

Throughout the past six months I have been privileged to help encourage fresh thinking and reflection and indeed to witness a growing national momentum towards taking action; I hope this momentum will build in the future. In this report I suggest both specific action steps and fundamental changes to the way we think and work – not least in respect of how we ‘do’ public policy and provide public services. I suggest that we need a much more grounded, common sense articulation of what matters to us as human beings and that we must work to build our human and social capital - in other words, to invest in our greatest asset – our people.

This need not - indeed should not – involve reinventing the wheel. Rather it is about trying to develop a shared awareness of what matters, build on what works and find real and practical ways of making a difference.

We need to be less reliant on Government action and intervention to drive the kind of social change most of us want to see. We, all of us, need to unlock resource – human, financial and physical – to ensure our children get a better start in life. We need to bring our efforts together in a collaborative spirit, so that Scotland truly invests in our children and our future.



# Why Relationships matter for the early years

## Research evidence from CRFR

***Effective knowledge sharing is vital if we are to tackle complex and sensitive societal issues effectively. As part of this project I invited the Centre for Research on Families and Relationships at the University of Edinburgh to provide me with a distillation of their research to inform my work. With their permission I have reproduced their submission to me in full below. This paper offers invaluable insights which will be of wide interest, it is also an exemplar of how research evidence can be shared in an accessible manner and so help inform and influence thinking, discussion and decision making. My thanks go to all who contributed to this work and indeed to a number of other academics and researchers who have also shared their research findings with me during the course of this project.***

The Centre for Research on Families and Relationships (CRFR) welcomes the opportunity to provide information for the dialogue on how best to take action to improved children's early years of life led by Professor Susan Deacon.

CRFR is a consortium research centre based at The University of Edinburgh. CRFR produces, stimulates and disseminates social research on families and relationships across the lifecourse.

The following briefing aims to summarise and distil the relevant research conducted by CRFR over the past 10 years and findings from the Scottish Government funded Growing Up in Scotland (GUS) project which tracks the lives of 8000 Scottish families and their young children from birth. CRFR is actively involved in the analysis and dissemination of GUS findings.

For a fully referenced copy of this briefing please see : [www.cfr.ac.uk/earlyyears.html](http://www.cfr.ac.uk/earlyyears.html) or contact: [cfr@ed.ac.uk](mailto:cfr@ed.ac.uk) / 0131 651 1832

## Scottish families – a multifaceted picture

- Although half of babies are born to unmarried parents, the overwhelming majority of their parents live at the same address.
- Most families are relatively stable. Just 11% of 5 years olds have experienced their father leaving or entering the household during the first three years of their lives.
- Some children have parents in different households. Around one in four children aged 5 do not live with their father. Around two thirds of children under 5 with a non resident parent have contact with that parent. Most extended families will include ex-partners, ex in-laws, ex-auntie or uncle relationships. We don't even have a name for some of the relationships but these people often remain in what we call family.
- Almost all families with young children receive some form of support from the child's grandparents, with many grandparents providing a full range of support, including long periods of childcare every week. Of the two-thirds of families in Scotland with a child aged just under 2 who use childcare, 60% of these families used grandparents for all

or part of this care.

- We know that what happens in their neighbourhood and in other households is an important part of family life.
- Over half of mothers with children under 5 were in paid work of 16 hours per week or more, most typically in part-time work of less than 35 hours per week. Most mothers also described themselves as ‘looking after home and family’, pointing to the wide spread importance of work-life balance.

## Support for families matters

### Most Scottish families and communities are strong

- Most children under 5 in Scotland live in families who eat, play games and read stories together every day.
- Most parents feel that people in their communities look out for each other’s young children and can be trusted.
- Three quarters of parents with young children in Scotland have good informal support from family or friends giving advice and assistance.

### However, families need help sometimes

- We know that it is important to support families who need help. We know that parents who feel supported have a positive impact on their child’s cognitive, social, emotional and behavioural development. We also know that parents who feel supported are more open to seeking help and advice when they need it.
- Parenting programmes may work for some families, in some situations, some of the time. Parenting programmes only provide one type of support whereas what families need is a range of services provided in their communities. Living in child friendly communities and having a reasonable level of resources are also very important to outcomes for children.
- Having a mother with a positive attitude towards seeking help has a positive impact on the health of children living in disadvantaged circumstances. Children whose mothers are open to seeking help and advice are more likely to avoid negative early health outcomes such as low birth weight, poor general health and language difficulties although other factors are important.

### Family breakdown is a process

- We know that family change can be disruptive for all members of a family and that families need to be supported through this process. Children or young people experiencing family change through the divorce, separation, or re-partnering are also more likely to experience other changes such as moving house, town or school. Family disruption or absence of a family member, in addition to other associated changes can stack up and push the balance towards risk for all family members.
- Mothers who report low relationship strength with their partner and/or low levels of social support were more likely to experience repeated mental health problems during the first four years of a child’s life.
- We know that with older children when parents separate it changes children’s

relationships with both parents not just the one who becomes 'non-resident'. Children feel better when they can see by the way parents act that they still have an important place in both of their parents' lives.

- We also know that relationships with non-resident parents (mostly fathers) are facilitated when they are supported to keep in contact by their resident families, when their friends could be included, and when they were better off. Keeping in touch with their non-resident parents' wider family was also important to some young people.

### Improving planning and funding processes for early years initiatives

- Through interviews with providers and planners, and analysis of indicators, there is some evidence that there are many benefits of working across agencies. However, this requires additional time, skills and resources for such joint planning and delivery to be effective. There was much enthusiasm for the diversity that Sure Start Scotland enabled as it allowed a range of projects to flourish. Although reaching vulnerable families not much in contact with services is important, many involved in early years' services also stressed the importance of mainstream and universal programmes.
- Early years' policies should be considered complex interventions, with broad and multiple objectives, cutting across sectors and allowing for local diversity in implementation. Such an approach helps evaluators to address complex interventions by focusing on processes and systems and to explore the relationship between context, activities and outcomes.

### Supporting mothers and babies is not the whole story

#### Fathers need to be supported to do their part

- It is important to support all those who may play a part in raising a young child. Even very young fathers can be very enthusiastic about fatherhood, but many feel marginalised by services.

### Intergenerational relationships play an important role in raising children

- Grandparents make a huge contribution to families with young children in Scotland. Not only do they provide a huge amount of practical support mentioned above they can be an important source of emotional support to families. While there can be a difference in expectations of motherhood between different generations, women can look to their mothers as an 'anchor' in a sea of seemingly conflicting and often confusing advice.
- Grandparents are also considered important by grandchildren themselves, not just looking back to early childhood but also in their teenage years.

### Families are not just people you live with

- The role of friends and neighbours is significant. What happens in the neighbourhood and in other households is an important part of family life.
- The extent to which parents feel supported has an impact on parenting behaviours.
- Parents who reported feeling part of satisfactory social networks with friends and

family engaged in more home learning activities with their children and are more open to seeking help and support, as well as being more likely to do so than were parents with fewer satisfactory networks.

## Social, political, cultural and environmental contexts cannot be separated from understanding and supporting families with young children

### How we view children

- Supporting families is more than just a group of ‘family friendly’ measures like providing a nappy changing room, it is an attitude that in itself will lead to mainstreaming child friendly approaches. In its 2008 report, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child commented with concern on the ‘general climate of intolerance and negative public attitudes towards children’ in the UK. Twenty percent of parents with children under 5 perceived their neighbourhood to have low child-friendliness. Parents who were dissatisfied with their neighbourhood and who gave local facilities a poor rating were also negative about the area’s child-friendliness.

### Poverty and inequality

- Factors associated with poverty can add up to make it tougher for families. Working towards reducing health inequalities, debt and issues related to long-term unemployment will have a positive impact on families and children.
- One quarter of children aged under 4 had been ‘persistently poor’ since birth. Low income in itself does not have a negative impact on children’s development but poverty more generally is related to other disadvantages which together can have a negative impact on children’s development.
- Families feel that government had a role in addressing low income. However, they have mixed views over the success of government intervention and those of its agents.

### Neighbourhoods and services

- Parents living in deprived areas were more likely than other parents to report low access to services like childcare, health and leisure facilities. Parents living in deprived areas and/or in social housing were also most likely to be dissatisfied with their local facilities.

### Work-life balance

- Mothers value work highly, not only for its economic contribution, but also for personal identity, social contact and as an important message for their children. Most working parents with children under 5 believe that their employment is not detrimental to their enjoyment of family life nor to their ability to raise their child(ren) although it does create tensions.
- 80% of working parents with children under the age of four had access to at least one family-friendly policy such as flexible working, home working or childcare vouchers. Parents in managerial and professional occupations tended to have access to a wider range of policies than those in other occupational classifications.

- Accessing available, affordable and quality childcare remains a key concern for parents combining caring and working. Most of the sourcing, organization and resourcing of care is still usually undertaken by women, illustrating and reinforcing the gendered aspects of caring. There is a presumption that care services are organised around work with no provision for providing care free or child free time in families.
- For many mothers, their choice of job can be constrained by family responsibilities. They require flexibility in hours and working practices, and for many this meant taking low-grade work. Parents working full-time and those in lower supervisory or technical occupations were more likely to say that their employment had a negative impact on family life.
- Many mothers find managing domestic life alongside paid work onerous and tiring. It seems that families have to negotiate individual solutions to managing caring and providing and that tensions run through aspects of their work and family lives. Lone mothers, as well as families living on low incomes, are particularly affected by lack of affordable childcare.

### Environmental change

- Environmental change and the need for families to become much more eco-aware in their everyday habits will increasingly impact all families in a variety of ways. For example:  
Climate change and the impact of adaptations to it will likely cause an increase in the cost of food and fuel.  
How access to green spaces impact children's health and indeed their future eco decision-making will continue to be a concern.  
Expectations about what is 'essential' for caring for young children may continue to increase pressure for parents to buy more and more stuff.  
Issues about the 'greening' of the family are likely to have a huge impact on parenting and outcomes for young children but are largely unexplored in research and need to be addressed in policy terms.

### Recession

- The recession is very likely to put a number of constraints on family life. The impact can be as acute as a parent losing their job or can also be more insidious, for example a climate of uncertainty that modifies people's ability to plan.
- In a recent study, lower income families were already feeling financially stretched and aware of increasing costs of living. In addition to cutting back on choice of purchases, were also modifying family practices (e.g. going out to eat, going to the cinema less).
- Other potential impacts of the recession could include:
  - delayed family building and increased unintended childlessness for some
  - shrinkage in services that will increase the burden of care on family households and particularly women
  - more distance relationships and living-apart-together and/or more return to one career families as coordinating employment in dual career couple becomes increasingly difficult
  - increase in low paid work with hours that are hard to manage with caring roles in the family

## Children's views must not be marginalised

- The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child has been influential in recognising the rights of all children to have their views considered, in all decision that affect them. This has been embraced by many sectors in Scotland.
- Children in their early years, however, are often excluded from broader participation activities. Yet, there is considerable expertise within the early years sector itself on how to consult meaningfully with children and young people on policy and practice. This expertise could beneficially be spread beyond the early years sector – to ensure children under the age of 8 are routinely included in local and national policy-making.
- Children's right to participate is too frequently misunderstood as solely being about 'choice'. Choice can be important, but can ignore other participation possibilities – like children being one stakeholder amongst others when a decision is being made.
- A preoccupation with children's 'voice' can ignore the many ways children express their views, and this may be particularly true for young children.

## Importance of research

- It is vital that good information is gathered so that we are able to better understand what leads to good outcomes for Scotland's children and how families can be supported. The Growing up in Scotland (GUS) study is an excellent example of this. GUS is an exciting study that follows the lives of 8,000 children and their families in Scotland from infancy through to their teens. This is one of the largest longitudinal studies ever done in Scotland.
- Further studies that aim to listen to and understand people's own experiences can help us pick apart how complex circumstances work to impact people's lives. There is also a role for studies that pull together all the work that has already been done on an issue in one place for analysis. A programme of qualitative research supports the development of this type of information. In addition, a programme for dissemination and knowledge exchange helps to ensure that once this knowledge is generated, it can be translated and mobilised into policy making and practice development.

# Input from Early Years Dialogue Groups

December 2010 – January 2011

Report by Dr Laura Meagher, Honorary Fellow, School of Social & Political Science, University of Edinburgh & Senior Partner, Technology Development Group

(With support from the Scottish Funding Council)

## Introduction

Throughout her work as Early Years Champion, Susan Deacon engaged with a wide variety of individuals, through a range of interactions, viewing their insights as a valuable resource. People responded generously, appreciative of the opportunity and willing to share their perspectives and their own personal learning. To give a flavour of the sorts of insights articulated, this Annex captures input from a subset of occasions gathering input --- a series of three Dialogue Groups and a related Scottish Government-hosted event.

These facilitated interactive events created what Deacon calls “shared space”. They helped to surface ideas, identify commonalities, build buy-in and explore sensitive and complex issues in effect, acting as a mechanism for knowledge exchange. Each deliberately small group was composed of a mix of diverse perspectives. Under Chatham House rules, participants were encouraged to draw upon multiple layers of insight into Early Years and offer input on complex issues without simplistically representing one organisation’s views.

***Participants provided thoughtful, rich input. Consensus was not sought, so this is not a report of agreed points; but a view of highlights is provided below, often clustered into groupings of similar thoughts. (Sequence in a list does not imply prioritisation.).***

## The Importance of Early Years

When asked why children’s early years are so important, participants came up with input which could be clustered as follows:

- This is the starting point, the optimum time when we can make the most difference, a formative stage with great intensity of development
- Rapid brain development now, laying down layers, influences so much later on
- This is the foundation for future well-being (or not), including physical, mental and emotional health (e.g. stress in early years has lasting effects)
- This stage is critical for attainment in education, skills, confidence
- This stage shapes sense of self, other people and community, development of caring relationships, foundation for link with society
- “Compass”, reference points, norms, habits, attitudes and values are being laid down
- Children have the right to be dependent and vulnerable; they need love and attention
- This is a key time for the whole family, inter-generational relationships early and later when children become parents themselves
- This is a key time for optimising “return on investment”, including but not limited to prevention of later problems, e.g. physical and mental ill health, crime, drugs misuse etc



Some discussion took place as to possible definitions of “early years”. Some saw this simply as “childhood”, perhaps even on into adolescence. Others emphasised the importance of taking into account the stage of conception and onward, and also pre-conception health. Another point suggested was to think in terms of laying down layers that last on into adulthood.

### Making a practical difference in a child's life

Dialogue Groups were asked to identify things that really make a practical difference in a child's life, providing a positive start. Some clusters include:

- Being loved, having positive and reassuring relationships, being nurtured physically and emotionally, attachment
- Being part of a family, with a set of relationships of some sort (a child can't exist alone; it is necessary to consider the family)
- Developing empathy, caring (and being cared for) ... developing emotional literacy
- Opportunities to socialise
- Being happy... happiness will have a knock-on impact for society
- A sense of coherence, consistency, boundaries (including being said “No” to) ... developing an understanding of the world, one's relationship to it and learning to manage one's life
- Feeling secure, in a warm dry home, with access to a healthy balanced diet
- Stimulus, play, experience with the outdoor environment
- Parents who have access to help if they need it
- Ideally, absence of problems like alcoholism, drugs, mental health difficulties or violence --- or at least a build-up of resilience

One group delved into the issue of parenting in particular, identifying the need for finding appropriate balances, e.g. society emphasising the importance of good parenting without falling into the negatives of too much “blame” or too much codification. How can we help without taking over? How can we expect parents to keep their responsibilities and duty of care, while also providing a safety net? It was recognised that there will never be just one solution, but rather a spectrum of possible interventions. Also, the type of guidance and assistance available to parents needs to be considered, perhaps for example “almost invisible” non-judgemental support.

### Building a shared awareness of the importance of children's early years

Dialogue Groups were challenged with thinking about how we can reach people widely to build a shared awareness of the importance of children's early years, to bridge common sense and what might seem to be over-complicated understanding. Points raised could be clustered:

- Try to send a simple, accessible message that focuses on the human side, e.g. the Scandinavian pedagogical message of “Heads, Hearts, Hands”. Metaphors may be helpful.
- “We as Scotland can do better” (“We” not “You” shows collective responsibilities.) Can we frame challenges in a way that leads to something positive? Can we give examples of social changes that have succeeded?
- We need to help people learn why early years matter, for example many don't know about brain development in pre-birth and early years

- The idea of a “shared awareness” raises difficulties, for example there exists a wide range of advice; who gives anyone permission to say “X is better for children”? Are service providers measured appropriately? Trying to intervene with or change the values of a family is fraught.
- It is difficult not to sound preachy, yet how can we say some behaviours are not only inappropriate but actually unacceptable?
- Scottish culture, compared to some other countries in Europe and elsewhere, seems less welcoming to children. At the same time, there can be too much indulgent “worship” of children with too little saying “No”.
- There is a concern that we should not focus only on the most needy children, without also thinking about population-wide improvement. However, the debate around universal vs targeted services and interventions is recognised as complex.
- Certainly investment must be made in communities and families most in need, yet shortcomings of targeting universal services into problem areas are clear, pointing to the importance of an innovative, personalised approach, building community capacity and empowering local people. This is particularly important since all individuals are different and, even for one individual, circumstances and needs for support can change over time.

### The Role of Government and Public Policy ... and Others

Probing questions about the role of government and public policy, in the context of roles played by others, led to multi-layered discussions. Just a few highlights may give a flavour of points explored. Discussions were held as to how the policy landscape might be improved, or made clearer, particularly given the numerous policies and papers that exist. It was felt that people need to be engaged at/from the formation of policy.

Many comments referred to the as yet unrealised potential for a more joined-up approach to Early Years, which transcends health, education and other government arenas, as well as numerous other organisations, not least the third sector. There needs to be a mechanism that allows people to come together from across sectors, and address big systemic issues in a way that helps people actually do things. It might help, for instance, to have a small group drill down into complex key areas needing more clarity.

Not only is joined-up working necessary at “high” levels, but also there need to be networks of well-disposed people able to work together at the coalface, for example in terms of local provision helping one person or one family. Professionals need to talk with each other at community level, but also with other members of the community; Early Years should not be taken out of the hands of the community. Integration or joint working should involve health visitors, social workers, preschool teachers and more.

There was a strong sense that simplification would help, that there are too many policies, and perhaps too much of a belief that if a policy exists, something will happen. Yet core messages are needed. While evidence for the importance of early years support is probably clear to Early Years specialists and professionals, the message needs to be spread to other key audiences, including for example local authority directors of finance, politicians and others who make or influence resource, policy and other decisions.

It will be important to align resources with Early Years goals, identifying the total resource spent on Early Years across various sources, developing a clear goal statement and shared indicators of progress, with joint and holistic scrutiny across the Early Years resource and services.

A general challenge raised lies in transforming what we are used to in terms of state/public sector provision by shifting to widespread engagement and support for children's Early Years, even a sense of "collective responsibility". There is a concern that a "state-ist" approach - expecting government to solve all problems - has dominated Scottish politics and that this detracts from the motivation and ability of others to generate solutions. A balance identified as important was that between calls for a more homogeneous and centralised approach to implementation of Early Years policy --- and tapping into the power and creativity of local solutions.

People who do things well, or bring about positive changes should be celebrated. Communities should be supported in developing their own solutions. ("Performance measures" should not divert practitioners from doing what is important.) Government could act as a facilitator for learning and sharing across the country, for example providing resource for joint training, meetings, dialogue and the time of practitioners who participate. Ideally, innovative effective practices may become mainstreamed or embedded (though tailored as appropriate by local communities.)

The definition of "leaders" should be quite broad, including champions trying out new things locally. "Distributed leadership" should be encouraged, with recognition of diversity of types of leaders and parity of esteem, e.g. between professionals and "others". Ideally, there would be mechanisms, such as but not limited to innovation funds, to test out and lever change.

### Some Action Steps

Different groups explored different issues in more or less depth. The following non-exhaustive clusters of suggestions for practical action should reflect the sorts of thinking that took place:

- Move more resources to Early Years
- Invest in problem prevention (e.g. pre-conception health)
- Come up with unambiguous statements about what children need to flourish (e.g. love, play, routine, sleep, food, safety, playmates)
- Hold a public information/social marketing campaign, shift debate; have a high-profile multi-dimensional campaign as to Early Years and parenting roles. Emphasise individual and collective enlightened self-interest –why Early Years are important for us all
- Convey to mothers, fathers and carers that the child's development is their shared responsibility and how important it is to lay the right foundations in this crucial period
- Take steps to include fathers in the first 18 months of a child's life, e.g. through expectations of service providers, flexible working arrangement, location and branding of services
- Make it so that any parent could expect to have the chance to meet other parents, find child care, advice, etc.

- Provide a mix of different “offerings” or contexts for parents, e.g. family centres as well as parenting programmes in and beyond the classroom
- For parents with insufficient income to meet the basic material needs of their children, provide advice and support, and pragmatic support such as fit-for-purpose houses, clothing exchange schemes, funded and centrally controlled heat, debt advisor services, etc.
- Encourage funding of childcare services, of decent quality, by local authorities
- Try to address patchy distribution of high quality support and services so as to provide assistance to marginalised families
- Recognise, support and reward grandparents and kinship carers, and non-conventional employment such as volunteering and caring
- Recognise the value of things that spring up informally, such as mother and toddler groups
- Provide more time of midwives, health visitors who may be trusted by families with babies and young children (be careful not to exclude fathers); maximise the health visitor role; provide more coherent and joint family service, without impeding innovation
- Recognise the value of childcare workers, e.g. with enhanced career structures
- Provide more education on early years/child development for various practitioners

Other suggestions for action addressed the bigger picture of building a truly collaborative approach and driving change:

- Small groups could dig down into issues to come up with practical suggestions, e.g. on joint working, decreasing red tape, appropriate measurement, finding money for silo-spanning efforts
- Consider the key things setting lives into motion that serve as the dividing lines between children ending up with lives we all want them to have and those who don't, e.g.:
  - to be born healthy, preventing whatever harm we can
  - have at least one caring, competent adult consistent in their lives
  - a child-friendly environment, with more early years assets than liabilities (more in favour of young children and families than against them)
  - since bad things happen, even with the best of intentions, regulations etc., have a quick and effective response when harm does happen
  - For each of these dividing lines, identify say 20 practical actions and who is responsible for each, including government, families, communities, business etc.
- Use taglines and metaphors to move beyond Early Years “anoraks”
- In a broad communication/engagement effort, emphasise enlightened self-interest, at the individual and the collective levels, rather than depending on altruism. Help people understand how their self-interest relates to early years.
- Remember that there will be many important activities that are not delivered by the state. Variety is healthy.
- Don't expect leadership to reside only at the national/expert/political level; create “local” leadership communities; involve a broad spectrum of interested people including parents and young people to drive change and develop services and supports
- Develop advocates for prioritising Early Years widely, in government, local authorities, community planning partnerships, voluntary sector agencies
- Avoid people with new ideas running into brick walls/silos.

## An Example of Input: Points raised by Early Years Practitioners

A variety of events afforded opportunities for gathering insights and views concerning the early years of children in Scotland. As just one example, a Learning and Teaching Scotland Early Years Conference of around 150 early years practitioners was used as an opportunity to facilitate round table discussion around three key questions. Even just this brief “taster” of a few of the points raised, excerpted from session notes, should convey a sense of the thoughtful input provided.

### What is the message that we want to get across?

- All children deserve the best possible start in life. They are the future of our country and communities.
- From childhood we want to build/create an adult who is confident, innovative, respectful and respected
- Building blocks of the future are laid down in the early years
- Earliest experiences promote good citizenship, values; skills for life are practised at nursery level
- Giving children the best start in life for the knock-on effect for their future
- In the early years, you capture the whole family.... Creating an environment which builds family confidence about aspirations to education, learning and emotional well-being.

### How can we get that message across?

- Positive publicity campaign encouraging people to value the early years
- Take the message out pre/ante-natally. Locally- through health visiting; nationally- media, advertising, leaflets, DVDs. Parenting in curriculum.
- People (e.g. parents) need to know how big an impact they can have, and need encouragement, for instance to break a negative chain/cycle
- Total change in attitude to families and importance of children in society; parental responsibilities being supported and encouraged by government and society
- Make sure plans are carried out and support is there

### How can we get better at providing support?

- Improve communication; take on board **everyone's** input. Open up!
- Co-ordinating services needs to be done at a local level.
- A range of health and social services available through centralised early years centres.
- Centres/Schools/Nurseries/Others: working in partnership to provide the best care for children and families
- Open nights, parenting workshops/encouragement, networking mums
- Health visitors highly available to all children 0-5
- Better multi-agency working, e.g. joint training, so people develop shared ethos and language before going to work in different agencies
- Volunteers/citizens, e.g. ‘adopt a grandchild’

# Stakeholder Engagement & Acknowledgements

My thanks go to the many people who have so willingly given of their time and shared their views, insights, experience and material during the course of this project. It is clear that there is a wealth of knowledge, enthusiasm and interest in how we improve children's early years in Scotland and an array of excellent 'champions' – from policymakers and professionals through to parents and children themselves. This is a very powerful base to build upon. I hope that this work has helped to raise the profile of early years and to encourage discussion, exploration and collaboration which can be built upon in the future.

## Conferences and Events

My thanks go to the organisers of the following events for inviting me to participate variously, as speaker, facilitator and participant:-

**The Child's Curriculum Conference**, University of Edinburgh,  
11 September 2010

**Life Stages – Improving the Support Conference**, West Lothian Council,  
16 September 2010

**Playing Outside Conference**, Children in Scotland,  
16 September 2010

**Dundee Partnership Forum GIRFEC Strategy Session**,  
22 September, 2010

**Positive Coaching Scotland Conference**, Winning Scotland Foundation,  
29 September 2010

**Creating Good Lives Conference**, Centre for Confidence and Wellbeing,  
29 October, 2010

**'Same as You' Conference**, Scottish Consortium on Learning Disability,  
2 November 2010

**Learning and Teaching Scotland**, National Early Years Local Authority Forum,  
3 November 2010

**Launch of Healthier**, Wealthier Children, NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde,  
9 November 2010

**Learning and Teaching Scotland Early Years Conference**,  
13 November 2010

**Association of Scottish Community Councils Annual Conference**,  
20 November 2010

**Assets Alliance Scotland Conference**,  
13 December 2010

## Dialogue and Discussion Group Participants

Theresa Allison, General Manager, North Edinburgh Childcare  
Graham Bell, Chief Executive Kibble Education and Care Centre  
Keir Bloomer, Chair, Tapestry Partnership  
Sue Bruce, Chief Executive, City of Edinburgh Council  
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Colin Campbell, Development Manager, SENSCOT  
Paul Carberry, Operational Director, Children's Services, Action for Children, Scotland  
Helen Carlin, Development Manager, Rowan Alba  
Kate Cherry, HM Assistant Chief Inspector, HMIE  
Dr Carol Craig, Chief Executive, Centre for Confidence and Wellbeing  
Dr Alison Elliott, Convener, Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations  
Garry Graham, Head Teacher, Auchinairn Primary School  
Karen Grieve, Programme Manager, Equally Well  
Leslie Gregory, Director, Open Door Accommodation Project  
Douglas Hamilton, Head of Policy and Research, Save the Children Scotland  
Richard Hellewell, Chief Executive, Royal Blind & Scottish War Blinded  
Ronnie Hill, Director of Children's Services Regulation, Care Commission  
Anne Houston, Chief Executive, Children 1st  
Barbara Hudson, Director, British Association of Adoption and Fostering Scotland  
Ann Hume, Research Practitioner, Queen Margaret University/East Lothian Council  
Barbara Hurst, Director of Performance Audit, Audit Scotland  
Dr Rosie Ilett, Deputy Director, Glasgow Centre for Population Health  
Susan Jackson, Senior Director, Winning Scotland Foundation  
Professor Lynn Jamieson, Centre for Research on Families and Relationships  
Kenny Kemp, Journalist and Director, Kemp Communications  
Prof. Richard Kerley, Queen Margaret University  
Romy Langeland, Honorary Professor, Scottish Institute for Residential Child Care  
Jane Liddell, Head of Education Quality and Development, North Lanarkshire Council  
Susan Lorimer, Project Co-ordinator, Cornerstone Community Care  
Dr Nancy Loucks, Chief Executive, Families Outside  
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Sally Amor, Child Health Commissioner and the Highland Integrated Early Years Team  
Tam Baillie, Scotland's Commissioner for Children and Young People, Barnardos Scotland  
Bob Black, Auditor General for Scotland  
Dr Harry Burns, Chief Medical Officer, Scottish Government  
Jean Carwood-Edwards and the early years team, Learning & Teaching Scotland  
Linda De Caestecker, Director of Public Health & Catriona Renfrew, Director of Planning & Community Care, NHS Greater Glasgow & Clyde  
Rosie Ilett, Deputy Director, Glasgow Centre for Population Health  
Bronwen Cohen, Chief Executive, Children in Scotland  
Martin Crewe, Director; Simon Watson, Head of Development & Mark Ballard, Assistant Director of Policy, Barnardos Scotland  
Zoe Dunhill, Retired Consultant Paediatrician, NHS Lothian  
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Michelle McCoy, Specialist in Public Health, NHS Lothian  
Fiona McKie, Communications Manager, Glasgow Centre for Population Health  
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