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Early Childhood Matters

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Messages from Research

Research reviews

'Research' is about finding things out, another word for enquiry. In the field of early childhood, practitioners are all – consciously or unconsciously – researchers. We need to find out about the needs of the individual children with whom we work, and how best to meet those needs; and so our daily enquiries are centred on their lives and on their development, and on our own professionalism. In a more academic and general sense, other people's research, when it has been done well, can also tell us useful things about those children and about our work. Research designs range from small-scale studies about a particular child or children, to large-scale reviews of statistical studies of hundreds or even thousands of children and families. But bigger does not always mean better, and the crucial issue is about the questions an enquiry sets out to answer. Some questions can only be answered reliably by big statistical studies, while smaller qualitative studies may be more appropriate and revealing for oth-

ers. The best kind of design will be the one that is most appropriate, the most fit for the purpose of finding answers to the questions being asked.

We know from research reviews that wellbeing in early childhood really matters. Health and happiness are needed to underpin the kind of childhood that is *every* child's right; and a strong sense of wellbeing is likely to be protective in relation to the challenging situations that may be experienced in adolescence and young adulthood.¹ A very great deal has been written about the scientific study of the nervous system to explain behaviour in terms of brain activity – neuroscience. Within this preliminary Part 1 which provides a research context for a study of wellbeing, it will only be possible to reflect this and other evidence selectively. Texts have been chosen that appear most relevant to early childhood practitioners, particularly in relation to the development of resilient wellbeing.

Three research reviews, drawing on a range of research approaches including neuroscience, have been particularly relevant in relation to studying the development of resilient wellbeing in early childhood. In 2000, Schonkoff and Philips edited *From Neurons to Neighbourhoods*, a wide-ranging report for the Committee on Integrating the Science of Early Childhood Development, for the National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine in Washington DC.² Three years later David, heading a team of early years researchers in the UK, edited the comprehensive literature review underpinning *Birth to Three Matters* in England.³

Also in 2003 Hannon, a professor in early childhood at the University of Sheffield, wrote a succinct journal paper addressing the implications of developmental neuroscience for early childhood intervention and education.⁴ Hannon made the important point that 'Findings from developmental neuroscience are fascinating for anyone concerned with early childhood interventions and education, but "fascinating" is not the same as having implications' (Hannon, 2003: 58–63). However, he concluded that 'developmental neuroscience findings are generally confirmatory of current thinking in early childhood intervention and education'. They do not so much provide implications for changing existing practices, as reassurance for maintaining them.

But in spite of over a decade of major investment in the early childhood sector in the UK, in 2007 a UNICEF comparative study of 21 OECD countries generated gloomy findings about the wellbeing of children and adolescents in the UK. These findings related to poverty and inequality, to disorder, crime and insecurity; and above all to the lamentable quality of relationships with parents and peers that these children and adolescents experience.⁵

There have been vigorous debates about the significance of the research

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findings, for policy makers and for those living and working with young children. There now appears to be some general agreement as to the key messages, which resonate with the policies now driving early childhood education and care.

Mother–baby interaction

We know that babies' and young children's 'important people' make a decisive impact on the way their brains develop; as do all their early situations and experiences. The important work of Trevarthen, an eminent researcher in developmental psychology and psychobiology, has given us much to think about, especially in relation to the concept of 'interplay' between mother and baby. His focus on intersubjectivity – the development of active 'self-and-other' awareness in infancy – is particularly relevant here. He shows that the natural sociability of infants serves to motivate 'companionship', eliciting the intuitive parenting that is evident in so very many observations of mothers and infants.⁶ Stern, an American psychoanalytic theorist specializing in infant development, also uses this idea of 'intersubjectivity' as a key concept in his work, as do others.⁷

The concept of intersubjectivity originally owed much to Bowlby, the psychiatrist whose theory of attachment was published in 1969.⁸ Attachment has been described more recently by Howe as a theory of personality development in the context of close relationship.⁹ This has been the cornerstone of the key person approach.¹⁰ It was described in *Birth to Three Matters* by Abbott and Langston as 'essential to young children's wellbeing'.¹¹ However Trevarthen takes issue with attachment theory, suggesting that it 'fails to grasp the importance of motives for relationships between offspring and their parents that serve shared discovery of new ways of behaving'. He says:

A good human mother is more than a protector of the human infant from fear, and more than a known and secure 'base' from which the infant may explore and gain experience. She, like others whom the infant may know and like, is a friend and playmate.¹²

Although focusing mainly on the findings of neuroscience, Meade described *a convergence* of these findings with cognitive science, developmental psychology and early childhood education research.¹³ Many recent writers have taken these findings as their starting point, incorporating them into findings from behavioural and social sciences.¹⁴

Children's needs

Waldfoegel's book *What Children Need* looked at the latest research very

largely although not entirely from the day care perspective. Drawing on evidence from the US, Waldfogel wrote about the wellbeing of children of working parents. In her careful analysis of social science research, the author concluded that there are key messages, for instance that:

children would tend to do better if they had a parent at home at least part-time in the first year of life ... the quality of parental care and the type and quality of child care that the child receives are also very important ... maternal sensitivity is the most important predictor of child social and emotional development ... ¹⁵

The author stated that a majority of parents in the US now work, and we need to bear in mind the impact of part-time working on children: they do not necessarily spend the majority of their time in day care. The tip of the iceberg that we see represents children's hours in day care, while the invisible critical mass represents their hours at home. Waldfogel asks what should be done to meet better the needs of infants and toddlers in day care? An additional question could be 'and what should be done to meet better the needs of infants and toddlers at home?'

In *The Learning Brain: Lessons for Education*, authors Blakemore and Frith examined implications for the wider sweep of education policy and practice, taking in a range of relevant issues for both primary and secondary schools, for instance: the resilience of the brain beyond the age of three; the teaching and learning of numeracy and literacy; the brain in adolescence; and learning and remembering.¹⁶ In addition to the view that birth to three is indeed the most influential period of the developing brain, this book also emphasises the brain's plasticity. It is thought-provoking that in relation both to a stimulating environment in the first three years and to nutrition, the authors point out that 'in both cases ... too little is damaging, but we know very little about the effects of too much' (p.186). In summary they argue that 'learning is not limited to childhood ... learning can be lifelong'.

The 2003 literature review for *Birth to Three Matters* tells us a great deal about what children need, its 'people under three' perspective moving us away from the limiting 'born at three' implication of previous early childhood education provision in England. Two conclusions relating to parents and the children themselves are of particular importance here, and can be taken as key elements of the research evidence about well-being: 'Parents need time to be with their babies and young children, to help them learn and develop, and sufficient finances to enjoy them', and 'Children need loving, responsible key persons around them ... to live in a society which is informed about their development and learning, and which is involved in their amazing abilities.'¹⁷

How do these findings translate into policy and practice for well-being?

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Policy and Practice for Wellbeing

From birth to three at home

The period from birth to three is like an iceberg – we see only the tip, i.e. the minority of a child's time spent in day care; whereas most children spend the majority of their time – the invisible underwater bulk of the iceberg – in the privacy of the home. Policy, however, focuses mainly on children's minority time outside the home – in day care and other early childhood settings. There is still a long way to go in promoting the over-riding importance of the home and the family in the earliest years, and in developing commensurately appropriate services to support families at this time.

Much, however, has been done. Since the research findings of the last decades of the twentieth century, awareness of the importance of the first three years of life has made a profound impact on policy and practice. Various factors have fed this awareness. These include the on-going debate about the policy and practice implications of studies on the early development of the brain, and the UK government's commitment to families with the youngest children, as evidenced by investment in the Sure Start programmes.

A new framework was developed to support all service providers of children's learning and care from birth to three years in England, called Birth to Three Matters.¹⁸ This framework was subsequently subsumed into the single framework of the Early Years Foundation Stage.¹⁹ In the development of these frameworks there was increasingly a focus on the related factors of 'relationships' and 'wellbeing' in the thinking about children's long-term development.

A contributing factor to an often confused and contradictory picture of information and support for parents and carers may have been a high degree of uncertainty about *what* information and support could or should be offered to *all* parents and carers, especially in view of the rich cultural diversity of families in the UK. Many issues relating to young children and racial justice have been comprehensively addressed by Lane.²⁰

UK Labour's decade of reform

The UK Labour Party swept to power in 1997 and embarked on a decade of reform which transformed policy and practice in the UK for children and families. Sure Start programmes, Neighbourhood Nurseries and

Children's Centres represent an investment of resources at an unprecedented level, aiming to achieve reform involving fundamental change.²¹

Behind these developments have been some fundamental driving forces which it is important to acknowledge. The relationship between education and social policy has become both increasingly uncertain yet increasingly relevant because of the economic, cultural and social transformation of post-industrial societies. Issues of poverty and its impact on child health are dismayingly evident. As Spencer, author of *Poverty and Child Health* argued:

Social policy decisions have a major impact on poverty and child health ... there is a strong case for child-centred policies which aim to give all children an equal start in life – the long-term benefits of such policies are likely to far outweigh the short-term costs.²²

Clearly concerns about citizenship, benefit dependency and social exclusion are matters for on-going debate. In relation to parenting, Halsey et al., active in the fields of social policy and educational reform, pointed out that 'what governments can do is to foster the social conditions that maximize the chances of committed parenting'.²³ These wider considerations need to be taken into account, in order to develop holistic models, policies and provision that are appropriate for a holistic view of the world, the children and families who inhabit it, and the services that they need.

It may be instructive to consider the rationale for the development of UK day care policy in this light. The drivers for twenty-first-century policies for day care have been twofold, and both financial. Firstly, awareness of the importance of early intervention for later development had been gathering momentum, fed in the 1990s by *Starting With Quality*, the report of the Rumbold Committee,²⁴ by the *Start Right Report*,²⁵ and subsequently by a growing number of syntheses of research focusing on child development in the early years.²⁶ The economic benefits of early intervention shown by the High/Scope Perry Pre-School Study made a powerful impact,²⁷ and in 2000 the Neighbourhood Nursery Initiative was launched, with the purpose of expanding childcare provision in the the most disadvantaged areas in England.²⁸

In the same year Feinstein, a London University Research Director and a government adviser wrote a paper entitled 'The Relative Economic Importance of Academic, Psychological and Behavioural Attributes Developed in Childhood'.²⁹ This was extremely influential in the policy context that was soon to generate the most far-reaching UK policy of all: Sure Start.

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The second driver for affordable childcare was the Labour government's social inclusion and social investment policy, with its determination to lift families out of poverty. This became linked not only with the need to raise family incomes through employment, but also with a strong national economy in which more women were employed in the workforce. Consequently, the availability of quality childcare (or rather the lack of it) became a key issue.

While these reasons for early day care were clearly very important, it was concerning that early childhood education and care policy was driven by economic considerations, rather than the needs and the wellbeing of children. Hence there is ongoing tension both within families and in services for children and families, between the workforce perspective, and the developmental needs of the youngest children. Many parents and early childhood professionals say that the needs of the youngest children, especially from birth to 12 months, have been ruthlessly over-ridden by financial perspectives.

The drive to end poverty, with the consequent need to increase the availability of day care, are among the factors that led to Labour's hectic decade of reform, a truly astonishing investment in the nation's future.

Figure 1.1 shows the main reforms in early childhood services in the UK since 1997. It is a picture not only of radical change, but of a quite extraordinary pace of legislation and guidance to which the sector has struggled to accommodate itself. The government's commitment to a Children's Centre in every community by 2010 has been a transforming agenda, representing the universal provision of fully integrated education, health and welfare services. Centres are expected to play a central role in improving outcomes for all children; and in reducing inequalities in outcomes between the most disadvantaged and the most advantaged. While this vision took only around a decade to materialise in terms of legislation, several decades and on-going government commitment to the youngest children will be needed to embed this agenda into reality for families and communities.

1997	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Launch of Early Excellence Centre programme: aiming to develop models of good practice. • Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) research started: 1997–2003.
1998	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • National Childcare Strategy: aiming to provide good quality, affordable childcare for age 0–14s, but little reference to 0–3s. • Launch of Sure Start.
1999	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Working Families Tax Credit and Childcare Tax Credit began.
2000	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Care Standards Act 2000: re-registration, regulation and training of child-minders and daycare providers. • Foundation Stage curriculum began.
2001	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Launch of Neighbourhood Nurseries Initiative: aiming to create 900 nurseries in deprived areas by 2004. • National Standards for under 8s day care and child-minding in force. • OFSTED responsible for registration and inspection of daycare 0–8. • Early Years Sector-Endorsed Foundation Degree.
2002	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Foundation Stage Profile replaced baseline assessment. • Special Educational Needs Code of Practice in place. • Birth to Three Matters framework introduced.
2003	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Working Tax Credit replaced Working Families Tax Credit. • Government forbade 'smoking and smacking' by child-minders. • First Minister for Children appointed. • EPPE '97–'03 report published, and research continued 2003–2008.
2004	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Every Child Matters: Change for Children</i> green paper – five central outcomes for children: be healthy; stay safe; enjoy and achieve; make a positive contribution; achieve economic wellbeing. • Children Act: taking forward proposals in <i>Every Child Matters</i>. • Ten-year childcare strategy <i>Choice for Parents, the Best Start for Children: Making it Happen</i> unveiled: goals included 3,500 children's centres and an out-of-school childcare place for 3–14 year-olds from 8am–6pm each weekday, by 2010, and 20 hours a week for 38 weeks for all three- and four-year-olds.

Figure 1.1 Labour's decade of reform

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2005	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First Children's Commissioner for England appointed. • Education Act aligns early years inspections with school inspections. • New 'no notice' inspections for early years settings. • Children's Workforce Strategy launched, including Children, Young People and Families Workforce Development Council (CWDC). • National Professional Qualification in Integrated Centre Leadership (NPQICL) set up. • Children's Centres faced cash shortfall.
2006	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Childcare Act placed duties on local authorities. • Parents, Early Years and Learning (PEAL) project: a national approach to training in parental support for early learning. • Qualifications and Credit Framework: unit-based qualification framework underpinned by system of credit accumulation and transfer. • Early Years Professional (EYP) Status: Children's Workforce Strategy. • <i>Choice for Parents. The Best Start for Children. Making it Happen. Action Plan for the Ten-Year Strategy.</i> • 13 other 'guidance' documents, including the <i>Rose Report</i>, and <i>Extended Services in Primary Schools</i>. • Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) consultation launched amid much criticism.
2007	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • £152 per week: average nursery day care cost for a child under 2. • Paid maternity leave extended to nine months, with long-term goal of 12 months. • OFSTED undergoes massive expansion. • 19 legislation and policy documents; 24 practice reports, guidance and standards; and eight workforce development documents published. • Final (partially amended) EYFS pack launched: to be statutory from September 2008.

Figure 1.1 (continued)

The need for integration

In the circular process of policy, practice and research, these findings have instructed the on-going formation of policy and practice. A review of government policy for children and families in 2008 by the UK Conservative Party's Social Justice Policy Group in the Centre for Social Justice reported, echoing the rationale for Sure Start, that 'a key thread is a call for greater

integration throughout service provision'. However, while recent early years policy had focused on the wider provision of affordable, quality childcare, on standards for this childcare and on the development of a public health strategy for children aged 0–5, the report stressed that:

despite current policy's far-reaching positive implications, a 'golden thread' is missing: a recognition, in the underpinning framework, of the importance of relationships in every young child's development ...

Economic and academic concerns trump relational ones, despite the latter's crucial role in child, and later adult's, well-being. Children's policy misses the importance of relationships, and political thinking in general misses the relevance of high levels of relational stress and relational poverty in the early years as key underlying factors for a whole host of social problems we face today.³⁰

The wellbeing of the youngest children is liable to be affected, directly or indirectly, by the whole range of local and national UK government policies and priorities for expenditure. Babies and young children are not just *potential* citizens, but are citizens *now*. Policies in general do not impact only on adults, they affect these youngest citizens too. A prime example is the need to balance work and family life, which is especially pressing for working mothers of young children, and fathers working long hours.

Other policies need to be integrated into the picture too. There are permeating issues of racial and ethnic diversity, taxation, law and order, transport, and planning and housing policies – in addition to the more obviously relevant areas of maternity and paternity leave, and the quality and availability of day care. Many UK children's experiences of growing up, especially in disadvantaged areas, would be radically more positive if all policies and legislation were screened in relation to generating opportunities for wellbeing for the youngest children – or at the very least, for not damaging their wellbeing.

One of the policy documents published in the UK in 2008 was *The Children's Plan: Building Brighter Futures*.³¹ This 10-year strategy to improve schools and bring about radical changes in the way parents and families are supported points the way to the integration that is needed. The Plan was underpinned by the following five principles:

- Governments do not bring up children – parents do – so the government needs to do more to back parents and families.
- All children have the potential to succeed and should go as far as their talents can take them.
- Children and young people need to enjoy their childhood as well as grow up prepared for adult life.
- Services need to be shaped by and responsive to children, young people and families, not designed around professional boundaries.

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- It is always better to prevent failure than tackle a crisis later.

As the early childhood sector continues to work towards these principles in the coming years, the wellbeing of young children and their families can be transformed.

Key messages

- Key messages from brain research highlight the importance of babies' and young children's experiences, especially with their 'important' people.
- Intersubjectivity – especially between mother and child – is a key concept.
- In the decade from 1997 to 2007, government guidance and legislation aimed to transform policies and services for young children and their families in the UK.
- Transformation in the early years needs to be underpinned by an integrated approach to policy and service provision.

Questions to think about and discuss

1. What matters in the earliest years of a child's life? Can you think of 'real life' examples?
2. Research tells us that everything babies and young children see, hear, touch and smell influences the way their brains develop. What daily situations and experiences do you think are especially important for them?
3. If you were asked to advise the government, what policies would you recommend for the youngest children and their families; and why?

Further reading

CALLAN, S. (ed.) *Breakdown Britain: The Next Generation*. London: Centre for Social Justice, 2008.

This report of the Conservative Party's Social Justice Policy Group in 2008 examines the reasons for Britain's social malaise and describes five multi-causal drivers of poverty, all of which impact directly on the wellbeing of the youngest children. Both its analyses and recommendations make thought-provoking reading in relation to early childhood services.

GROARK, C. & McCALL, R. 'Community-Based Interventions and Services', in M. Rutter et al. (eds) *Rutter's Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 5th edn. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008, pp 971–988.

Just one chapter in an enormous and enormously interesting reference book, that you can expect to find in a university library. The chapter contains clear explanations of attachment theory and social learning theory as different approaches to parenting that are thought to be associated with child outcomes. It brings a hard-edged and perhaps controversial perspective to a review of the characteristics, possible outcomes and limitations of parenting programmes. Plenty of food for thought and debate about

approaches to policy and research.

PUGH, G. 'Policies in the UK to Promote the Well-Being of Children', in J. Scott & H. Ward (eds) *Safeguarding and Promoting the Well-Being of Vulnerable Children*. London: Jessica Kingsley, 2005.

This is another reference book chapter that you can expect to find on the library shelf. Adopting an ecological approach, it sets out very clearly the risk and resilience factors of which we need to be aware. The very helpful framework provides a strong foundation for thinking about policy in relation to the early development of wellbeing.

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