



# What About The Children?

**'Raising awareness of the never-changing emotional needs of children in our ever-changing society'**



Registered Address: Feldon House, Chapel Lane, Newbold on Stour CV37 8TY  
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**Patrons:** Sir Michael Morpurgo, Rebecca Abrams, Sir John Timpson, Dame Sarah Storey

*What About The Children? is a national charity established in 1993 to raise awareness of 'The never-changing emotional needs of the under-threes in our ever-changing society'. The charity publishes information from the growing body of scientific research in neuroscience, psychology, biology and the medical sciences on infant brain development in the first 3 years. It promotes public awareness about infant brain development from conception to age 3 and the importance of secure infant/parent attachment on future physical and mental health. It is a member of the First 1001 Days Movement and Early Childhood Forum.*

## **CSJ Early Years Cross Party Commission Call for Evidence for future of early years policy. June 2020**

### **What About The Children? submission of evidence**

The descriptor 'early years policy' is not clearly defined and often misunderstood and misinterpreted by policy makers: Department of Education policy refers to 0 to 5 year olds with a focus on early education ( Department of Education Early Years Foundation Stage 0-5, government funding for free childcare 3 and 4 year olds) whilst for the Department of Health, (Healthy Child Programme: Pregnancy and the First 5 Years of Life) emphasises the health of the mother and support from health professionals. In practice this has led to the needs and emotional wellbeing of the very youngest children, babies and the under-threes, being over looked by successive governments in early years policy. The key role of parents and their vital contribution to optimum infant brain development continues to be 'air brushed' out of public understanding of children's early years. An example of this is the recent headline in Nursery World for their early years awareness campaign, June 2020, which does not include parents as having a part to play in the care and education of young children.

*'No matter what part you play in the care and education of young children, as a nursery nurse, a nursery manager, a nursery group director, a childminder, an early years teacher, a lecturer, a consultant or trainer, help us raise awareness by sharing your perspective . Nursery World June 2020*

There is a raft of scientific studies that show very clearly the crucial significance of the earliest period of an infant's life, from conception through the first 30 to 36 months. Understanding of the science that explains and supports Bowlby's Theory of Attachment, and the importance the relationship between parent and infant that shapes the individual emotionally, psychological and neurologically, has grown over recent years. During the first three years, brain growth is at its fastest, and at its most susceptible to the 'pruning away' of neurons if there is inadequate stimulation of the right kind. It used to be thought that babies' brains grew and developed because of physical maturation and genetic inheritance; we now know that brain development depends principally on a healthy pregnancy free from maternal stress, misuse of drugs and alcohol, and the healthy interactions between baby and his/her parents from the earliest moments after birth.

*'Early experience establishes the formation of major neurological pathways in the infant brain, including the direction and level of intellectual competence, psycho-social and even physical health, life-long' (Ulanowsky and Pereira-Gray, 2015, p 2)*

### **Q.8 If you could introduce one early years policy designed to bring about the greatest impact on a child's life chances, what policy would it be and why?**

The policy priority must be the appointment of a Cabinet Level Minister for Children with cross-departmental responsibility, drawing together education, health, social care, and fiscal policy to lead the implementation of a long term integrated strategy based on what is known from the latest science on early brain development, and focused on providing children with an environment that facilitates stable loving care and secure attachment critical for optimum brain development.

*'The environments we create and the experiences we provide for young children and their families affect not just the developing brain, but also many other physiological systems' National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2020). Connecting the*

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*Brain to the Rest of the Body: Early Childhood Development and Lifelong Health Are Deeply Intertwined Working Paper No. 15.*  
[www.developingchild.harvard.edu](http://www.developingchild.harvard.edu)

Successive governments' early years policies have failed to act on the science of infant brain development, support care in the early years or understand the interrelationship with employment, criminal justice, inequalities, mental health and communities. This is despite the overwhelming evidence of many parliamentary and government department reports over the past two decades.

The extreme challenges of 2020 have laid bare longstanding inequalities that affect the lives of children and families, as well as the health of the nation. To fully address these deeply embedded inequalities requires a transformative change, by government, to ensure the emotional wellbeing of children from conception to age 3. Early childhood policies are the basis of the solution to many of the challenges we currently face because significant adversity in the early years disrupts the development of the brain, and other biological systems, undermining the capacity of young children to achieve their full potential. We have the knowledge, but without Cabinet level leadership and with more of the same piecemeal and short term initiatives, there will not be the fundamental change needed to prevent harm and reduce inequalities.

## **Q.1 How can we ensure that parents and children receive the best possible physical and mental health support, particularly during the perinatal period?**

The solution to this question is complex, multifaceted and intergenerational. If parents and children are to receive the best possible physical and mental health support, it is important to understand the effect of parents' own early life experiences, in addition to the findings of scientific research on infant brain development, the evidence about the importance of secure infant/parent attachment, appropriately responsive loving care, the new emerging evidence on epigenetic changes resulting from early life stress and potential for intergenerational transmission: a long term integrated life course strategy. (Pereira Gray D, Dean D, Dean P. 2020)

An integrated approach should include:

- Prioritising the study of infant brain development in the initial training of all professionals working in health, education, social work, justice system.
- Age-appropriate quality relationship education in schools e.g. Roots Empathy Programme
- The science of brain development included in Key Stage 3/4 Science curriculum.
- High quality universal integrated ante and post natal services, available to all providing timely and proportionate support. e.g. Greater Manchester Perinatal and Parent Infant Mental Health Service: Championing 1001 Critical Day
- Effective communication system between midwives, GPs, Health Visitors

*'The most effective intervention strategy therefore requires helping parents to get it right at the antenatal, postnatal and infant stages, long before such help is typically available. Such timely support for parents could help them do an outstanding job in raising the next generation'. CSJ The Next Generation Report 2008*

## **Q.2 How can we ensure that parents are supported to balance work and caring for their child during the early years?**

This requires a review of the Tax and Benefit System informed by the research that clearly identifies family, the quality and stability of family relationships (the work of parents) as the key protective factor for emotional wellbeing, future physical and mental health. The remit of this review should include arrangements for paid paternity and maternity leave, the rights to career breaks and flexible working.



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Our current tax and benefit system does not recognise family responsibilities to care about and for children; indeed, it implies that childcare is better provided by others by subsidising 30 hours of childcare so parents can be in paid work outside the home. There is emerging evidence that separation from the mother at too early an age and for too long leads to raised levels of cortisol in the infant brain which has the potential to cause long term harm. Government must invest in parents so they can invest in caring for their children in the early years, 0 to 3.

### **Q3. How can we support parents to develop the skills and maintain the relationships that support healthy child development during the early years period?**

Better liaison, communication and integration between services provided by NHS England, Public Health, GPs, locally funded services and voluntary sector, with ring-fencing of funding to protect service provision across the country. There are many examples of effective interventions and good practice but these are not consistently available in all areas or to all parents and children which they should be. Examples of support for parents include: Video Interactive Guidance (VIG) Parent Infant Partnerships, OXPIP Toyhouse Tower Hamlets, Mellow Parenting, Mellow Bumps, Perinatal Mental Health Teams Homestart. Better Start Bradford, Sure Start Children Centres and couple relationship support programmes.

### **Q4. How do we provide the most effective and integrated early years services in local community spaces to give children the best start in life?**

Sure Start Children's Centres provided an excellent model, but over the intervening years since they were introduced funding has been reduced, and in many areas provision has been cut altogether. The Sure Start model of Children Centre needs to be reinstated nationwide, providing a comprehensive range of support and service provision for families with young children that reflects the needs of local communities, urban and rural.

All those working with families and young children should have a core element of training, study of infant brain development including infant/parent attachment and ongoing CPD to keep up with the latest research

### **Q 5. How do we ensure every family can access high-quality childcare that works for both parents and children?**

Secure infant/parent attachment is a fundamental element of high quality early years experience for the under-threes. Long hours in inadequately funded group day care with little attention to secure attachment is not appropriate and potentially harmful. Too many carers and too many transitions causes stress in babies under three, elevating levels of cortisol in the infant brain.

*'Many small (young) children in nurseries have persistently raised cortisol levels, indicating emotional stress. Raised cortisol levels can affect developing brain centres, which is potentially serious. Environmental factors interact with genes and can alter them. Once altered, such genes can pass to future generations'.* Pereira Gray D. Dean D. Dean P. 2020

High-quality care of children under three must provide a consistent, appropriately responsive loving care(r). This is not sufficiently acknowledged in current Department of Education childcare policies, the Early Years Foundation Stage Guidance of Ofsted Inspections of early years settings

### **Q 6 How can central government work better together to develop effective policies on early years?**

Leadership at Cabinet level is key-it requires a designated and informed Cabinet Minister for Children driving an integrated co-ordinated interdepartmental strategy (Fiscal policy Health& Social Care

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Education, Housing) with a clear focus on preventing emotional harm, supporting and protecting the emotional needs of babies necessary to ensure long term physical and mental health. Ring-fenced Local Government funding for services to support Children's Centres, Health Visiting Services and Community Midwives.

## **Q 7. How can local government and agencies work together to deliver innovative high-quality early years provision?**

The Health and Wellbeing Boards offer a model but local leadership, a clear understanding and focus on the emotional needs of babies is required.

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Q.1 How can we ensure that parents and children receive the best possible physical and mental health support, particularly in the perinatal period

CSJ The Next Generation Report 2008

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Greater Manchester Perinatal and Parent Infant Mental Health Service: Championing 1001 Critical Days

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Q.2 How can we ensure that parents are supported to balance work and caring for their child during the early years.

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Q.3

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## What About The Children? Goodman Lecture Series

2019 Dr Mary Gordon: Seeding empathy in young children to build an empathetic world

<http://www.whataboutthechildren.org.uk/images/documents/2019goodmanlectureMaryGordon.pdf>

2017 Professor Sir Al Aynsley-Green 'Are we betraying children and childhood and if so what's to be done about it?'

<http://www.whataboutthechildren.org.uk/downloads/the-goodman-lectures/2017goodmanlecture.pdf>

2015 Professor Vivette Glover Professor of Perinatal Psychobiology 'What happens in the womb can last a life time'

<http://www.whataboutthechildren.org.uk/downloads/the-goodman-lectures/2015goodmanlecture.pdf>



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2013 It's the relationships Stupid! Sir Denis Pereira Gray OBE HonDSc FRCP FRCGP FMedSci

<http://www.whataboutthechildren.org.uk/downloads/the-goodman-lectures/goodmanlecture2013.pdf>

2011 Emotional Neglect in the Early Years: causes, consequences and practical solutions Dr Margot Sunderland

<http://www.whataboutthechildren.org.uk/downloads/the-goodman-lectures/sunderlandlecture2011.pdf>

2009 Inaugural Goodman Lecture Children at Peace with Themselves: The importance of nurturing an emotionally secure generation Dr M Suzanne Zeedyk Dundee University

<http://www.whataboutthechildren.org.uk/downloads/the-goodman-lectures/zeedyklectureoct09.pdf>