

We must hold our nerve and support deprived children [GB]^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Ministers need not panic. Supporters of Labour's flagship programme for deprived under-fives just need to take a deep breath. A government-funded study has failed to find improvement so far in Sure Start children relative to other deprived children.

But though the programme has been dealt a blow, experts, including those who did the study, agree the problem lies in the hard-to-measure design of Sure Start and in government pressure for early results. How can you prove a miracle effect on the hardest-to-change children when the first Sure Starts had been open only 18 months?

Researchers compared 19,000 under-fives, half in Sure Start areas, the rest from similarly deprived districts, but found no discernible developmental, language or behavioural differences. Crucially, they were not asked to compare children actually in Sure Start programmes, only those living in the area, many of whom had no contact with it.

Responding to overwhelming evidence that the futures of most children are set by family circumstance long before primary school, Sure Start provides drop-in mother-and-toddler groups, parenting classes, health visitors, IT classes, childcare, speech therapy and so on.

The scheme was set unrealistically tough targets - such as reducing the number of low-birthweight babies in an area. But the key test was whether children progressed faster. Experts advising on the evaluation warned that effective results would come only when the same children were followed for years. But politics doesn't work to academic timetables.

The ambiguous results are not the fault of the eminent researchers, whose problems were legion. Poor areas have a high turnover of families; Enfield Sure start, monitored by the Guardian, had an 80% turnover of under-fives, so any evaluation missed many children with a lot of Sure Start help who moved away, while catching newcomers who might have had none.

No complex social scheme makes for a crisp laboratory experiment, but ministers yearned for hard proof that would cement Sure Start into the welfare state.

Every Sure Start is different, run variously by health, education and voluntary groups or local authorities: the original ethos was to let a thousand flowers bloom. They are so popular partly because mothers have a big say in how local schemes are run. But without a fixed template, the same everywhere, researchers couldn't know what they were measuring.

"We are in an unknown country without a map," says Professor Edward Melhuish, of Birkbeck College, in London, who headed the study.

Take note of this: Sure Start was inspired by Head Start, a US programme for deprived under-fives. Results of one part showed how every \$1 spent on under-fives saved \$7 by the time the children were 30; they committed fewer crimes, had fewer mental problems, drew less social security and had better jobs and qualifications. But in the early years Head Start also produced little measurable effect. It wasn't until their teens that Head Start children pulled away, apparently better protected from adolescent problems.

Sure Start remains one of Labour's best achievements, and experts are confident it will produce results. As 3,500 new Sure Start children's centres in every area are rolled out by 2010, the question is how to ensure it maximises its effect. Even Tory MPs praise Sure Start's positive effect on communities, rescuing mothers from isolation. But ministers are now saying sternly that improving mothers' lives is not enough: it must provide concrete results for children. But how?

When a childcare bill in November gives local authorities a duty to ensure childcare for all who want it, a prescriptive practice guidance for all Sure Start centres will insist on a more regulated and uniform service. But this first research can't as yet offer much insight into what works best, so those running Sure Start want space left for continuing local experiment and enterprise.

Prof Melhuish, advising a Treasury working party on what all children's centres should do, points to the one study that shows unequivocal success. He wants the government to offer nursery education to two-year-olds. He wants childcare for the most deprived from a very young age, with home visiting delivered by formal structured programmes. Every month is vital for young children, but teaching adults how to be better parents takes ages. He would expect better results from giving deprived children more professional help, with early talking and playing.

But that needs expensive qualified staff; currently 40% of nursery assistants have no GCSEs. How can the new children's centres provide more intensive support when they will have less money for each child than the current programme offers? As childcare is only for parents in jobs, the most deprived children, with parents too addicted or mentally ill to work, are the ones denied childcare. What is needed now is more, not less, intensive and expensive professional support. Even if there is no proof yet of Sure Start's direct effect on young children, Labour must now accelerate spending on this best hope for the children with the least chance.

- reprinted from the Guardian

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