

# Doubts over value of £3bn Sure Start [GB] <sup>[1]</sup>

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## AVAILABILITY

See text below.

## EXCERPTS

The first major evaluation of the government's flagship £3bn Sure Start programme for deprived preschool children and their families has revealed no overall improvement in the areas targeted by the initiative.

Although some Sure Start schemes were successful, an independent study by academics at Birkbeck College, London - due to be published by the government next month - revealed that Sure Start as a whole failed to boost youngsters' development, language and behaviour. It also showed children of teenage mothers did worse in Sure Start areas than elsewhere.

The findings represent only an early snapshot of the programme's effectiveness, and academics involved in the £20m evaluation emphasise that they do not mean the scheme, which varies widely around the country, will not succeed in helping children in deprived areas in the long term.

However, the results represent a blow to a much-vaunted government programme that has cost £3.1bn since its launch in 2001 and is to be extended from the current total of 524 schemes to 3,500 Sure Start children's centres, one in every neighbourhood, by 2010.

The scheme is targeted at children aged up to five and their families in deprived areas, and is intended to offer a range of joined-up early years services, including high quality childcare, parenting classes, training to help mothers into work, health advice and a variety of other programmes according to local demand.

Ministers have been pushing for early findings on Sure Start - a move that those leading the national evaluation say has meant the full effectiveness of the programme has not been tested.

Edward Melhuish, head of the study, which runs until 2008, said: "To some extent we are reporting these results now because of the political pressure to do so. The government wants evidence to inform the new policy of children's centres and so they are trying to squeeze anybody with information."

Despite government pressure for quick results, ministers sent back the original Birkbeck report in May and asked for more detail on elements of the programme that worked, delaying publication.

While Prof Melhuish declined to give details of the report's findings, it is understood that the study - which covered 15,000 families in 150 Sure Start areas plus 4,000 families in 50 deprived areas that were not yet covered by the scheme - revealed a wide variety of outcomes from different local programmes. While some were successful in boosting children's progress, others had no measurable effect.

The findings include some positive results, including the fact that Sure Start mothers involved demonstrated "warmer parenting" than the control group, relying less on smacking and criticism and more on talking and affection.

- reprinted from the Guardian

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