

Study backs Labour childcare strategy [GB] ^[1]

Author: Carvel, John

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EXCERPTS

The publication of the largest ever survey of pre-school education in Britain yesterday will provide the foundations for the general election debate about how best to raise the prospects of children from deprived backgrounds.

Margaret Hodge, the children's minister, will publish a national childcare strategy next week, which is expected to become a centrepiece of Labour's election strategy. It will call for a national network of children's centres providing education and health services for the under-fives.

Professors from Oxford, London and Nottingham universities began a thorough investigation in 1997, tracking more than 3,000 children from differing social backgrounds through their early years.

They looked at 141 pre-school settings, including nurseries, playgroups, private day nurseries, local authority day centres, nursery schools and fully integrated centres that provide a range of daily educational and health services from 8am to 5pm.

The integrated centres - pioneers of the children's centres which Mrs Hodge wants to roll out throughout England - performed best.

The quality of education provided and the qualifications of the staff made the difference. Nursery schools performed well for the same reason.

Disadvantaged children benefited significantly, especially if they were in a pre-school with children from different social backgrounds. The average child of unskilled parents failed to reach the expected reading standard at the age of seven if brought up entirely at home, but romped well past it with the benefit of a pre-school education.

But the children of professional parents benefited too. By the age of seven those with pre-school experience were nearly half way to levels of attainment in reading and maths expected of an 11-year-old. Their advantage in writing was significant but not quite so pronounced.

The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education project found the quality of learning experiences at home was also important. Teaching nursery rhymes and songs promoted intellectual and social development in all children. Although parents' social class and levels of education affected the child's attainment levels, the home learning environment was more important and the effects persisted at seven. "What parents do is more important than who they are," the researchers found.

But home learning was not enough for the average child, and those denied pre-school were disadvantaged. From the age of two the maximum benefit appeared to be gained by children whose parents were closely involved in the pre-school, fitting home activities into the development process.

The researchers intend to track the children to discover whether the advantages of pre-school education persist into the later school years.

Professor Kathy Sylva from Oxford University said: "The impact of coming from a poor family when you are three is greater on your developmental profile than it is when you are five. It indicates to us that the pre-school has reduced bad effects on children's developmental profile."

Ms Hodge said: "I think, I hope, this research gives comfort to parents who are always worrying about whether they are doing the best for their children and how to balance work responsibilities with care at home."

- reprinted from the Guardian

Related link: The Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) project: Final report ^[2]

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