

Sure Start good for families and for children's health, says researchers ^[1]

Study shows that programme led to children being more stimulated at home but not better prepared for school

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EXCERPTS

Disadvantaged children who were the first to use Labour's flagship Sure Start scheme were less likely to be overweight by the time they were five, were in better health and had less chaotic home lives, according to an official evaluation released today.

Mothers using the programme, which in its early stages was targeted at families in the most deprived areas, also reported providing a more stimulating home learning environment for their children, disciplining them less harshly and being more satisfied with life.

Researchers from the National Evaluation of Sure Start, at Birkbeck College in London, have been following 7,000 families in 150 areas where the first Sure Start schemes were introduced in 1999. They monitored the children at nine months and three years old - this evaluation was the latest check-up on their progress.

Despite the benefits, the team said they were disappointed children were not showing any signs of increased "school readiness". They also found two negative effects: mothers using Sure Start were more likely to suffer from depression and less likely to visit their child's school for meetings with teachers.

"Sure Start local programmes appear to have generated mainly positive, but also some negative effects by the time children are five years of age," the researchers wrote. "Primarily the benefits apply to parenting behaviour and only in the case of physical health did children directly benefit."

The programme was later expanded to run from children's centres, whose services were available to all families. But last week the government said centres in the 30% most disadvantaged areas will no longer be obliged to provide 40 hours of full daycare per week because of low take-up. Middle-class parents are likely to be charged for an increasing number of services, and there are fears centres could face cuts in local authority funding now that the money councils get from the government is not ring-fenced - although, legally, they still have to provide sufficient centres to meet local needs. The broader cuts that councils are expected to make could hit services run from the centres.

Anne Longfield, the chief executive of charity 4Children, said: "This report shows many of the important benefits that we know Sure Start provides to families through running our own children's centres. Particularly in areas of disadvantage, reducing the likelihood of children being overweight and improving a parent's levels of life satisfaction are crucial in ensuring that children feel happy and secure. Equally, creating a more stimulating and less chaotic home environment directly makes an impact on a child's future chances of success.

"But it is not until the first generation of children who have used Sure Start reach their teenage years that we will begin to see all the rewards of this investment."

The children's minister, Sarah Teather, said: "It is encouraging to see the positive impacts that Sure Start brings. Sure Start children's centres are at the heart of the government's vision for early intervention, tackling disadvantage and improving life chances.

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