

Not so sure? Are children really benefiting from Sure Start? ^[1]

Author: Abrams, Fran

Source: BBC Radio 4

Publication Date: 12 Jul 2011

AVAILABILITY

Listen to the program on BBC iPlayer ^[2]

The Sure Start centres were set up to give more deprived children a better chance in life, but how much evidence is there that they are actually making a difference?

Ruth Walsh says her local children's centre almost literally saved her life.

A lone parent living in West London, she became profoundly depressed after the birth of her son Billy, now two.

She began to turn a corner, she thinks, when an outreach worker from a Sure Start programme almost "dragged" her to a mother and baby session.

"Without that, I was heading for a very, very dark place, and I'm not sure that I would even still be here, to be quite honest. I certainly wouldn't be the mother I am to Billy," she says.

"I interacted and played with Billy more when I was in the children's centre than I possibly did at home. It encouraged me and showed me the best way to do that.

"And for me, it became somewhere to go," she adds. "It was a place of human contact."

The Sure Start programme was set up by the Labour government in the late 1990s, and today there are 3,500 children's centres in England which are run under its auspices.

But while parents across the country - including Ruth Walsh - are campaigning against council cuts which could threaten the future of many of the centres, some academics are questioning whether they have really changed the lives of the poorest children as much as politicians hoped they would.

Huge claims were made for Sure Start in its early years - that it would cut child poverty, reduce social exclusion and even save money by creating well-balanced youngsters who would be less likely to get involved in crime.

It was hoped the programme would also bring benefits to health, education and family life.

But 12 years after the first Sure Start centres opened, one leading academic who was part of the government's official evaluation of the scheme says there is still no clear evidence it has helped children.

Sir Michael Rutter, Professor of Developmental Psychopathology at King's College, London, told BBC Radio 4's Analysis programme that he has doubts:

"The fact that the parents liked it - and I think by and large they did like it and do like it - is not enough.

"It was set up to improve the outcomes for children."

Asked what evidence there was that Sure Start was helping children, Sir Michael replies: "We don't know - that is still lacking."

....

Evidence from the evaluation, which has now been running for ten years, has shown some positive results for children.

A study published in December 2010, comparing five year-olds in Sure Start areas with their contemporaries in non-Sure Start areas, found there were fewer obese children in the areas where the programme had run. And parents felt there had been a number of benefits - they said their children were healthier and better behaved.

But the study found no measurable improvement in Sure Start children's assessment scores when they started school. And mothers in Sure Start areas were actually more likely to report depressive symptoms, while parents covered by the scheme were less likely to attend school parents' evenings.

The study compared children in Sure Start areas with children in similarly-poor non-Sure Start areas.

Professor Edward Melhuish of Birkbeck College, London, who leads the National Evaluation of Sure Start, says there has been some progress.

But he admits the evidence could have been more positive: "I wouldn't say it was a complete ringing endorsement."

"We've been operating Sure Start for roughly ten years. We've overcome some of the problems, but still there's a great deal of room for further improvement."

Despite the question mark that still hangs over the evidence for Sure Start, the coalition government has underlined its commitment to keeping it - though it has handed control of funding to local authorities, some of which have decided to make cuts.

Sarah Teather, the Children's Minister, told the BBC more research was needed because the evaluations published so far had only covered Sure Start's first few years.

"But I do think that there's an awful lot more that we need to do to improve the way in which children's centres are targeting those children and families who most need that support," she says.

....

She said the centres would move away from their early aim of cutting child poverty: "We want them to focus on parents' aspirations and skills because the evidence says that's what makes the difference.

....

Parents like Ruth Walsh are pleased the government is committed to the programme - but is concerned that the funding for Sure Start is not ring-fenced, leaving budget decisions to cash-strapped local councils.

She still believes her local centre is making a huge difference.

"It would be a crime to lose it," she says. "I know in my heart, in my soul, that it's benefited my child. I've seen other children come to the children's centre and they develop and they grow and they become socialised.

"If it does just help parents, it is of huge value. But that is not the true picture."

- reprinted from the BBC

Region: Europe ^[3]

Tags: outcomes ^[4]

Source URL (modified on 27 Jan 2022): <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/11/07/not-so-sure-are-children-really-benefiting-sure-start>
Links

[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/child-care-news/11/07/not-so-sure-are-children-really-benefiting-sure-start> [2]

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b012fc5q> [3] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/region/europe> [4]

<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/outcomes>