

Children are being 'failed on a grand scale' ^[1]

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EXCEPRTS:

Children are being 'failed on a grand scale', due to poor standards of literacy and huge inequalities which have left Britain lagging behind other European countries when we should be number one, the author of a landmark report claims Prof Sir Michael Marmot, on the second anniversary of his major review into how wealth affects health, disclosed that four in ten children are failing to master the basic skills expected of a five year-old.

The number of failing pupils in poorer areas is almost double the number in wealthier suburban parts of the country meaning children's lives are being 'blighted' from an early age by inequality, Sir Michael, Director of University College London, Institute of Health Equity, said.

Britain lags behind other countries including Poland, Hungary, Denmark and Finland, in the gap between the children who do best and those who do worst, he said.

Children are judged to be failing to achieve a good level of development if they are unable to dress themselves, take turns in a conversation, knows some of the alphabet, can read simple sentences and can count to ten.

Sir Michael criticised cuts being made to children's services such as Sure Start because those who are at a disadvantage from an early age grow up lagging behind their peers.

He said: "How can it possibly be the case that 41 per cent of children across the country are thought not to have a good level of child development?

"We do really really badly on international comparisons. This is a brainy country, why aren't we number one?

"We've got these huge inequalities which means that we are failing our children on a grand scale. It matters to their health. It matters to their wellbeing. It matters to the productivity of the country and it matters to the sort of society we want."

Sir Michael released new figures showing the number of five year old children classed as having a 'good level of development' at age five has increased slightly.

In 2010 around 56 per cent of five year olds were classed as having a good level of development and this increased to 59 per cent in 2011.

This was a 'marginal' improvement, Sir Michael said.

Children in traditionally affluent areas did better on the score, with seven in ten classed as having a good level of development in Rutland and Richmond in 2011. Both had improved on the 2010 scores.

Where as at the bottom of the scale, only five in ten five-year-olds in Blackpool achieved the 'good' development score in 2011 which had hardly changed on the 2010 level.

Sir Michael was speaking on the second anniversary of his review, Fair Society, Healthy Lives, which set out areas of public policy that need to be prioritised to reduce inequalities in society and in particular health.

Sir Michael, one of the foremost public health experts in the country, was

appointed as an adviser to the Labour government and his research has helped shape the coalition's public health strategy.

More than 3,600 Sure Start children's centres were open by the time Labour left office in a drive to provide childcare and early years education services, as well as health and parenting advice, to some of the most disadvantaged families in England.

Before the election, David Cameron said he supported Sure Start but funding cuts have led to the closer of 124 children's centres since the coalition came to power.

He said it was vitally important that parents of young children play with them and read to them from an early age to encourage their development. Where that was not possible, someone else should read to them rather than they not be read to at all, he said.

Sir Michael said cuts to children's services such as Sure Start were a 'deep concern'.

The Government confirmed in November that there are now 124 fewer Sure Start centres for children than there were when the coalition formed, but said many of the reductions were due to services being "streamlined".

Sir Michael said: "If the evaluation of Sure Start was ambiguous then the response should not be to throw it out but to learn from the best. I have great concern that we must not cut services for early childhood."

He said the inequalities in the start children have in life follows through to their teenage years where they are more likely to be classed as a NEET, or not in employment, education or training.

"My view of NEET is two fold. One is the way to avoid NEET is to invest in early child development because it's the kids who have poor early child development – who do poorly in school – who end up not in education, employment or training.

"So one view is invest in early childhood and the other is make sure we invest in educational training for potential school-leavers.

"It blights their futures and hence their subsequent health," he said.

Sir Michael also highlighted life expectancy, saying that while there had been a four month increase in life expectancy across the board to reach 78.6 for men and 82.6 for women in the years 2008/10.

But this masked the fact that the differences in life expectancy had increased for men and not changed for women, despite narrowing the gap between rich and poor stated as a key objective for successive Governments.

The gap between the highest and lowest life expectancy increased in 104 council areas for men and 92 for women, he said.

Sir Michael said some areas such as Hackney had a uniformly bad life expectancy for men with an average of 77 while other areas such as Westminster had a higher average life expectancy at 84 but had a range of almost 17 years.

The picture was similar for women.

-reprinted from the Telegraph

Region: Europe ^[2]

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