

Early years key to closing gap between rich and poor ^[1]

Author: Morton, Katy

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EXCERPTS:

The interim report by the cross-party All Party Parliamentary Group on Social Mobility, *Seven Truths about Social Mobility*, which brings together findings from a range of studies to highlight the most important challenges for policy-makers, says that a young person's chance of a good job or university place is shaped long before the age of 16 or 18.

The report argues that the attainment gap can be traced back to a child's earliest years, with the 'point of greatest leverage' for social mobility being from birth to three-years-old, primarily at home.

However, it acknowledges that this period is 'difficult territory' for policy-makers as it relates to parenting and what happens in childcare and nursery settings.

To ensure all children have the same opportunities, the report recommends focusing on the delivery of parenting programmes, as research shows that families earning the least are less likely to read to children every day at the of age three, or have a regular bedtime for their children.

It goes on to suggest that policy-makers consider prioritising early years staff development in light of results from the Millennium Cohort study, which found that countries least marred by social mobility tend to invest in training of early years staff.

To break the cycle through education, the report recommends focusing on school readiness and progress in reading, as well as having excellent teachers in schools in less affluent areas, and increasing participation of lower-income children in out-of-school activities.

Damian Hinds, the Conservative MP who chairs the group, said, 'For a long time we have lagged behind our international competitors in ensuring all Britons can realise their potential.

'To bridge the gap will require a shared commitment between schools, universities and firms, Government and the voluntary sector. The pupil premium and extensions of early years provision are important structural changes which should aid social mobility, as were the creation of Sure Start and Teach First.

'But the scale of the challenge is immense and the very earliest years are an obvious place to prioritise.'

Ryan Shorthouse, a researcher at the think-tank the Social Market Foundation, said, 'Though experiences in the early years do not determine your life chances, this report rightly highlights that it is the most critical period for shaping future educational and social development.

'In particular, the quality of parenting and early years education are essential. Countries with higher social mobility tend to invest more in early years staff. But providers, facing tight profit margins, find it difficult to pay enough to attract and retain high-quality staff.'

-reprinted from Nursery World

Region: Europe ^[2]

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