

Early years: Valuable ends and effective means^[1]

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AVAILABILITY

Full report in PDF^[2]

Press release: "Free early education offer not enough to boost children's chances, says think tank"^[3]

Excerpts from the executive summary and recommendations:

Since the publication, twenty years ago this year, of a Royal Society of Arts (RSA) report on nursery education, there has been a rapid expansion of policy interventions in the area of early childhood education and care. The case for government intervention has been accepted.

However a review of the many policy interventions or "means" deployed over the last twenty years, and of the complex and confusing policy landscape that results, demonstrates that there is a lack of clarity about the outcomes or "ends" to be sought. Successive governments have introduced policies to support parental employment, promote learning and development for every child and, in recent years, to "narrow the gap" in outcomes between children from disadvantaged families and their peers.

Six contributions, written by experts drawn from the academic study of early years policy, policy-thinkers and those who lead delivery of early years services, make strong cases for each of these outcomes. The arguments draw on UK and international evidence about what works in delivering high-quality early childhood education and care, and what works in supporting children from all backgrounds, and their parents, to grow and develop. The contributions recommend a number of policy changes that should be made to achieve the desired outcomes.

In order to avoid perpetuating the confusion and inefficiency of the current system, there is a need for greater clarity of purpose from central government, whichever outcomes are sought. The time has come for politicians and policy-makers to be clear about what it is they are trying to achieve, and to adopt policy interventions in that light.

While there is a good case to intervene to support universal child development and maternal employment, the case for intervening to narrow the gap in outcomes in the early years is strongest. If the government is to intervene in the early years, it should act to promote a just society, where no child is held back by the circumstances of their birth, and every child has the chance to succeed. There is strong and growing evidence for policy interventions which support this end - the time to act is now.

Recommendations to improve clarity and focus in policy-making

- 1) Government should make an explicit statement about the outcomes to be achieved through state intervention in early childhood education and care, in order to increase the likelihood of policy interventions being designed to achieve the stated outcomes.
- 2) In preparing an explicit statement about outcomes, government will have to recognise the need for trade-offs and design a forum in which these trade-offs can be made, either as part of a party political manifesto process, or, if elected, through the machinery of government.
- 3) Ministers should ensure that plans for evaluation and evidence gathering are in place before changes begin to ensure progress can be tracked.
- 4) Government should adopt the Family and Childcare Trust's recommendation for an independent review of childcare funding, but not until the government has come to a clear view, and made a public statement, about which outcomes it wishes to prioritise.

Recommendations to make progress in "narrowing the gap" in children's outcomes

- 5) As a priority Government should be explicit about defining what "narrowing the gap in outcomes" means, and how progress will be measured, including the place in this of The Early Years Foundation Stage Profile, the Ages and Stages Questionnaire, and the new reception baseline assessment.
- 6) Government should accept the case made in the Nutbrown Report and commit to investing in a better trained and qualified workforce - a graduate-led, QTS profession, and a workforce trained to L3, with English and Maths as a prerequisite for entry.
- 7) As a first step, government should set higher qualification requirements for staff working with children from disadvantaged

backgrounds, reflecting the evidence that these children stand to benefit most from high-quality early education.

Stronger quality criteria for settings offering the two year-old offer, stronger conditionality around the Early Years Pupil Premium, or additional funding to disadvantaged areas are all routes by which this could be achieved.

8) Government should accompany investment in early childhood education and care with policies that support family income in the early years, such as extending the free entitlement to offer additional hours as parents take on additional hours of work and paying parental leave at the minimum wage.

9) Government should recognise the critical importance of the home learning environment and the importance of early speech, language and vocabulary development and develop ways to equip all professionals working with young children to support parents in developing their children's early learning, especially speech and language skills.

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