

Investing in high quality early care and education will benefit children^[1]

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EXCERPTS

David Quinn ('State-subsidised childcare is not the way to help harassed parents', 30 January) is right to say that Donna Hartnett's letter struck a chord.

But he is wrong when he suggests the response is a simple choice between 'State-subsidised childcare' and parents looking after their children at home.

Yes, parents need more support - including entitlements to paid parental leave and stronger work-life balance policies, so that working families can strike a happier, less stressful balance between work and family life.

No family should be forced in to the sort of lifestyle that Donna Hartnett described so vividly in her letter. The sort of pressure - and the long hours in crèches - that Donna Hartnett refers to is not good for parents or for children.

But it is possible to give parents more support, and at the same time to increase public investment in early childhood care and education so that early years services are both higher quality and more affordable.

We need to do this because the research evidence shows clearly that high quality early childhood care and education services are positively beneficial for children.

David Quinn writes that the benefits of early education for children 'fade over time, except when the children are from very disadvantaged backgrounds'. Some of the benefits do fade over time, but some of the benefits of quality early education last into adulthood.

In fact, research studies that have tracked the outcomes of quality early years programmes through into adulthood report long-term benefits that are a multiple of the economic costs. As children's learning in their earliest years increases the effectiveness of later education, Professor James Heckman, the Nobel Prize winner for economics, has argued that investment in pre-school education has a higher rate of return than any other level of education.

The benefits of quality early care and education are especially large for children from disadvantaged families, but large-scale studies in both the UK and the US have shown that children from all social backgrounds benefit from high quality early years services.

In addition, for families who are trying to get out of poverty, the cost of 'childcare' can be a major barrier to getting a job. A recent UNICEF report ('Children of the Recession') found that the rate of child poverty in Ireland rose from 18% before the recession to 29pc now. The cost of 'childcare' does need to come down - not to push parents into employment who would prefer to be at home, but to give families a chance to get out of poverty.

However, there is one major caveat. The research shows that the benefits only arise if the early care and education services are high quality. And the quality of early care and education services in Ireland today is very variable, because of a legacy of low public investment over many years.

In the coming general election, we need a public debate on early care and education. But that doesn't mean a debate on whether women should be in the home or at work. It means a debate on how much - and how - the Government should increase public investment in our youngest children.

David Quinn says that the Irish Government 'is clearly on the side of the OECD' in being 'in favour of State-subsidised childcare'. Actually, the evidence suggests the opposite. The level of public investment in pre-school services in Ireland is one of the lowest in all OECD countries. The Irish Government spends around 0.15pc GDP per year on pre-school services, compared to an OECD average of 0.75pc - five times the level in Ireland.

And the level of public funding for family leave entitlements in Ireland is one of the lowest in Europe. Because maternity benefit only lasts 6 months, many parents in Ireland return to work when their children are 6 months old. Parental leave in Ireland is the minimum duration

permissible by EU law, and it is unpaid. In contrast, most European countries offer paid parental leave, making it financially possible for one or other parent to remain at home beyond the end of maternity leave.

David Quinn refers in his article to the Prime Time exposé, A Breach of Trust, broadcast in 2013, which showed children in crèches being manhandled, shouted at, and restrained. It was an important programme, and there are many lessons to learn from it: staff seem to be over-stressed and under-paid; the inspection system needs to be overhauled; and public funding needs to be tied to the achievement of quality standards.

Far from implying that the State should step back from investing in early care and education, the Prime Time programme showed that the level of public investment needs to rise.

Some 96pc of 3-4 year olds take part in the Free Pre-School Year, and some of those who don't are children with disabilities who would take part if only early years services had enough resources to support them. So if we increase investment and improve the quality of early years services, all children will benefit - whether their parents are in full-time employment, part-time employment, or full-time in the home.

Region: Europe ^[3]

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