

If the Prime Minister is worried about families, he needs to pay more attention to what happens in nurseries ^[1]

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Source: NewStatesman

Format: Article

Publication Date: 12 Jan 2016

AVAILABILITY

Read online ^[2]

EXCERPTS

For a parent, deciding which school their child goes to can feel like one of the biggest early decisions they make about their child's future.

But, in his speech yesterday, the Prime Minister made clear that a child's learning starts long before they walk through the school gates for the first time.

Too often it is in these early years that the damage is done to a child's life chances. The poorest children arrive at school an average of 15 months behind their new classmates and those who start behind, tend to stay behind. In a recent poll of primary school teachers, almost 8 in 10 (78 per cent) said that children who fall behind in their early years may never catch up.

Parents are of course at the very centre of a child's early learning and the Prime Minister was absolutely right to identify that we need to prioritise additional support for new parents through health visitors, parenting guidance and advice on how to support early learning in the home. However this isn't the whole picture. The government's new life chances strategy is missing one of the biggest influences on a child's development and parents' best partners in their children's early learning - nurseries.

More than 90 per cent of three and four year olds go to nursery, their parents taking up the offer of 15 (soon to be 30) hours of free pre-school childcare. These pre-school years are when children are developing the building blocks of learning, particularly language and communication skills they need to be ready for the classroom.

Going to a good quality nursery, led by a qualified early years teacher, is one of the most decisive ways of ensuring the poorest children don't fall behind. This isn't about turning nurseries into classrooms – instead, early years teachers set the right mix of play-based learning activities, lead the training of other nursery staff, spot children who are struggling and give advice to parents on how to help their children learn at home.

But nurseries didn't play a part in the Prime Minister's vision for improving social mobility and the political debate on pre-school childcare remains focussed only on cost and not quality.

The Prime Minister was spot on with his message that a child's early years can decide their future. But until he prioritises nursery education as much as he does schools and parenting, the poorest children will start life two steps behind.

-reprinted from NewStatesman

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