



**The Michael Sieff Foundation**

Working together for children's welfare

# THE RECEPTION YEARS

ensuring children's well-being from  
3-5 including preparing for school

## Summary Report

This is a Summary Report of the 22<sup>nd</sup> Annual Residential Conference of the Michael Sieff Foundation held at Cumberland Lodge on 21 to 23 September 2009.

In 2007 the Foundation embarked on a five year conference programme of examining the prevention of the abuse of children and young people, the protection of their emotional and mental health and well-being and improvements in work with young offenders, progressing through developmental stages.

The 22<sup>nd</sup> conference considered specifically the issues involved in bringing up children in modern society from the important stage of a child's life before the start of school and the transition into school to the end of the reception year. Speakers addressed the development and change in the pre-school child, preparation for learning, the management of children with additional needs and the provision of a suitable workforce.

Important recommendations for the development of policy and practice in the early years' services emerged from the conference. Given the expertise and experience of those attending from Central and Local Government, Children's Services, the Health Services, Education, Research and Voluntary Agencies, the messages deserve serious consideration.

The full report is available on the Foundation website at [www.michaelsieff-foundation.org.uk](http://www.michaelsieff-foundation.org.uk) but this summary is extracted from material in the conference proceedings.

**John Tenconi**  
Chairman

**Richard White**  
Secretary

## OVERVIEW

We now see young children as highly competent and active learners from birth. New evidence from neuroscience shows that the brain is developing fastest in the first months of life and that learning begins from the moment we exist. Longitudinal studies have also shown that the earliest learning is the most formative and long lasting. Studies reveal that children are learning in all contexts and from all interactions and experiences. Further, a child's personal, social and emotional capacity underpins all other areas of learning and needs particularly nurture and scaffolding. The child's ability to use language to interact with and make sense of their world, is also essential to the learning process, as learning is both a social and cognitive process and so requires the capacity to communicate well. It should be noted that children learn with and through interactions which are culturally and contextually situated and therefore diverse. Finally, recent studies are emphasising again that the mind and body are linked so movement is essential for development and learning to occur.

The purpose of early year's provision is much more than a mere preparation for school. The reception years provide a guide to how well we as a society have done with our children during the formative first 36 months of life. It is this phase of learning that still presents enormous challenges to policy and practice. We now know a lot about how our youngest children learn and what conditions best enable them to succeed in school and after. But how well we are doing in putting this knowledge into practice?

We have increasing knowledge of the enabling conditions for learning. Companionship and attachment between children and the adults who share their lives is essential. Children thrive within affectionate and encouraging relationships. Positive and stable relationships within the family and wider community support the child's attachment, security and sense of belonging. Experience of high quality early years settings can make a difference to a child's life chances but the home environment is the most formative context for learning.

Supporting the development of a positive sense of self and identity within the young child enables exploration and curiosity to flower. An enabling environment for learning includes both the socio-emotional climate and a stimulating physical environment.

There has been an increase in the rights and entitlements of young children and their parents to expect high quality services from birth and in ensuring their participation and voice in the development and delivery of services. A key part of realising this vision has been work to raise the leadership, status, qualifications and career pathways of the early years workforce, which traditionally has been held in low esteem and poorly remunerated.

Current expenditure on the early years is incongruent with the importance of this period.

Early years programmes have benefits in terms of improvements in school readiness and achievement, and reductions in behavioural problems and crime. The biggest challenge now is in sustaining, or even increasing, the necessary funding and political commitment to ensure that achievements are not lost during times of economic constraint. There is an economic rationale as well as an ethical and moral case for sustained investment. This involves decisions based on our values, ethics and beliefs and a commitment to achieving a more cohesive, inclusive, secure and responsible society.

## CHILD DEVELOPMENT

Children progress through different, observable stages which provide a benchmark of wellbeing upon which care and education programmes can be built. For every child there is a sense of progression and increasing complexity. Each stage builds on the previous stage but is not discrete. Children become increasingly more organised, integrated and more complex. Different stages of development lead to more competent individuals.

Behaviour is influenced by the environmental context or situation and assists professionals and service providers to help children develop

as well as possible. Milestones identify that as children grow they become competent and confident in different areas, and that development occurs in the same order for all children but not necessarily at the same rate. They identify impairments as early as possible in order to provide appropriate services. They modify milestones for disabled children and maximise outcomes for them.

A child treated with kindness and respect and observing people they care about treating others with kindness and respect is more likely to develop kindness and morality. A child is more able to recognise the perspectives of others and converse about inner states if encouraged by family discussion of feelings and motives.

Some children, having experienced trauma, abuse and neglect, carry around undigested painful feelings that act as obstacles to achieving a state of mind necessary for concentrating, forging friendships and learning. These children are often difficult to deal with and their behaviour causes much concern within the school framework. The most important mental and behavioural patterns, once established, are difficult to change once children enter school.

There are well established problems for children of 3-4 years old when parenting capacity is impaired.

- Physical needs neglected
- Increased risk of direct physical violence and witnessing domestic violence leading to inappropriate behavioural responses
- Cognitive development delayed because of fear and anxiety preventing exploration of environment and through lack of stimulation and disorganization
- Secure attachment may be damaged by inconsistent parenting
- Trauma and stress may result in regression
- When parents' behaviour is unpredictable and frightening, children may display symptoms similar to post-traumatic stress disorder
- By 4, a child should be reasonably good at controlling aggression – if not, it needs to be taken seriously.

The quality of childcare affects development. From age 2 all children benefit from pre-school. The biggest effects in the first 3 years are for language development. Those children with good language development then do better on literacy and most educational outcomes. Preschool quality has enduring effects upon children's educational achievement and social development.

## WORKFORCE

The workforce makes a difference and their needs and development are at the heart of providing for the welfare of children and young people. The workforce is complex and diverse. It ranges from paid professionals working in some of the most difficult situations, a large number of part time and home based workers and volunteers. Employers sit in the statutory, private and third sectors. It is difficult to get data on such a diverse group but we do know that when this workforce is skilled, well trained and qualified it makes a significant difference to the outcomes for children. So investing in their development is an important strategy. The early year's workforce operates as part of a wider workforce and their role in early intervention and prevention in an integrated workforce is important. Evidence now shows that this integrated working in children's centres is making a difference to the quality of professional relationships and support for children and their families.

There are real challenges ahead as we build this workforce. Early years is seen as "women's work" with low pay and status. The early years workforce in Children's Centres is predominantly women; with some male nursery nurses. The private and third sector face real challenges in retaining staff who move on as their skills improve or move out of the sector altogether. The financial crisis is making it difficult for small settings to remain viable. We need to support and lead this workforce through these difficult times and keep a clear focus on the skills of the workforce. This will make a difference to children and a difference to their status and value.

Children's Centres, Sure Start and wider child-care arrangements have an increasingly inclusive focus, in part in response to their duties under disability discrimination and legislation around special educational needs, but also because of parental pressure and demand. The EPPE Project evaluation clearly demonstrates the value of high quality early years education, child-care and support for parents as home educators and has in turn stimulated awareness of the particular importance of high quality early years provision for children, including those with disabilities or special educational needs.

Challenges for the future include expanding and adequately resourcing the expansion of Children's Centres, Sure Start and other early year's provision, especially for the changing population of disabled children. Individual budgets in children's services offer the possibility of tailoring family support to meet individual needs. The impact of Sure Start has improved, probably because of increasing quality of service provision, greater attention to the hard to reach and the move to children's centres.

The struggle of schools with increasing numbers of behaviourally and emotionally challenging children is shifting from the secondary to primary school setting. Large numbers of primary school children, as young as 4 years old are reported to be excluded from schools. Over the past one year there has been a 6% increase in the exclusion rate of primary school children. Some of these children never achieve entrance to secondary school.

## DISABILITY

The population of disabled children is increasing and changing. Disabled children form the fastest growing group of disabled people in the UK. There is a marked increase in children with autistic spectrum disorders and also with complex health problems and disabilities (largely due to the 'new survivors' of improved neonatal care).

Families of disabled children are at greater risk of disadvantage because of their caring roles. Disabled children are more likely to live in families that are financially disadvantaged; are single parent families and have poorer housing than their non-disabled peers. Many families have to give up paid employment because of their caring roles.

## CONCLUSIONS

Investment in early years services should be a priority because research has shown such investment to be highly cost effective in increasing school achievement, employability, father's involvement with their children and in reducing welfare dependence, teenage pregnancy, criminality and anti-social behaviour.

A first class stable workforce will be achieved by supporting and training current staff and recruiting increasing numbers of qualified staff. There should be a culture of continuing professional development. The workforce should reflect the diversity of society and changing pattern of men and women roles in raising children, and in particular recognise the positive contribution men make to children's development and encourage their involvement.

Due to a lack of understanding about the importance of the early years and its impact on life chances, these services suffer a low status. It is difficult to pay and recruit a high calibre and stable workforce. A public awareness campaign would increase understanding of the development of the brain and the importance of the early years services which enhance positive development in children.

We must not lose the impetus of investment in services for 3-6 year olds. The positive impact on children has been demonstrated. Investment now in Children's Centres, health visitors, nursery education and the workforce in general for all will save money in the long term. The government should further support existing good practice towards integration of services for children.

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