

The Case for Early Years Investment and Universal Health Services for Families and Young Children

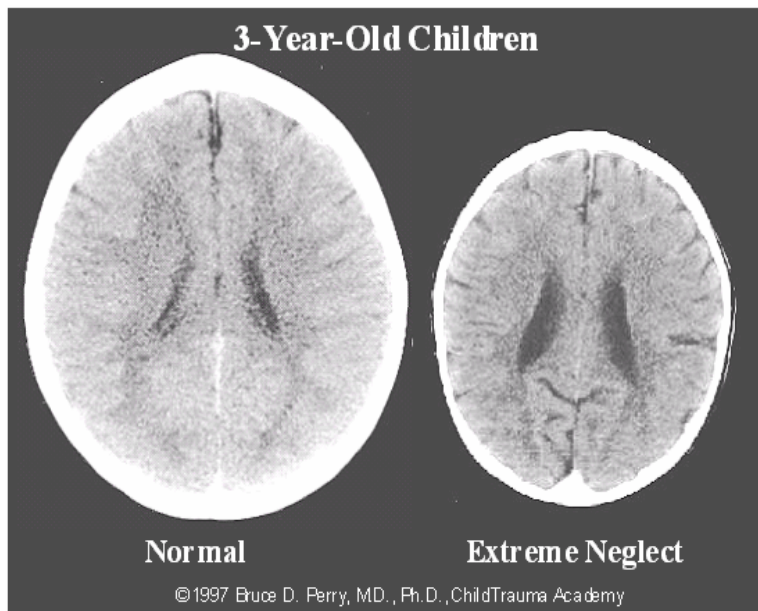
A child's experience during the early years is critical to their physical, cognitive and social development. During this development phase the foundations are put in place for the rest of that child's life and is a once in a lifetime opportunity to give that child the 'best start in life'. Both the Allen report (2011) and the Marmot review (2010) recognised the importance of giving every child the optimum conditions, and how investing in this period of a child's life influences their school readiness, educational attainment, economic participation and long term health. It makes good economic sense to invest in this period of development.

From October 2015 Local Authorities will be responsible for commissioning the Healthy Child Programme (HCP). The purpose of the Healthy Child Programme is to deliver services that work to achieve the ambition of giving all children the 'best start in life', and is delivered by Health Visitors and other professionals.

The purpose of this briefing sheet is to outline why investment in the early years is essential to maximise the health of the whole population, and how investment in this critical period will yield the greatest returns, in relation to improved health, higher educational performance and savings in social expenditure.

The importance of the home environment and parenting

Research has shown that children from less advantaged backgrounds have a higher risk of death in adulthood across almost all conditions including; mortality from stomach cancer, lung cancer, haemorrhagic stroke, coronary heart disease, and respiratory-related deaths, accidents, and alcohol-related causes of death. Research has demonstrated that the conditions in which children grow up are not just critical for child health, they are also critical for adult health, and this has profound public policy implications.



Human beings have large brains compared to other mammals, and so to enable a successful birth humans are born earlier in their development. Over the first three years the brain grows rapidly outside of the womb. By the age of three the human brain is almost 90% of adult size (Child welfare information gateway, 2009)

If the brain of a child is not stimulated and nurtured from conception to three years of age then the connections in the brain don't develop as they should and growth will be affected. This will cause irreversible damage, which will influence the child's personality, intelligence, empathy, health, education and employment.

The above image compares a healthy average size brain with the brain of a child exposed to extreme neglect, the brain of the neglected child has less brain tissue, and the tissue is abnormally developed. If neural pathways are not developed and strengthened by stimulation they may be discarded, and acquiring the same skills becomes more difficult in later life – for example child who has been experienced neglect and has not formed any attachments will have difficulty forming emotional attachments in the future.

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The Case for Early Years Investment

- Optimal child development will provide solid foundations for community and economic development
- Brain development is an on-going process beginning before birth and continuing into adulthood – the quality of early brain development establishes either a sturdy or fragile foundation for all the capabilities and behaviours that follow.
- However the brain’s ability to respond to changes in stimulation change behaviour decrease over time. Consequently, getting it right early leads to better outcomes and is less costly, than trying to fix it later
- Cognitive, emotional and social capabilities are all linked. Learning, behaviour, and physical and mental health are highly interrelated over the life course. You cannot address one domain without affecting the others.
- Toxic stress in the early years (e.g. from poverty, serious parental mental health impairment, child maltreatment and/or family violence) can damage developing brain architecture and lead to problems in learning and behaviour, with increased susceptibility to physical and mental illness. If a child’s early experience is predominantly characterised by fear and stress, the neurochemical responses to fear and stress become the primary architects of the brain, as they are the responses most frequently triggered.
- By age three, children from the poorest fifth of homes in the UK are on average over a year behind in their expected development.

The Financial Argument

The table below outlines the cost to health and social care for circumstances that are linked, and potentially preventable through working with families and parents and maximising early child development.

Estimated costs dealing with a range of health and social problems	
Youth unemployment	£133 million per week
Youth crime	£1.2 billion per year
Educational underachievement	£22 billion per generation
One year in a children’s residential home	£149,240
One year in secure accommodation	£230,000
One year in foster care	£ 35,152
CAMHS inpatient admission	£ 24,482

- Not all of the above problems are due to neglect, but children living in poverty or who experience trauma early in their lives are more at risk.
- As a society we currently under-invest in pre-school programmes when brain adaptability is at its greatest and the highest returns on investment can be achieved
- Speaking at the launch of ‘Early Intervention City’ in Nottingham, Paul Ennals, chief executive of the National Children’s Bureau, said he expected that for every £1 invested in such services, the Government would save £7 in the future
- “Early years education and support is key to reducing violence in the long-term. It’s the nearest thing to magic without being magic. 1,000 additional health visitors rather than 1,000 additional police officers would be more effective in cutting crime in the long term”.
(Detective Chief Superintendent John Carnochan, Head of Violence reduction Unit, Scotland)

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It’s a win – win situation!