A country that works for all children and young people

An evidence-based approach to supporting children in the preschool years

Contents

Please sign our petition if you share our vision for building a better UK that invests in its future (the next generation of children and young people)

Foreword by Anne Longfield and Camilla Kingdon

The early years of a child's life, as they learn and develop through the pivotal first months and years of life, are crucial. Now a priority for the new government, there is an opportunity to build a world leading early years system that brings together brilliant education with the best in early intervention and support for healthy development.

The case is clear - if we want to build a strong economy and healthy society, we must prioritise the early years. It is here we can make the biggest difference, but it is here where the biggest gaps in opportunity can open. The early years need to become a new focus for the early identification and associated intervention that sets children up for success throughout their lives.

We know that children who are involved in high quality preschool programmes are more likely to do well at school and succeed in later life. Early support boosts children's cognitive development and academic outcomes, improving literacy, speech and language skills. This is particularly important for the many children who grow up in our most disadvantaged communities. The evidence shows that home visits by trained professionals to first-time, low income parents leads to better pre- and post-natal health, fewer childhood injuries, and children who are more likely to be ready for school.

However, the development of early years services has often been piecemeal and incremental, fuelled over the last few years by the impact of the pandemic. We have heard many concerning experiences of teachers and other school and social work professionals about the impact of COVID-19 on some of the most vulnerable children. This includes children arriving at Reception wearing nappies, still sitting in buggies, and unable to properly communicate or socialise with other children. Many of these children have developmental problems, struggle with speech and behaviour, and can require significant extra attention and support from already over-stretched school staff.

In 2022/23, a third of children were not considered 'school ready' but there are large regional variations reflecting the UK's structural inequalities. In Manchester, it was four in ten children. Concerningly, studies have shown that children who are not school

ready are approximately six times as likely to need downstream SEND support compared to pupils who are school ready.

And children who start school behind very often stay behind or experience wider problems in their education. Unsurprisingly, over half of children who were not school ready also performed below expected in their Key Stage 1 reading assessment, compared to just 6% of children who were considered school ready.

Children who are not school ready are also more likely to become disengaged from the education system over time. Recent analysis suggests children who were deemed not school ready were nearly 2.5 times as likely to be persistently absent from school, with this figure increasing to over three times when considering persistent absence over several academic years.

It is important to remember that many of these challenges existed long before COVID-19. But the pandemic has made many of these problems worse, particularly for many vulnerable children. The rise in developmental problems and the decline in school readiness is particularly frustrating given there is a wealth of evidence to support the implementation of positive parenting programmes and the benefits of family support programmes. We know early support and intervention can improve child behaviour and reduce parental stress and conflict.

We saw the successes of Sure Start. Yet we have gone backwards over the last decade. Too many of our public services are working in silos, and too many programmes have been lost to austerity and short-sighted funding cuts. The dismantling of Sure Start was an enormous mistake, and Family Hubs have not been given the resources to replace them. The result is that too many children are now entering school with a raft of problems which nobody has spotted early. This is placing extra burdens on families, schools, and public services – including the NHS. We need better sharing of information to connect public services, so we can speed up interventions that work and eventually improve the life chances of thousands of children. Despite many brilliant local initiatives, the necessary change

"If we want to build a strong economy and healthy society, **we must prioritise the early years.**"

"Children [are] arriving at Reception wearing nappies, still sitting in buggies, and **unable to properly communicate or socialise with other children.**"

requires national leadership from the Government. This report, the ninth in the Child of the North and Centre for Young Lives series, makes evidence-based policy recommendations which show the positive impact of early support programme on the development and wellbeing of young children. There are long-term benefits for everyone if these recommendations are acted upon, not least cutting the eye-watering costs of late, crisis-driven intervention which is threatening the financial stability of many local authorities.

It is welcome that the new Government recognises that high quality preschool provision is essential for our society and economy. However, it has inherited a system suffering serious financial problems. Many nurseries have closed and qualified early years practitioners are at an all-time low. There is an unprecedented recruitment and retention crisis. This discourages many providers from prioritising provision for children with complex needs, due to the costs involved. The system is not fit for purpose.

The practical and forward-thinking recommendations in this report are well-tailored to help turn around the crisis in provision and support the goal of boosting the preschool workforce. They include innovative real-world approaches that are already being trialed and making a difference, such as the Nuffield Early Language Intervention, a preschool programme that boosts the language skills of children and better prepares them for school. Likewise, the Lambeth Early Action Partnership is working to improve communication and language development in babies and young children and thereby improve their life chances.

Crucially, this report advocates for a bold and clear vision of what is needed in individual communities, recognising there cannot be a 'one size fits all' approach. Disadvantaged communities can each have differing starting points and levels of need requiring bespoke approaches.

The report recognises how Sure Start brought together health, education, and other services alongside the community and voluntary sectors to deliver a range of early intervention and preventative services. One of the strengths of Sure Start was its ability to provide services that met the specific needs of the communities it served, encouraged collaborative working, and stopped professionals working in silos. The result was the building of strong, trusted relationships with families. The report also highlights the impressive work in 'School Health Hubs' which are providing some children with preventative early intervention. By bringing health and wellbeing practitioners to work with and through schools we can reduce inequalities to healthcare access and improve children's health outcomes.

For those of us who have been beating the drum for early family support and earlier intervention for many years, a new Government which recognises its benefits is an opportunity we cannot afford to let slip. Too many of our children are being held back because they are not receiving the relatively low-cost support needed to boost their school readiness, with siloed and unresponsive systems in place. The preschool system is disjointed, underfunded, and suffering for a recruitment and retention crisis.

None of these problems will fix themselves. This report provides affordable, realistic proposals and shares best practice. What we now need are government policies that invest in and commit to supporting babies and young children in their early years. This will not only benefit those children's futures, but also the success of the whole nation. If we get it right, we can transform the life chances of millions of children.

Anne Longfield CBE,
Executive Chair of
the Centre for Young Lives

Dr Camilla Kingdon,
Former President of the
Royal College of Paediatrics
and Child Health

Guest editorial by Paul Lindley OBE

Paul Lindley OBE is the founder of Ella's Kitchen, a children's food brand that has revolutionised the way we think about feeding our youngest generation. He is a passionate advocate for children's rights and early years education and leads the Centre for Young Lives' recently established Raising the Nation Play Commission. His book: Raising the Nation: How to Build a Better Future for Our Children (and Everyone Else) was published in 2023.

Throughout my career, I've championed the health and wellbeing of children, starting with their earliest years. I have seen firsthand the transformative power of investing in early childhood from my work with Ella's Kitchen, creating nutritious and accessible food for young children, to my experience on the Board of Sesame Workshop, the creators of the iconic Sesame Street, to my advocacy for children's rights. I've always believed that by nurturing the potential in every child, we can build a brighter, fairer, and more prosperous future for our society.

It is with this passion that I write today, deeply moved by the findings within this report. It paints a stark picture of the inequalities that blight the lives of children across the UK, particularly those in the North of England. The time to act is now, to ensure that all children, no matter their background or where they grow up, have access to the support, education, and opportunities they need to thrive.

The report's insights into the divide between children in the North and South of England should give us all pause. Children born in the North are more likely to experience poverty, lower educational outcomes, and poorer health compared to their southern counterparts. These disparities don't begin in adulthood; they start at birth. This divide affects everything from nutrition to the quality of early childhood education, which is critical in shaping a child's future.

I've long been aware of the impact that a child's early diet and overall wellbeing can have on their development. However, as this report clearly demonstrates, nutrition alone is not enough for ensuring a child's healthy development. We must tackle the broader structural inequalities that hold back children in disadvantaged areas, particularly in their first five years— the years that lay the foundation for life.

The economic and social case for early intervention could not be clearer. My recent book, Raising the Nation, made the case for a National Children's Service to support early interventions. Research shows that high-quality early years education can change the trajectory of a child's life, particularly for those who start at a disadvantage. As a parent and advocate, I've always believed in the power of giving children the best possible start. Programmes that support young children through their early developmental stages have been shown to lead to better educational outcomes, higher lifetime earnings, and a reduced likelihood of criminal activity.

Investing in early childhood is not only the right thing to do but is also the smart thing to do. Every pound we invest today in high-quality early years education saves us many more in the future by reducing the long-term costs of healthcare, social care, and the criminal justice system. The return on investment is clear, and yet we continue to underfund these essential services, leaving too many children behind.

I believe that we must provide professionals— and parents—with the skills and knowledge they need to support children through their early years. Home visits, online resources, and professional development should be widely available and accessible to all.

Public services are too fragmented, leading to delays and missed opportunities for early intervention. The report calls for better information sharing between health, education, and social care sectors, so that children get the support they need sooner. I wholeheartedly support this recommendation—after all, how can we expect children to thrive if the systems designed to support them are working in silos?

Education is not just about structured learning; play is a crucial part of early childhood development. Through play, children learn to navigate their social environments, build emotional resilience, and develop key cognitive skills. I've always advocated for giving children the freedom to play, explore, and express themselves, and this report rightly highlights the role of play in shaping a child's growth.

Equally important is language development. The Nuffield Early Language Intervention shows us how targeted programmes can help children from disadvantaged backgrounds improve their language skills, ensuring they don't start school already behind their peers. The same goes for physical activity—something I'm championing through the Raising the Nation Play Commission through promoting active play together with healthy eating. Children need space to move, explore, and develop healthy habits that will last a lifetime.

As I reflect on my career, I can't help but feel a deep concern for the early years sector today. Many nurseries are closing, qualified practitioners are leaving the field, and the most vulnerable children are losing access to the services they need. Without significant investment, the situation will only worsen. We are facing a crisis that demands immediate attention.

The UK cannot afford to let this crisis deepen. By failing to invest in early years education, we are failing our children, and in turn, our country's future. The potential for every child to thrive is there, but we must act now to ensure that this potential is nurtured, not stifled.
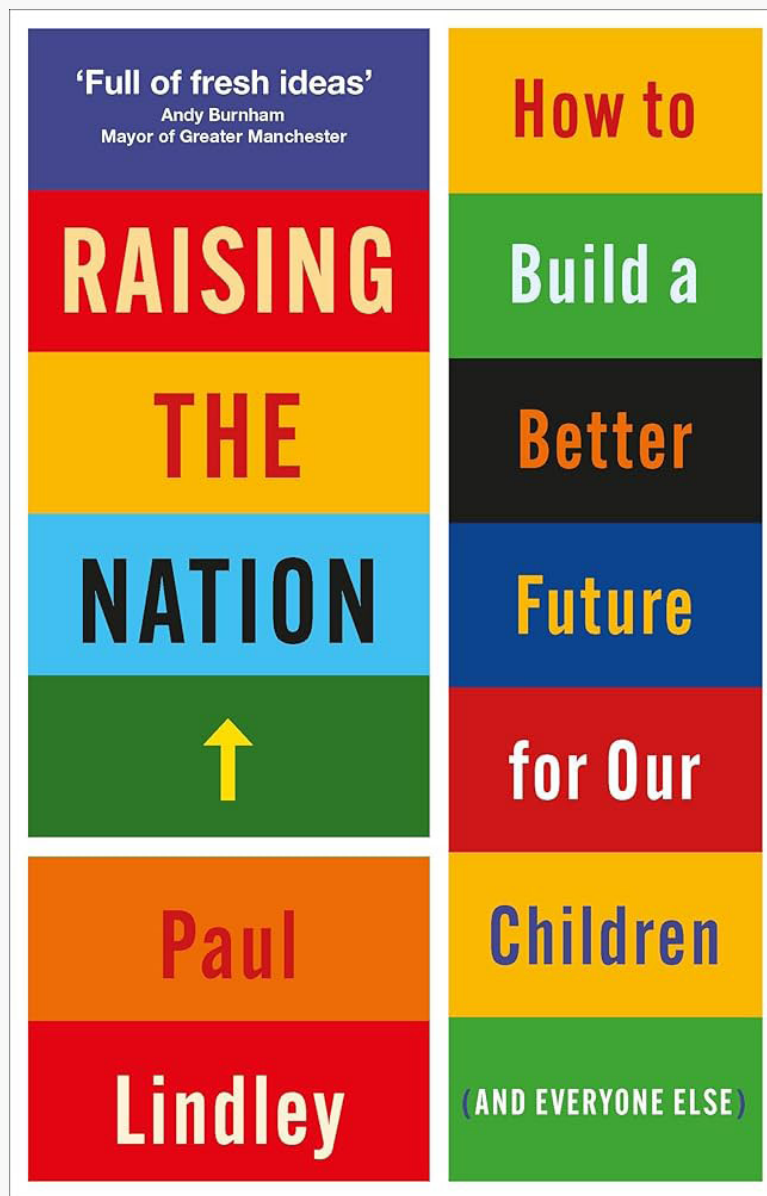
As a parent, an advocate, an author and a business leader, I know that the future of our society depends on the health, wellbeing, and development of our children. The findings in this report provide a clear roadmap for how we can improve early years education, reduce inequality, and ensure that every child, regardless of their background, has the opportunity to succeed.

It's time for all of us—parents, policymakers, educators, and business leaders—to come together and invest in our children's future. The evidence is there, the solutions are clear, and the need is urgent. Let's put our children first, and build a fairer, brighter future for every child in the UK.

| **Paul Lindley OBE**

"Every pound we invest today in high-quality early years education **saves us many more in the future."**

"The potential for every child to thrive is there, but **we must act now to ensure that this potential is nurtured,** not stifled."

'Full of fresh ideas'
Andy Burnham
Mayor of Greater Manchester

How to Build a Better Future for Our Children (AND EVERYONE ELSE)

RAISING THE NATION

Paul Lindley

This report is a collaborative programme of work between Child of the North and the Centre for Young Lives.

A full list of authors and contributors can be found at the end of this report.

A note about language

Children and young people

In this report, CYP is used to refer to children and young people.

Schools, nurseries, and educational settings Please note that this report often uses "schools" as shorthand for "schools, nurseries, and other educational settings such as pupil referral units and special schools". One central message of this report is the need for a "whole system" approach that includes all relevant stakeholders, and this includes all parts of the education system.

About Child of the North

Child of the North is a partnership between the N8 Research Partnership and Health Equity North, which aims to build a fairer future for children across the North of England by building a platform for collaboration, high quality research, and policy engagement. @ChildoftheNort1

Who is the Child of the North?

The "Child of the North" is an archetype (like the "unknown soldier"), representing all the millions of children throughout the UK whose lives are blighted by inequalities. We use the Child of the North as a means of illustrating the inequities that affect children and young people. These inequalities are well captured by the differences in opportunities available to the child growing up in the North of England versus the South. But inequalities are present throughout the UK at both a national and regional level. These inequalities are bad for almost everyone and the future of the UK depends on their urgent eradication. The Child of the North represents every child who deserves a better start to life, regardless of where they live.

About the N8 Research Partnership

The N8 Research Partnership is a collaboration of the eight most research-intensive Universities in the North of England: Durham, Lancaster, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle, Sheffield, and York. Working with partner universities, industry, and society (N8+), the N8 aims to maximise the impact of this research base by promoting collaboration, establishing innovative research capabilities and programmes of national and international prominence, and driving economic growth. www.n8research.org.uk @N8research

About Health Equity North

Health Equity North is a virtual institute focused on place-based solutions to public health problems and health inequalities across the North of England. It brings together world-leading academic expertise, from the Northern Health Science Alliance's members of leading universities and hospitals, to fight health inequalities through research excellence and collaboration. www.healthequitynorth.co.uk @_HENorth

About the Centre for Young Lives

The Centre for Young Lives is a dynamic and highly experienced innovation organisation dedicated to improving the lives of children, young people, and families in the UK – particularly the most vulnerable. Led by former Children's Commissioner, Anne Longfield CBE, who has been at the forefront of children's issues for decades, the Centre's agile team is highly skilled, experienced, and regarded. It is already widely known and well respected across government departments, Parliament, local and regional government, academia, the voluntary sector, and national and local media. The Centre wants to see children and young people's futures placed at the heart of policy making, a high priority for Government and at the core of the drive for a future for our country which can be much stronger and more prosperous. www.centreforyounglives.org.uk @CfYoungLives

About the N8+

Collaboration lies at the heart of "Child of The North". The N8 has proved a useful organising structure but the Child of The North vision is to: (i) use the North-South England divide to show the impact of inequity on all children in the UK; (ii) bring together stakeholders from across the UK to build a better country for CYP. One aspiration is to link researchers from across the UK to support evidence-based approaches to policymaking. In particular, there is a desire to unite Higher Education institutes across the North of England so we can address problems in partnership.
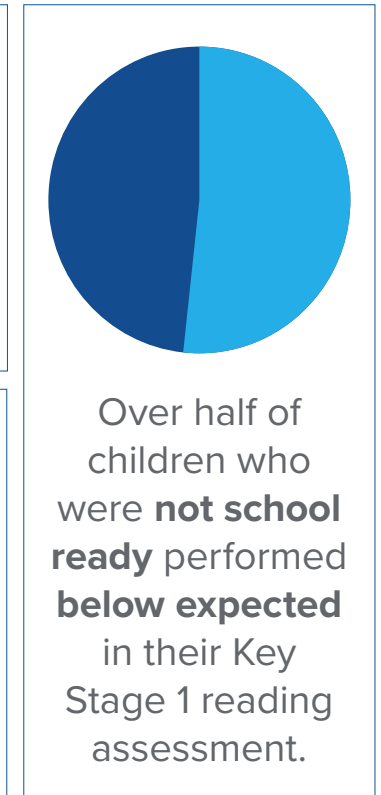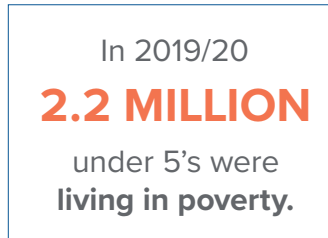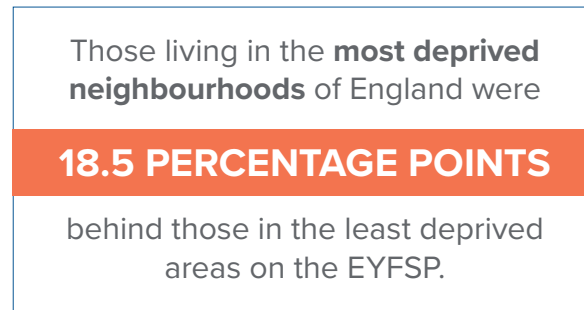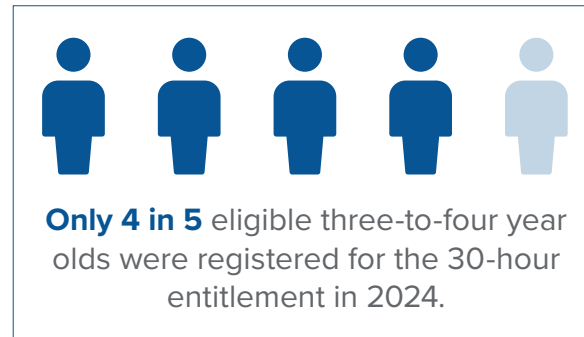
Quotations

The illustrative quotations throughout the report were taken from extensive qualitative and consultation work with children, families, and professionals.

Acknowledgements

Key insights

72% Of children not eligible for free school meals.

52% Of children eligible for free school meals.

Were considered school ready in 2022/23.

30% Of four to five-year-olds are **not considered school ready.**

74% OF GIRLS **61% OF BOYS**

Reach a **good level of development** during preschool.

48% Of providers said they had to **increase pay** in response to **staffing issues.**

ONLY 17% Of preschool staff receive CPD, job-related training in the UK.

In 2019/20 **2.2 MILLION** under 5's were **living in poverty.**

1/5 **Parents** reported problems finding **childcare flexible enough** to meet their needs.

Only 4 in 5 eligible three-to-four year olds were registered for the 30-hour entitlement in 2024.

Children who are **not school ready** are nearly
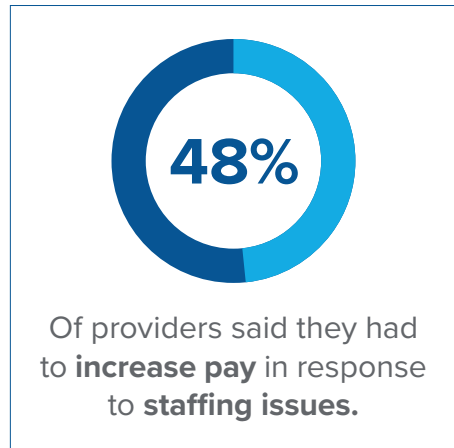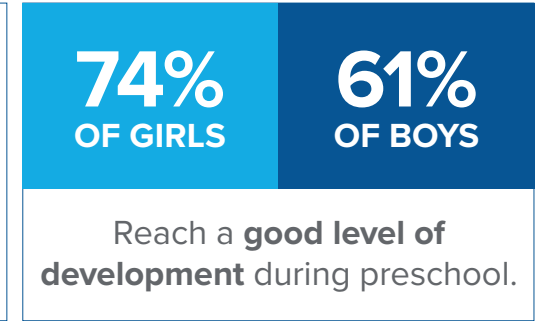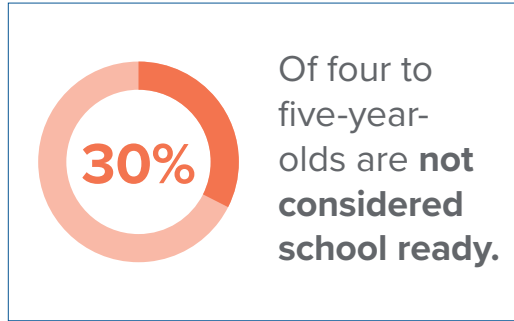
2.5X as likely to be persistently absent from school.

Over half of children who were **not school ready** performed **below expected** in their Key Stage 1 reading assessment.

LESS THAN 10% Of two to four-year-olds are meeting the recommended **180 minutes of daily physical activity.**

Those living in the **most deprived neighbourhoods** of England were

18.5 PERCENTAGE POINTS behind those in the least deprived areas on the EYFSP.

1 in 5 UK children are overweight or obese by the age of five.

Policy recommendations

There is overwhelming evidence to suggest that the health and education of a population are greatly influenced by the experiences of children before they enter the formal school system. The economic case for investing in the early years is compelling. There is therefore an urgent need for the UK to invest in the preschool population, and we make three evidence-based recommendations to the new government on what is needed.

1

Invest in Early Childhood Education Programmes that support the holistic needs of families and situate these programmes in educational settings within our most disadvantaged areas

The evidence is clear – children who participate in high-quality preschool programmes have better educational and life outcomes, including higher school completion rates, higher earnings, and lower rates of criminal activity. There is evidence to show that children who receive early educational intervention from infancy to age five years have better cognitive and academic outcomes compared to those who do not receive such interventions. Various evaluations of Head Start, a federal programme in the US, have shown positive effects on children's language, literacy, and socio-emotional development, particularly for disadvantaged children. The provision of such programmes can help ensure access to comprehensive health and nutrition services for young children, including regular health screenings, immunisations, and nutrition assistance.

2

Improve and extend training opportunities for professionals and families

The evidence is clear - home visits by trained professionals to first-time, low-income mothers leads to better pre- and post-natal health, fewer childhood injuries, increased intervals between births, and improved school readiness. There is good evidence to support the implementation of positive parenting programmes that provide a multi-level system of parenting and family support. These programmes have been shown to improve child behaviour and reduce parental stress and conflict, which benefits children's overall development. Studies from the US indicate that the "Early Head Start" programme improves parenting practices, enhances children's cognitive and language skills, and increases family wellbeing. Continued Professional Development (CPD) courses on holistic childcare should be mandatory for preschool educational professionals. Moreover, "one stop shop" online resources should be developed to provide professionals and families with information and support including accessible versions for those without digital resources. These resources need to be co-produced with individuals with lived experiences.

3

Connect systems more effectively through shared information to provide more integrated support throughout a child's educational journey

Public services, such as education, health, and social care, often work in silos. As a result, health information (e.g., health conditions, birth factors) that may facilitate earlier identification of problems is rarely communicated directly with nurseries and preschools. This can place a burden on families, and result in delays and inequalities. Better sharing of information would connect public services, speeding up provision of support, and reducing structural inequalities. Collaborative working through improved information sharing would also allow professionals to develop practical and quick solutions to everyday issues and barriers that children may face.

These policy recommendations are supported by substantial evidence demonstrating their positive impact on the development and wellbeing of young children. Implementing and scaling these programmes can lead to significant long-term benefits for individuals and society as a whole. These recommendations offer immense potential for decreasing the long-term costs associated with not acting early enough (e.g., the health, social care and criminal justice bills that result from not supporting children's needs sooner); they will help the UK benefit from the sustainable economic growth available when the talents of every child can be deployed effectively within the workforce. Whilst there are resource implications, the recommendations do not require unfeasible levels of investment.

Principles

Our recommendations are based on seven principles, and the evidence that underpins the recommendations is laid out within this report. The recommendations are pragmatic in nature and recognise that the UK is in a perilous financial state. These recommendations do not pretend there is a magic wand that will immediately fix the system. Rather, they avoid the trap where the impossibility of perfection prevents change. Further, they provide a platform that allow us to harness research and scientific evidence to learn what works best for which community – noting that science is one of society's most powerful tools for improving education and wellbeing, particularly in the early years of life.

Our seven principles

1 **Putting our children first** – The future of a country depends on a healthy workforce, equipped with the skills needed by the economy and society. Early childhood determines long-term health and is the critically important period for developing the core foundational skills needed to learn and thereby function effectively and be economically productive within society. High quality early years provision is a known protective factor in mitigating adversities such as child poverty. Logic thus dictates that the UK must prioritise such provision if it wants to enjoy a healthy future. The UK must commit to putting children first, legislation that has already been established for Scotland (Getting it Right for Every Child) and Wales (Future Generations Act). A failure to support the preschool years will place unsustainable pressures on the health, social care, and criminal justice system in the longer term.

2 **Addressing inequity** – This will reduce the financial burden of poor population health on public services. Concurrently, economic stagnation must be reversed to generate wealth and ensure the UK makes the best use of all its assets (i.e., the brilliant young minds located across all our communities). The UK's structural inequity is laid bare within access to high quality preschool and early years support. A failure to support preschool children will starve the UK of talented individuals within the future workforce.

3 **Adopting place-based approaches** – Geography, culture, economic activity, and other factors vary between localities, changing the way that support needs manifest, and the way communities prefer to engage with services. New approaches to reaching and helping families must be planned and aligned to the needs and preferences of the locality and its communities. There are many

cultural factors that impact preschool provision, including stigma and biases, and these local contexts must be addressed for efficient service delivery.

4 **Working together effectively across our public services** – The needs of CYP and their families cannot be neatly divided into silos such as "health", "education", "social care" etc. We must recognise that our current organisational arrangements are not fit for purpose and find new ways of delivering connected public services so that the necessary holistic ("whole system") solutions to complex problems can be implemented. Public services should work together to co-develop initiatives to improve preschool provision support for CYP and their families.

5 **Putting education at the heart of public service delivery** – Educational establishments have a statutory responsibility to help CYP develop the skills required by society. It makes good sense for relevant support programmes initiated by the Government to be aligned with these responsibilities so that a holistic (and efficient) approach can be deployed given the evidence for the effectiveness of programmes. However, preschools must not be seen as responsible for ameliorating the structural inequalities that underlie the challenges facing many communities. They also need adequate and equitable resourcing to properly support the additional responsibilities involved in new models of co-delivery.

6 **Establishing universities as the "Research and Development" departments for local public services** – Universities can bring together insights from across multiple disciplines, ensure decisions are based on the best possible evidence, oversee evaluation of service delivery, and policy change. Partnerships between universities and local public services enables academic research

to inform and enhance practical interventions, providing cutting-edge solutions to current challenges and enriching public service delivery.

7 **Using and sharing information across public service providers effectively** – Data are currently collected within organisational silos, which fails to reflect the reality of how families interact with services. Only by connecting our public service data (i.e., education, healthcare, social care etc.), can we: (i) begin to understand how services intersect and interact within families; (ii) allow the essential information sharing that will safeguard children. Information held within education systems, including preschools, can also help clinicians (and services such as social care) to make more accurate decisions faster. The efficient transmission of information between preschool settings and schools will stop children falling through the knowledge gaps that currently appear when children transition from one setting to another.

The evidence

Preschools provide education for children from ages two to five years. The Department for Education (DfE) generally distinguishes between group-based providers (accounting for 21,200 settings in the UK in 2023), childminders (25,300), and maintained school-based preschools (9,700). The group-based provider category describes both private providers (such as company run nurseries) and voluntary providers (such as community organisations). Together, these various settings hold 1,558,100 places (in 2023). In 2024, 115,900 families of two-year-olds and 1.2 million of three-year-olds were registered for 15 free hours of preschool provision in the UK [1]. A goal of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) curriculum implemented in 2008 was to join the maintained, voluntary, and private sectors through joint care and education responsibilities [2].

Why the preschool years are so critical

School readiness

The Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP) is a statutory assessment conducted in England at the end of the early years (i.e., during the child's first year of formal schooling, in Reception) [3, 4]. Class teachers assess each child against a range of academic and non-academic competencies. Children are deemed to be "school ready" if they are rated as performing at an age-appropriate level across all competencies across the Personal, Social, and Emotional Development; Communication and Language; Physical Development; Mathematics; and Literacy domains [3, 4]. This is often also referred to as having reached "a good level of development".

Nationally in 2022/2023, only 67% of children were considered school ready [5]. However, there are stark inequalities where particular groups of children may be at increased risk of not meeting the expected standard. For example, there are growing disparities between children from different ethnic groups, with Gypsy/Roma children often being least likely to be considered school ready [6]. Socioeconomic factors also come into play, with 72% of children who were not eligible for free school meals being considered "school ready" in 2022/23, compared to just 52% of children eligible for free school meals [7]. Gender discrepancies also exist, with girls being more likely to be considered "school ready" than boys (74% vs 61% in 2022/23) [8]. Other demographic characteristics that increase risk include having English as an Additional Language; having Special Educational Needs or Disability (SEND); or being summer-born [9].

In addition to pupil characteristics, there is large variability in outcomes across local authorities. For example, the percentage of school ready children varies from just 59% in Manchester to 84% in London [5]. These inequalities are likely to have been further exacerbated by

the COVID-19 pandemic, with a recent report showing a 13-percentage point difference between the proportion of children being school ready before and after the pandemic. For children with English as an Additional Language, this difference rose to 16-percentage points [10]. The Education Policy Institute has also reported that the disadvantage gap has widened since the pandemic, with children from areas of disadvantage performing four and a half months behind their more advantaged peers [11]. In policy terms, these children are considered to be academically and developmentally disadvantaged before they begin the Key Stage 1 National Curriculum in Year 1 and thus they make the transition into Key Stage 1 in a deficit position [12]. The DfE has highlighted this transition as a priority area for research [13].

There is a wealth of evidence to demonstrate how school readiness assessments, such as the EYFSP, might be useful to identify the children in need of additional support. While the EYFSP is conducted at just 4-5 years of age, whether a child is considered school ready has implications for outcomes across childhood and into adolescence. For example, children who are not school ready are approximately six times as likely to be later identified as having SEND compared to pupils who are school ready [14]. Similarly, in a study of nearly 9000 children, evidence suggests that the EYFSP can be used as a flag for children at risk of unidentified autism. A low score on the EYFSP was associated with increased likelihood of later receiving an autism diagnosis – 4.1% of children with a low score on the EYFSP later received a diagnosis of autism compared to 0.15% of children who did not have a low score [15].

Good academic achievement, even early in the school career, lays the foundations for later academic success, later employment opportunities, and psychosocial outcomes. Findings show that over half of children who were not school ready performed below expected in their Key Stage 1 reading assessment. This compares to only 6%

of children who were considered school ready performing below expected. This effect was even greater when SEND status was considered – over three quarters of children with SEND who were not school ready performed below expected in Key Stage 1 reading. Similar results were found across assessments in writing, mathematics, and science. Findings demonstrate that being school ready is also indicative of good academic achievement beyond Key Stage 1, into Key Stage 2 and 3 [14, 16] Recent findings also suggest there is a critical period for "catching up" too. For example, if children who are not school ready do not meet age-appropriate academic standards by the end of KS1, they are likely to remain behind, further demonstrating the need to act early [17].

Lastly, children who are not school ready are more likely to become disengaged from the education system over time. In an analysis of over 60,000 children, those who were deemed not school ready were nearly 2.5 times as likely to be persistently absent from school, with this figure increasing to over three times when considering persistent absence over several academic years.

After compulsory education, young people are expected to progress to some form of further education or training, such as an apprenticeship or begin employment. Those who do not, between the ages of 16 and 24 are considered "NEET" (Not in Employment, Education, or Training). Analyses show that children who are not school ready are around three times as likely to be NEET at 16-17 years [16]. This large body of work demonstrates how preparing children for formal education during the early years (i.e., ensuring they are school ready) is pivotal to later outcomes.

Language skills

Early language skills are a significant predictor of future academic and life course success. Children acquire and develop their language skills during

the preschool years, with preschoolers starting to recognise between 1,000 and 10,000 words [18, 19]. However, the rate at which these skills develop varies from child to child. Research suggests there is a strong gradient relating socioeconomic position to language skills. Children from less affluent homes are more likely to enter education with poorly developed language abilities [1, 2, 20].

Moreover, it is well established that children who enter school with poor oral language are at high-risk of low educational attainment which, in turn, limits their later career opportunities [21]. The pandemic has widened the language gap between children from more and less advantaged communities [22] - a gap which is likely to hinder an entire generation of our youngest members of society.

Surveys of schools and nurseries indicate high levels of concern around speech and language with significant numbers of children below age-related expectations at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage [23]. There is evidence that these issues can be addressed. For example, Stockton-on-Tees has been working collaboratively with Speech and Language UK to deliver a pathway of provision for speech, language, and communication across their early years provision. One school, with 68% of children living in extreme poverty, prioritised speech and language for their nursery (two- to four-year-olds). They took a strategic approach to addressing speech and language challenges, implementing Speech and Language UK's evidence-based training, resources, and accreditation as well as targeted interventions aimed at parents of two years olds, and children aged three to four years [24, 25].

Following extensive participation in the Stockton-on-Tees Talks project, School Leaders not only have the knowledge and drive to continue to prioritise communication and language, but they also have the confidence, tools, and resources to be able to do so. They continue to ensure the pupils in their school community have provision and practice

that enables them to talk and understand words. Similarly, it has been shown that NELI (the Nuffield Early Language Intervention) can improve the oral language (speaking and listening) skills of children in the first year of school, strengthen reading-related skills and improve their behaviour [26]. The NELI intervention has also been shown to be successful when delivered at scale [27, 28] (more information on NELI can be found in the Innovative Approaches section).

A focus on supporting the development of language skills is important as the UK becomes an increasingly diverse society. The benefits and challenges of multilingualism are becoming more apparent with increasing numbers of children growing up as multilingual. It is estimated that around one in five children have English as an Additional Language [29]. Multilingualism research and practice in preschool settings is multidisciplinary and wide-ranging, spanning the specific needs of young children and families in an increasingly superdiverse English (plus UK and international) context [30, 31, 32, 33], as well as challenges faced by educators [34].

The linguistic landscapes of preschool education in the North of England reflect this diversity and are constantly evolving as they reflect global shifts and changes, both slow-moving and rapid. This demonstrates the vital role of early education practitioners in supporting language learning and development, as well as highlighting the need for linguistic diversity in the early years workforce to be valued [34]. This goes beyond supporting the children within the education setting. There is a need for communication with multilingual families and non-expert users of English to take place daily. There is an urgent need to both recognise and support practitioners who work with multilingual young children and their families by providing much-needed resources in terms of training, networking, and funds to support and retain practitioners who represent the linguistic diversity within the UK.

This should be underpinned by a recognition that multilingualism is a creative and critical resource that should be nurtured across children, and within their families, and preschool settings.

Supporting preschool children with intellectual and developmental disabilities of genetic origin

Preschool support needs to reflect the increasing understanding of the impact of health conditions on education. For example, advances in genetic medicine have revealed that a high risk of intellectual and developmental disabilities are associated with a range of genetic conditions [35]. The research shows that children with these conditions already show complex health and educational needs during the preschool years. Unfortunately, there is little to no sharing of this information across health and education which means that preschool educators are often unaware that a child in their care needs tailored provision.

Recent research focusing on one of these genetic conditions, 22q11.2 Deletion Syndrome, highlighted the broad range of needs of this patient group [36]. This condition is regularly diagnosed in NHS medical genetic clinics but rarely is the diagnosis shared with education authorities. Children aged two to five years with 22q11.2 Deletion Syndrome experience difficulties in a wide range of areas of child development including cognitive ability, language, social skills, sleep, and motor functioning when compared to their siblings without 22q11.2 Deletion Syndrome. Those children who had worse sleep and motor functioning were particularly vulnerable to experiencing emotional and behavioural problems. The research has shown that there is a subgroup of children with 22q11.2 Deletion Syndrome who show particularly high levels of difficulties, indicating that during the preschool period it is already possible to identify those children who may be in particular need of early developmental support. Children with intellectual disability of genetic origin are at increased risk of developing later mental health problems, with

80% developing at least one psychiatric condition [35]. Therefore, the preschool period represents an important potential window to deliver early intervention and support before children later develop severe mental health difficulties.

Less than 10% of two to four-year-olds are meeting the recommended 180 minutes of daily physical activity.

Physical activity and maintaining a healthy weight

Childhood obesity poses a significant challenge to public health systems worldwide. In the UK, the NHS faces an annual expenditure of £6.1 billion due to obesity-related healthcare costs, a figure projected to rise to £10 billion by 2050 [37, 38]. Unfortunately, existing physical inequalities have widened since the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to increased sedentary behaviours, decreased physical activity levels, and negative attitudes towards physical activity [39], these trends will continue to have significant implications for health and wellbeing, such as delayed motor development, adverse effects on cardiovascular, bone, and mental health, reduced cognitive function and social interaction, as well as an increased risk of obesity [39]. Therefore, the environment, role models, and pedagogy of preschool provision should include opportunities for more movement.

The World Health Organisation defines physical activity as any voluntary bodily movement produced by skeletal muscles that requires energy expenditure [40]. Preschool children will engage in physical activity of varying intensities, from light-intensity (slow walking) to moderate-to-vigorous activity such as running and jumping. The UK Chief Medical Officer's guidelines state that children aged five years and under should achieve at least 180 minutes of daily physical activity, including 60 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity [23]. The 180 minutes include physical activities throughout the day, including active and outdoor play. However, evidence suggests that less than 10% of two to four-year-olds are meeting the recommended 180 minutes of daily physical activity [24] and one in five UK children are overweight or obese by the age of five years old [25].

Physical development is cited as one of the three prime areas of learning and development in the Early Years Statutory Framework. It states that early education programmes should "provide opportunities for young children to be active and interactive; and to develop their coordination, control, and movement. Children must also be helped to understand the importance of physical activity and to make healthy choices in relation to food." All preschool children, regardless of their background or circumstances, should be supported to have positive experiences and relationships with physical activity from the earliest opportunity.

Research suggests that currently nursery and preschool environments are organised so that boys, older children, and highly active children benefit more compared to girls, younger preschool children, and children with lower moderate to vigorous physical activity levels [41]. Environmental adaptations are needed to encourage physical activity for more children and targeted interventions for different groups of children. It has been found that boys are significantly more active than girls and that lower levels of moderate to vigorous physical activity was associated with being overweight

in young children [42]. They suggest that future interventions for improving weight should focus on increasing moderate to vigorous physical activity. Interventions delivered to preschool children encompassing locomotor skills such as running and jumping, object manipulation including throwing and catching, and stability skills (such as bending and stretching) are extremely effective [42]. Therefore, as well as environments (indoor and out), role modelling, and a balance of child-initiated, and adult-led physical activity are vital. This should include opportunities for active play, as well as regular opportunities for direct motor skill development sessions. See the previous Child of the North report on physical activity and healthy nutrition for more detail about how good habits can be implemented within education settings.

Play is not only a fundamental human right; it has a fundamental role in preschool education.

The importance of play

Play is not only a fundamental human right [43]; it has a fundamental role in preschool education because it establishes the foundations necessary for successful participation in society. Through play, young children learn, develop, and make sense of their worlds. Play has a crucial role within early years education because it offers open-ended opportunities for children to take an active role in navigating and contributing to their home, community, and preschool cultures. Regular and sustained opportunities for self-chosen play provide a context for children to connect home and preschool cultures and to make sense of their diverse everyday lives, including domestic relationships and routines, family activities and hobbies, religious practices, and popular culture [44]. Play also enables children to interact with peers and to become aware of diverse social, cultural, and linguistic practices [45]. In this sense, children's participation in collaborative, open-ended play can enable them to develop a deep understanding of their own identities and build relationships with others, thus brokering a sense of belonging and togetherness [46]. The opportunities that play affords for young children to negotiate meanings, become aware of different perspectives, and collaborate with others are of crucial importance in contemporary society that is characterised by increasingly complex layers of diversity [47].

The past two decades have seen preschool education in England becoming increasingly dominated by prescribed academic outcomes that are the result of top-down pressures to prepare children for formal schooling [47]. However, standardised learning goals are not in themselves sufficient to encompass the diversities within children's lives. As a result, the interests, and purposes that children explore in play may not be valued by practitioners, particularly if they do not align with the early learning goals that are set out in the Early Years Foundation Stage framework [48]. Furthermore, downward pressure to deliver

academic outcomes and to generate assessment evidence can lead practitioners towards a more formal approach whereby play is structured by adults to meet specific learning outcomes [49]. Children require ample, flexible time and space to reach deep levels of play and if the prevalent approach is geared towards highly structured activity "it is likely that the complex benefits of play will be lost" [50].

Therefore, while educational policy has a role in shaping basic entitlements, a focus on academic learning must not overshadow the value of play in building children's positive identities and relationships. Academic learning should not, and need not, be placed in opposition to children's diverse everyday experiences.

The challenge for policymakers and practitioners lies in creating inclusive opportunities for play that respect children's agency supported by adults who recognise, value, and respond to the multiplicity of interests and experiences that children explore in their play [9]. This calls for learning environments that allow children to develop rich and resourceful play narratives through which they explore and make meaning of their worlds. When children have open-ended play resources, including ongoing access to digital resources, and are given the time to develop, co-create and record their play in multi-modal ways, they are capable of agency and creative self-expression, and able to share ideas that are important to them with peers and adults [9].

The current crisis in preschool provision

High quality, no-cost preschool provision is essential for all. It enables young children to effectively manage their transition into formal schooling, allowing them to engage and learn from the start, leading to better overall outcomes [51, 52]. Early years settings play a crucial role in supporting successful development in young children, including their language, social, emotional, and physical skills, and behaviour – especially for those from deprived backgrounds [53].

However, there is a crisis in preschool provision and the financial stability of the early years sector is volatile. Nurseries have closed and qualified early years practitioners are at an all-time low, resulting in unprecedented recruitment and retention challenges [54]. The financial instability of the sector means providers are unable to prioritise suitable provision for children with complex needs, due to increased cost. By not acting now, the crisis will only worsen, exacerbating the inequalities faced by children, and further reducing the life chances of our most disadvantaged.

The lack of sufficient and sustained investment in the early years workforce has jeopardised the quality of provision, limited capacity to provide current entitlements to early years provision, and limited opportunities for practitioner engagement in essential CPD [55]. Maintained nursery schools provide many essential services beyond early education, which effectively subsidise other essential services. However, many struggle for funding, forcing their closure, and a consequent lack of services [56]. Maintained nursery schools must be sufficiently funded so that they remain at the heart of early years provision, employing well-qualified early years practitioners at all levels, and enhancing the learning and life chances of disadvantaged children. Investment in the early years workforce is essential to provide and sustain a diverse, well-qualified workforce, equitable for all, and high-quality early

education for all young children, thus challenging disadvantage. Recognising the educational significance of the early years for children and the wider economy can contribute to inclusive and high-quality early childhood provision.

Intelligent and sustained change is needed to make the early years workforce fit for purpose. A Government-commissioned independent review and several studies have identified unaddressed, decade-long concerns around inequalities in the early years workforce which require state intervention to ensure quality for children and sustainable working conditions for the workforce [57, 58, 59, 60, 61]. Losing members of the early years workforce to other low paid jobs in retaining industries is a waste of talent and investment in their initial training. Ensuring a fully qualified early years workforce, with appropriate pay and conditions is essential for CYP's futures and workforce equitability.

> "Schools and other educational settings **need to be at the epicentre of support.**"

Training and education for professionals and families

Nationally, there's a clear demand for effective, affordable, high-quality training to develop the early years workforce. Early years senior staff (e.g., nursery managers) and early childhood educators report insufficient training and support [57]. Preschool staff do not always feel equipped to support children in their care, with just 17% receive CPD job related training with UK funding being significantly lower than other European countries [62]. As reflected by declining workforce qualifications, there is a need for upskilling to address the gaps in attainment and emotional wellbeing to reduce the social inequalities facing the early years workforce [57].

Both new to the sector and experienced practitioners need high quality, meaningful training, and ongoing CPD. It is this focus on quality that matters. Qualitative work suggests that early years practitioners do not always feel that the delivery of training aligns with their unique learning styles. For example, Level 3 NVQs often consist of large amounts of reading and answering questions which might not be appropriate or accessible to everyone. Whatever training is accessed, learning needs to be ongoing in smaller chunks, interspersed with planned opportunities to put theory, new skills, and techniques into practice with children in settings. In these challenging times, where the whole sector is struggling with staffing and recruitment, releasing one person for training may seem difficult and two is almost impossible. Yet, evidence states that together, individuals are far more likely to gain a better understanding, learn more, and successfully share their learning with others. A leader and a practitioner is the ideal model.

While various approaches exist to manage behaviour problems and promote social-emotional and language development, more research is needed to develop and evaluate evidence-based interventions that can be implemented effectively within early years classrooms [63, 64, 65, 66]. The sustained positive outcomes from the Nuffield Early Language Intervention (NELI) provide a strong

case for investment in the development and of high quality CPD programmes. Importantly, existing evidence shows that skilled educators uniquely mitigate the effects of social disadvantage and early family challenges by providing a high-quality environment [67, 68]. However, there is a lack of coherence around the availability, acceptability, and quality of CPD which needs to be addressed [69].

Caregiver-implemented language interventions

Caregiver-implemented interventions can promote child language [42, 44, 70] but some high-quality interventions, when subjected to rigorous evaluation are either not effective [42, 44, 70] or effective only in the short term [45]. Thus, careful attention to the aspects of interventions that make them effective is needed [71]. Overall, if early intervention is to be effective it needs to be a) sustained, b) adaptive to changes over developmental time, c) adaptive to levels of family need d) sufficiently intensive to make a lasting difference to child outcomes and, most importantly, e) acceptable to parents and their children.

Evaluations that measure caregiver beliefs and engagement find intervention messages have been taken on board by parents. However, it is generally only the more intensive interventions that have an impact on child development outcomes for children at risk due to socioeconomic disadvantage [46].

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a surge in interest in offering intervention services remotely. If effective, such digital services could help to mitigate the high expense of more intensive interventions because they can deliver high-fidelity messaging via video content and because they allow remote connection with professionals via text messaging and phone or video calls [47].

There is a huge appetite for digital parenting services to complement in-person provision and capitalise on the very high rate of smartphone ownership amongst parents and caregivers. BBC

Education created their Tiny Happy People service to support children's language skills before school entry. This multi-million-pound project, the largest ever undertaken by BBC Education, has involved the co-creation of high-quality videos and other digital resources illustrating evidenced-based ways to support language development from zero to five years. A text messaging service offers parents the opportunity to automatically receive videos that are developmentally appropriate for their child as they grow. Parents like this service and opt to remain with it over a span of over two years. An evaluation with 435 families across the four nations of the UK showed this had a significant impact on quality of caregiver-child interaction at 12, 17, and 24 months and a significant impact on infant communication at 12 months [47]. No impact was seen on caregiver-reported child language at 24 months so refinements to the service were made including providing remote access to a Speech and Language Therapist, improving design and message clarity. Further evaluations are ongoing. Findings to date, alongside those from other interventions worldwide, indicate that digital services can promote caregiver responsiveness and have substantial promise to complement in person services.

Importance and provision of home literacies

Young children's communicative practices are more complex and diverse in scope than ever, encompassing both "traditional" reading and writing and a growing range of "new" communicative competencies, including across multiple digital media contexts. It is also acknowledged that children's literacy (and digital literacy) practices are specific to particular social and cultural contexts. Researchers have identified important differences between accepted literacy practices in schools and early years settings (sometimes called "school literacies") and children's literacy practices in a socioculturally-diverse range of home settings ("home literacies") [72]. Family literacy work enhances how parents engage their young children in literacy at home, especially for

disadvantaged families [73]. Emphasis on literacy in everyday exchanges using household print, digital communications, books, writing, and talk makes early literacy learning purposeful and accessible for families and builds literacy knowledge, skills, and confidence [73]. The Sheffield REAL [74] (Raising Early Achievement in Literacy) project was identified by the Education Inspection Framework as providing good evidence of effectiveness [74]. Initial training for early years practitioners is urgently needed to ensure all are fully equipped to engage with parents on the importance of their role in fostering children's literacy development.

Funded CPD for early years practitioners is essential to establish and continue family literacy work with parents, so that all are confident in supporting their young children's early literacy.

> "I firmly believe the **current system is failing** our children."
>
> — Teacher

Future-proofing the early years

Curriculum is a powerful intervention for societal change. As such, the curriculum acts as a mirror to reflect the political values and aspirations that shape the direction of young children's learning. In England, the last twenty years have borne witness to significant changes in the early years curriculum associated with the intensification of prescribed academic content. This shift reflects a policy positioning of preschool education as a site to prepare children for school. The resulting movement from a holistic play-based curriculum towards a focus on academic outcomes has been described as a process of "schoolification" [48]. International organisations have highlighted concerns about schoolification, suggesting that an over-emphasis on prescriptive academic outcomes creates barriers for responding to children's holistic needs and wellbeing [75]. The negative impact of a formal curriculum is likely to be magnified for children who are already at an educational disadvantage [49]. If the early years is to fulfil a role in addressing educational disadvantage, new approaches to curriculum that foreground equity and inclusion are required. Broadly defined national goals and principles have a place in supporting access to basic educational entitlements [49]. However, the curriculum also needs to make space for locally relevant experiences that build on children's diverse experiences, languages, and identities [76]. Further research is needed to identify inclusive and equitable models of curriculum that support children's learning within contexts that have relevance to their multiple interests, needs and motivations.

Importance of preschool education provision working collaboratively with childhood

It is established that providing every child the best start in life is associated with positive health and social outcomes that extend throughout the life course [77, 78]. The developmental needs of children, therefore, need to be prioritised, to prevent health and behavioural issues and reduce inequalities [20]. Preschool education settings are

an environment where children and their families, early education and care providers, and health and social care professionals interact, providing an opportunity for early identification and provision of vital support. These different groups of professionals have a diverse skill set that can support the promotion of children's health and development [79, 80]. Individually, these include specialist knowledge of physical and mental developmental milestones, assessment/diagnosis, and treatment of developmental disorders, as well as development of support/care pathways for children and families with complex needs.

Indeed, it has been recognised globally that collaboration across professions including preschool education providers result in improved child outcomes [81]. While the extant literature on interprofessional collaboration is focussed on healthcare settings [82, 83], there are key principles that are transferable to encouraging interprofessional collaboration between preschool education settings and health and care services. These include a relationship of trust, developed from opportunities to interact, and develop an understanding of each other's roles and particular expertise, shared goals, effective communication, and information sharing. These principles have been identified in a realist synthesis exploring collaboration in early intervention for speech, language, and communication needs, for example [84]. To enable holistic support for children, it is vital that different professionals across preschool education and health and care settings develop collaborative approaches, through interprofessional learning and practice [85].

Co-production methods could help recognise and empower individuals to draw on their lived experiences as active participants in the design and delivery of information and services. This can lead to identification of unique support needs of disadvantaged groups and result in increased impact and effectiveness of the service/intervention [86]. Inclusion of certain populations in co-

production can be challenging; however, creative methods have enabled participation of preschool children and their parents/carers who are most familiar with their needs [87, 88, 89, 90].

> **"All practitioners need to improve...** not because they are not good enough, but because they can be even better."
>
> - Nursery practitioner

Opportunities and risks of emerging technologies in early childhood

Emerging digital technologies are clearly going to have a profound impact on the next generation, from early in life [91]. This includes both interventions that are designed specifically for this group, and those that are more "general purpose" (i.e., usually designed for adults but are used with preschool children). These questions were the focus of a set of workshops in Newcastle and Durham on Hacking Early Childhood [92]. Many scholars argue that digital technologies are an important part of all human life, including in early childhood, and that children should be supported from a young age to develop appropriate digital literacy skills to support their positive engagement with the digital world, creativity, participation in peer cultures, and broader wellbeing [93, 94, 95, 96].

Exciting as these technologies are, they also represent a set of important risks for early childhood in both the near- and longer-term. Perhaps the greatest near-term risk is that technologies become used as an excuse to avoid vital investments in human resources for

the early years, as "digital dummies" are used to passively occupy children. Longer-term, there are vital questions to consider how the next generation will develop alongside increasingly human-like machines. For example, will they form an "attachment" to artificial intelligences (AI)? And who will design, develop, and evaluate early years technologies; tools that are increasingly complex and subtle in their operation [97]?

At the same time, developments in AI, sensing, and machine learning represent numerous exciting opportunities too, from freeing up the early years' workforce from paperwork [98], to better tracking of development, to powering adaptive interventions that are tailored to each child and more. Further, recent research has demonstrated that machine learning can be used to reduce the length of child assessments to the critical questions that distinguish children with and with genetic diagnosis [99] and even to enhance learning and development in young children in areas including creativity, emotion control, collaborative inquiry, and literacy skills [100]. Examples of this include "PopBots" and Duolingo, demonstrating how AI can be used to support preschoolers in topics such as speech and language development to Science Technology, Engineering, and Maths (STEM) [101].

Given the pace and scale of these changes and the potential implications for developing brains, what is clear is that they require a "whole society" engagement; they're too important to be left to "big tech" alone.

> **"[The] digital divide can have profound implications** for children's educational outcomes, social inclusion, and future employment prospects."

Developing AI literacy in young children and the early years workforce

The term AI literacy refers to the extent an individual has a basic knowledge and understanding of AI, the ability to evaluate, communicate and collaborate with AI, and has been argued to be a fundamental skill for all [102, 103, 104, 105].

In the context of early years education, evidence suggests AI has the potential to have a significant impact. For example, AI can be used in the classroom for administrative tasks such as attendance monitoring and enrolment [98], business management and grading and assessment [106]. AI has the capability to collect, store, and analyse big data about a child's learning patterns and their progress [107]. Combining this objective numerical data with teacher observations of the child can help provide recommendations for individual children [107]. Further, AI has the ability to support consistent communications between early years staff and families. For example, the Sidekick Writing Assistant can support staff with written work through checking spelling, grammar and improving the tone of the writing [108].

However, it is important to be aware that AI also has the ability to provide incorrect and misleading information or suggestions [100]. Therefore, it is important to develop CYP's AI literacy regarding its opportunities but importantly the limitations [104, 109, 110]. It has been suggested that preschool children are too young to explore AI knowledge [100] however evidence does show that AI tools do have promise in such settings with younger children [111, 112, 113]. Further, AI literacy has been argued to be important for younger children to improve their development such as creative emotional and collaborative inquiry skills [100, 114].

Although AI has potential in early years settings, barriers to its adoption have been described: 1) lack of teacher's skills and AI knowledge, 2) lack of curriculum design, and 3) lack of teaching

guidance [115]. Therefore, it is important to work collaboratively to develop a framework to help early years educators understand and effectively integrate AI literacy into their classrooms [116]. It is also important that these approaches are created in partnership with those involved including early years educators, families, and CYP to ensure needs are being met [117, 118]. The need to digital upskill our CYP is discussed in detail within the previous Child of the North report on Digital Futures.

> Emerging **digital technologies** are clearly going to have a profound **impact on the next generation,** from early in life.

Innovative approaches trialled in the real world

Preschools provide education for children from ages two to five years. The Department for Education (DfE) generally distinguishes between group-based providers (accounting for 21,200 settings in the UK in 2023), childminders (25,300), and maintained school-based preschools (9,700). The group-based provider category describes both private providers (such as company run nurseries) and voluntary providers (such as community organisations). Together, these various settings hold 1,558,100 places (in 2023). In 2024, 115,900 families of two-year-olds and 1.2 million of three-year-olds were registered for 15 free hours of preschool provision in the UK [1]. A goal of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) curriculum implemented in 2008 was to join the maintained, voluntary, and private sectors through joint care and education responsibilities [2].

1

Nuffield Early Language Intervention (NELI) Preschool

In the absence of appropriate action, weaknesses in spoken language persist through the lifespan, affecting not only educational achievement and career prospects, but also mental health. Given the evidence that is available, it is important to act now to prevent a downward spiral from poor spoken language through poor literacy and numeracy to longer-term effects on adult employability and the costs to society of intergenerational disadvantage.

Building on the success of the NELI intervention, a preschool intervention has been produced to boost the language skills of children and better prepare them for school entry. NELI Preschool is a 20-week programme suitable for children aged three to four years, which combines universal enrichment with targeted small group and individual sessions for children with poor language skills. NELI Preschool comprises training for nursery practitioners, oral language assessment, intervention, and whole-class instruction. A randomised controlled trial in 65 nurseries has shown that NELI Preschool significantly improves the oral language skills of children receiving the intervention, with recipients making the equivalent of three months' additional progress in their language skills. Approximately 1,500 children took part in the trial and many of their nurseries have continued to include the programme as a key part of their curriculum.

Given the promising findings of the NELI Preschool research trial, an evaluation of NELI Preschool is now being conducted in 155 Local Authorities across eight regions during the 2024-2025 school year. This randomised controlled trial will include 318 eligible settings from nurseries across England and will provide evidence for effectiveness of implementation.

"We were delighted with the end-of-year data... [after the six-month programme] the majority of children moved into the average range, with nine children scoring well above average."

– Nursery Headteacher

"The staff found the online training course very easy to use. It was easier for us to train more staff in NELI Preschool because you can just do it online."

– Nursery Manager

2

Natural Thinkers

Lambeth Early Action Partnership (LEAP) is one of five local partnerships which make up Better Start, a national ten-year (2015-2025) programme that works to improve the life chances of babies, young children, and families. LEAP delivered over 20 services in parts of Lambeth ("the LEAP area") where young children experience greater inequalities than children in the rest of the borough. Since 2015, LEAP has created and funded a tailored package of services to support children's communication and language development (CLD) outcomes.

As part of LEAP's commitment to contributing to communication-friendly environments both indoors and outdoors, Natural Thinkers was integrated into the CLD strand of work. The Natural Thinkers service aims to promote children's communication and language development, wellbeing, and involvement through the provision of high-quality outdoor learning and play. To achieve this long-term goal, training and support aims to upskill practitioners to:

- *Feel more knowledgeable and confident about creatively using the natural world to support children's communication and language development, wellbeing, and involvement*

- *Run regular, high quality outdoor activities as part of their everyday working*

- *Promote and support parental involvement in outdoor activities, demonstrating the importance of connecting children to nature, and supporting them with practical ideas*

Participating settings received a programme of training and support comprising foundation training for a subset of their practitioners; ongoing in-setting support; "accreditation visits"; funding for resources to embed the service; and cross-setting network meetings. This is underpinned by the Natural Thinkers' ten commitments which provides practitioners with a framework for connecting children to nature through practical activities. It is also supported by the "Green Folder" and other resources, which aim to provide ideas for high quality outdoor activities.

Practitioners in Natural Thinkers settings use the Leuven tools to observe and record children. Leuven assessments are conducted at the start of the school year (or when a child joins), and at the end of the year. The Leuven tool focuses on two indicators: wellbeing and involvement. It is a five-point scale ranging from extremely low to extremely high. The wellbeing indicator measures the emotional wellbeing of children. The involvement indicator measures the engagement of children in particular tasks.

In January 2024, over 200 children from both English speaking and non-English speaking households received two Leuven assessments. On average, both wellbeing and involvement scores improved between the two timepoints, more so in children from non-English language speaking households.

3

50 Things to Do Before You're Five

50 Things to Do Before You're Five is an initiative that provides ideas for fun, low or no-cost activities for families with young children that aim to help children develop the skills, language, and resilience needed for starting school and beyond. It can also be used by nurseries, childminders, schools, health teams, cultural settings, and community organisations, or by anyone who wants to improve outcomes for young children.

The associated website and app are free for parents and practitioners. They provide details of each activity, including local links to parent groups, parks and green spaces, museums, and libraries. There are suggested age and stage-appropriate words and vocabulary to use in conversations during the activity to increase children's vocabulary, adaptations that can be made if children have additional needs, and a list of related books. Parents have reported increased confidence in communicating more purposefully with their child during play.

Other benefits are reported to include improved relationships with parents, aiding conversations about the child's day when they go home, and improved engagement and interactions between children and practitioners. 50 Things to Do Before You're Five was created by education and early years specialists, using theories of learning, child development, and play. Feedback indicates that the initiative's success is due to the emphasis on families having fun together without overtly promoting the fact that it supports children's learning and development. Instead, the initiative promotes an inclusive, non-judgmental way for parents to engage fully with their children. Families can become isolated from their communities for a variety of reasons. Often, cultural and language barriers prevent families from accessing resources to improve the home learning environment for their children. Being locked out of these opportunities can have a detrimental impact on their child's development, especially if the family doesn't have an existing support network. By encouraging children and families to explore their own local landscapes, communities, and cultural venues alongside the local history that defines the places they live, families are better connected to the communities around them. Since using the 50 Things to Do Before You're Five app, 70% of parents have reported that their child has had more opportunities to socialise within their local community.

50 Things to Do Before You're Five is now available across the British Isles and the app has a total of 89,780 unique downloads. However, it does not look the same everywhere. Each area has the option to choose one unique activity (with the remaining 49 activities the same across areas). Localising 50 Things to Do Before You're Five enables the initiative to celebrate the diversity of individual communities across the country and acknowledge the need for an offer that represents and connects with local people.

4

Sheffield Small Talk

Children with speech, language, and communication difficulties are known to find learning to read and write, develop friendships and progress with their life chances more challenging than other children. These difficulties are even more profound for children with SEND. However, children's speech and language therapy services are under pressure with long waiting lists, meaning early identification and effective intervention is challenging. Speech and Language Therapists are crucial in identifying the speech, language, and communication difficulties of preschool children, particularly those with SEND. Early identification ensures timely and effective interventions to facilitate children's speech, language and communication development are implemented. This is essential to reduce the potential negative impact of these challenges on children's lives as they grow older.

Sheffield Small Talk is an innovative and established speech and language therapy clinic, providing inclusive no-cost provision for all preschool children with SEND. Children and their families are at the heart of Sheffield Small Talk, where they are welcome to engage for as long as they would like, up until formal school entry. Children may be identified with (or waiting for identification) autism, learning difficulties, complex developmental difficulties, and other developmental difficulties.

Pre-registration speech and language therapy students are integral to the delivery of Small Talk and it is one of their core placements they complete as part of their degree qualification. An outreach arm of Small Talk involves the students working with the child and family's community. In addition, the students work with the children's preschool provision to share their learning to support early years professionals to enable them to facilitate the children's speech, language, and communication. Small Talk is collaborative, working with the NHS Sheffield Children's Speech and Language Therapy Service as an additional provision to the NHS offer.

Small Talk is evidence-based, building on existing research to implement known effective interventions, exemplifying excellent knowledge exchange and impact. It is recognised both regionally and nationally, being shortlisted by the Communications Trust for a national award.

A key to the success of Small Talk is in its origins, where two parents of preschool children with SEND co-produced the development and implementation of Small Talk to ensure it meets the needs of the regional community of children with SEND and their families. Speech and Language therapy students work with the children and their families to identify the child's speech, language, and communication needs. The students are supervised to engage the child and their families in evidence-based speech, language, and communication interventions. The child and their family are supported to enable the child to develop and use their most effective means of communication. This can be spoken language, but also the use of other non-spoken means of communication such as signing.

Ultimately, *Sheffield Small Talk* means preschool children with SEND come to start their formal schooling at four to five years old with spoken language skills and/or being able to use their most effective communication. Families are skilled in understanding their child's communication and how to enable others in their community (e.g., the school classroom) to communicate with their child and to further develop their speech, language, and communication skills. This is a key factor to improving the life chances of preschool children with SEND.

> "Ahmed is communicating now; he uses some of the signs [we learnt at Small Talk] and we know what he wants... **He also seems happier and less frustrated with us.**"
>
> – Nursery Headteacher

5

The ONE programme

The Orchestrating Numeracy and the Executive (ONE) programme has been developed to support children in early mathematics learning with an aim to reduce early socioeconomic attainment gaps. The programme builds on a solid evidence base linking core thinking skills to the development of mathematics, and evidence from teachers that they often have less guidance for teaching these skills. The programme was co-developed with early years practitioners and involves teachers playing short, fun games with children that involve mathematical content and thinking skills, such as memory and attention. The 12-week programme involves attending four short CPD sessions and playing three activities with children a week. The activities range from familiar classic games like "What time is it Mr Wolf?" to craft games that involve constructing caterpillars to learn about patterning. Practitioners get a set of activity cards and a resource box. The programme is a whole class intervention and has been built with inclusion at the heart. The activity cards provide differentiation ideas for children who might need to start at a lower level, and ideas for levelling up once children become familiar with it. Practitioners have praised the intervention for its inclusion goals, accessibility, and how it met the teacher's and child's needs. The early trial results have been promising and show gains for children who have taken part in memory skills and mathematical skills, particularly in children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Implementation

We know there is no "one size fits all" programme when we have such a diversity of need within communities. Disadvantaged communities can each have differing levels of deprivation resulting in varying needs requiring bespoke approaches. One family's needs may not be met with the same approach that is given to another. Each family's needs should be addressed holistically, enabling priority issues to be dealt with before looking to focus on others. Family support, social care, education, and health are all intertwined and should not work in silos. Families need these organisations to work together to improve outcomes.

Investments in new Early Childhood Education Programmes require a clear vision of what is needed for individual communities across the country

There are lessons to be learned not only from HeadStart, but much closer to home, with our Sure Start. The nationwide delivery of Sure Start Local Programmes and subsequently Sure Start Children's Centres brought together colleagues from health, education, and the community and voluntary sector, designed to deliver a range of early intervention and preventative services. It was designed to ensure access to good quality early education was available to families, living in the most deprived communities across the country. The delivery of these community led interventions meant the majority of Sure Start Local Programmes were able to provide services that met the needs of the communities it served. Many localities found that for the agencies involved, Sure Start enabled a huge amount of collaborative working and stopped professionals working in silos. Thus, it facilitated the creation of much needed referral pathways to ensure families received the correct support within a more appropriate time frame, and in a familiar, welcoming setting.

However, we know in many areas that the children and families most in need are not always the ones who are most engaged. We must ensure that any new early childhood programmes have the opportunity for practitioners working in communities to build relationships with families in ways that are meaningful to the family and community.

Where parents don't engage in support programmes offered for their children, home visits should be offered with family-centred offers of individualised support. Shifting the balance – so rather than expecting families to come to professionals – professions should go to the families. Trusting relationships need to be developed between parents and practitioners to improve levels of engagement and completion of education programmes.

The success of future programmes would need to see investment being given to training opportunities for practitioners and improved understanding regarding the needs of children and families within their own communities.

All initial training for practitioners working with families, across all sectors, needs to focus on understanding the difficulties faced by a parent and how the parent may or may not prioritise a highlighted issue.

We need to raise awareness of the issues that may be impacting families:

- *How challenging it is to feed their children when they have no means to*

- *Being unable to pay for gas or electricity*

- *Having no access to toys at home*

- *Safeguarding issues such as domestic violence*

- *Parents' previous experiences with professional services and educational settings and the potential impact on levels of anxiety*

Clear pathways for support need to be in place for practitioners to refer to, and these need to be available to families in their local neighbourhoods. Issues must be addressed in order of priority for the family and not always the priority of the practitioner.

Practitioners working with families, both new and experienced, need access to high quality training opportunities

Consideration must be given as to how professionals across various agencies can train

together to increase cross-sector knowledge, increase multi-agency working, and provide congruent messaging for families.

Whilst CPD should be mandatory, it is vital to recognise the strain many professionals working with families are under, especially where appropriate adult:child ratios need to be maintained. Therefore, an investment designed to sustain staff recruitment and retention must sit alongside this.

The Early Years Stronger Practice Hubs have now been running for a couple of years, covering all of England, and have already managed to reach a significant number of early years practitioners. With further investment, these hubs would be ideally placed to integrate training and CPD for all professionals working with preschool children into their offer, creating a holistic, multi-agency approach.

Many hubs have already begun to bring professionals from outside the early years

sector to deliver training to their hub members. For example, St Edmund's Early Years Stronger Practice Hub for West and South Yorkshire have run a successful learning network with speech and language specialists, while other hubs have responded positively to the very strong demand for CPD to support the growing number of children with neurodivergent conditions. Hubs have successfully created the much needed one stop shop for early years practitioners to find the training and CPD required while providing inspiration for additional CPD. The NHS also has a network of training hubs. Consideration should be given to whether these two hub models could work together. This could provide the radical shift needed to deter professionals from working in silos. A multi-professional hub would not only improve practice, but it could also be the ideal solution to provide congruent messaging for families too. The 50 Things to Do Before You're Five initiative has seen this happening already in the 24 areas it is available. In its impact report, Wakefield says "50 Things to Do provides a joined-up approach and runs like a golden thread

"All staff are engaging well with high quality interactions which is ensuring **more children are meeting their age expected levels. Less children are requiring Speech and Language Therapy** referrals than previously as we are able to use the progress tracker on Speech and Language UK and with our two-year-olds we are able to implement strategies from the start whereas previously children were coming into the setting after their third birthday delayed."

– Headteacher Mandale Mill Primary School Stockton-on-Tees, Louisa Reeves (Speech and Language UK)

through the support available for families and young children. It provides a consistent message for our local partners, frontline practitioners, and parents, and ties the different strands together to positively impact on outcomes for children." Designed predominantly as a tool to support families to support their children's development, this initiative is also having a positive impact on family wellbeing.

Training needs to be of a high quality for all involved. Key priorities include:

- *Understanding issues facing families with preschool children, especially those in disadvantaged circumstances*

- *How to engage families most in need without being judgmental*

- *Making the most of home visits and sharing information gathered appropriately*

- *CPD to be underpinned by a strong evidence base, meeting the needs of settings, and sustained for most impact*

-

We must work differently across silos to make the public sector work effectively for families, making early intervention effective to improve lives of CYP

Schools and nurseries are the agencies that have the most regular contact with CYP and families and can therefore build strong relationships. If we work more effectively together and share relevant information appropriately, we will be able to get CYP the support they need sooner, helping to improve their health outcomes in the future.

Schools and nurseries have long recognised the impact of health and care on children's behaviour and readiness to learn, and the potential to use their unique access to CYP to link them to essential services. School staff have shared that

families feel services they receive are often late and not coordinated effectively across health and education settings, which contributes to poor health and education outcomes. Many schools feel powerless to provide meaningful and sustained change for families trying to navigate these complex and fragmented systems, with many services relying on a referral from a professional or threshold processes to unlock support. Getting the right support at the right time can positively influence the life chances of CYP.

Taking a place-based approach to develop a designated "School Health Hub", in a defined geographical area (bringing together primary and secondary care professionals with public health, social care, and community care into schools) can have a positive impact on the sharing of information amongst health and education professions and positively impact CYP's health.

A place-based "School Health Hub" offer (evidenced in the Child of the North Sure Start report) aims to benefit and lessen the burden on the NHS by providing children and young people with a preventative offer of activity and early intervention. This is a model being developed in Bradford, currently at Dixons Allerton Academy through the Education Alliance for Life Chances (a public service partnership) with a view to expand to further areas across the district. The area chosen is an area of multiple deprivation and incorporates one of the district's most deprived wards, Manningham. The model aims to achieve long-term system change by enabling services to be better coordinated and connected so that CYP and families experience earlier support in a place that is near to where they live and in a place they are likely to know and trust (i.e. a school). By having services provided in a co-located venue, practitioners of multiple disciplines can share information (both through multi-agency meetings and via IT systems) and coordinate support so that need is identified earlier, support is effective and

provided close to home resulting in less missed appointments, reduced unmet need, and reduction in the need for specialist support.

By bringing health and wellbeing practitioners to work with and through schools it can reduce inequalities to healthcare access to improve the health outcomes of CYP. This aims to ensure an effective pooling and targeting of resources, efficient operational alignment, and a coordinated strategy to CYP wellbeing. By placing schools as anchor institutions of local communities, they are perfectly placed to link families to essential services.

Expected outcomes include:

- CYP receiving clinical health interventions (e.g., dental care, receiving missed immunisations, or mental health support)

- Increased prevention awareness and improved health literacy for children/families

- Unregistered children being registered with a GP/dentist

- Improved compliance with healthcare interventions
- Improved school attendance – improving children's long-term opportunities and parental freedom to work

- Evidence of the social value and return on investment for this approach.

- Development of the business model with costs for future scaling across district-wide educational settings

- Contribution to shared priorities including improved partnership working between schools, statutory services, and the voluntary and community sector so that the needs of CYP and families are prioritised and met

"We need to bridge the gap between health and education."

End word

(Elliot with his Mum, pictured at St Edmund's Nursery School)

Elliot's journey at St Edmund's Nursery School and Children's Centre: "Parents as Partners"/ An Approach of "Connectivity"

Based in Girlington, Bradford, St Edmund's Nursery School works in partnership with families to provide the best possible start for all children. They strive to make a real difference to the children and families of Bradford and to enable parents to support their children to achieve anything they want to. The following example aligns with the report's urge for a connected approach to respond to the complex needs of families in deprived areas. "Elliot's journey" illustrates the importance of a collaborative approach to support early childhoods of fun, learning and health. If you read Elliot's story, it is clear that there is a need for a wider governmental approach to provide more effective information and services, especially to families from disadvantaged backgrounds.

When Elliot's mum became pregnant, she came to Juraj Tancos, the Parental Involvement Worker at St Edmund's. From a Roma background, Juraj is a trusted member of the wider Girlington community and his role is invaluable to the success of the nursery. Juraj began his work by connecting Elliot's mum to the midwife. This was made much easier because the midwife held her practice within St Edmund's. Elliot's mum was further supported with a referral to the GP for issues related to pregnancy and Juraj remained a key person throughout Elliot's birth. His close relationship with the midwife and Elliot's mum meant that Elliot had a safe and supported start to life.

Juraj's key responsibilities are:

- *To bridge the gap including by providing translation between families and services created by cultural differences and lack of understanding*

- *To build positive relationships with families wrapped around strong communication and effective support*

Juraj helps to improve difficult situations through his communication with health visitors and other children's service workers that some families may be unfamiliar with. Cultural differences mean that social workers are not aware of the specific perspectives of the Roma community. Our systems and culture operate differently in the UK to that of the central European Roma community so explaining these differences establishes a middle ground where social systems better understand the family situation. As a result, Elliot and his family were able to access the help they needed.

Elliot was born with significant hearing impairment and with curvature of the spine, meaning he was born needing extensive support and access to health services. Juraj's relationships with Elliot's family, local teachers of the deaf and speech and language therapists aided Elliot in getting the health support he was entitled to. Juraj supported Elliot's language development further by inviting Elliot's mum to a session within the nursery to demonstrate practically how and why the work the speech and language therapist was helping Elliot which would make a big difference to his life. Professional understanding mixed with a compassionate approach made Elliot's family feel acknowledged and respected.

Juraj hosts an EU family programme sharing simple practical examples of neglect and how to counteract these mistakes in hopes that families can learn to adapt their behaviours and this will in turn help their children. Barriers and prejudice against EU and new migrant families often affect their perceptions of the educational system and social systems in the UK. The 'Exploring Together' programme tries to counteract this tradition through a simplified bespoke approach. The key role of communication and explanation goes a long way in building excellent relationships with families.

Juraj further explains that professionals within health services or local authorities want to help; "Some professionals try their best to connect with families but sometimes they do so much that it has the opposite effect and often overwhelms families." Through continual conversations and getting to know the families, developing understanding of families' boundaries they can then communicate more effectively. Juraj explains that he understands he cannot dictate to families to change their ways and that he simply enables them to understand the system and how it works facilitating their own positive choices.

Representation of culture is invaluable in building connections with families such as Elliot's and is instrumental in developing children, seeing their culture celebrated within their educational setting.

St Edmund's hosts a Better Together day where all parents and children from the nursery are invited. St Edmund's adopts a "welcome to all" culture, which allows them to be trusted within the community. St Edmund's own '50 Things to Do Before You're Five' initiative is an important part of the school's offer to families, providing suggestions for fun, low cost activities which support improved health and learning. A favourite of the Roma Slovakian families at St Edmund's is 50 Things' #7 Making Music. Last year a Roma band came in to play for the families. This celebration of culture is significant to children as they develop - it is great for them to see their culture respected in their learning environment. St Edmund's fosters positive experiences from the start of life for children, this is something that should be unanimous across the country.

> "We are constantly trying to develop the broken early years system. What happens now does not work for lots of children and families. Ultimately what needs to happen is for health, education, social care, the police and all other organisations that support families, to work together. When this happens and there is effective engagement with all families, things can start to fall into place."
>
> Sian Hudson, Headteacher of St Edmund's Nursery School

Just as this report calls for a bold and clear vision of what is needed in individual communities, Elliot's story highlights the individual approach taken by St Edmund's staff to support Elliot's family. In agreement with the report - a revisit of early years approaches must take place in order for all children of disadvantaged or vulnerable backgrounds to have their needs met.

In truth, we need to build a connected early years system where one currently doesn't exist. Attempts to patch together a "one size fits all" approach serves to isolate many families, especially those living in poverty. Elliot's family's story is one of many. We have an opportunity today like never before to build a system that works for all families.

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