

BRINGING FAMILIES AND SCHOOLS TOGETHER

GIVING POOR CHILDREN THE BEST START

'Family-based support is now recognised as a central feature of successful outcomes for young children in high-poverty areas.'

Goodall and Harris (2009), Helping Families Support Children's Success at School

At Save the Children we believe no child should live in poverty or have their life chances shaped by deprivation. No child should be born without a chance. We believe there is a need for a sustained programme of early intervention that gives children from disadvantaged backgrounds the strong foundations they need to thrive. We want to harness the transformative power that parents have to support their children's early learning and development and ensure they get the best start at school.

We are proposing a new entitlement for parents in deprived communities. Families with children preparing for or starting primary school should be able to participate in the Families and Schools Together (FAST) programme. By establishing early partnerships between families and schools and empowering parents to do what they can to help their children learn we can remove some of the obstacles that prevent poor children succeeding at school.

Much of the research and data in this briefing was brought together in a new report prepared for Save the Children by the Centre for Educational Development, Appraisal and Research at the University of Warwick.

DEPRIVATION CAN STUNT CHILDREN'S LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

The evidence on how socio-economic background affects early learning and development is stark. Using data from the 1970 British Cohort Study, Leon Feinstein found that differences in children's cognitive development linked to parental background can be seen as early as 22 months and that the highest early achievers from deprived backgrounds are overtaken by lower achieving children from advantaged backgrounds by age five.¹ The Millennium Cohort Study, which tracks children born in 2000/01, shows those who experienced persistent poverty or episodes of poverty scored markedly less well at age five in English schools than those who grew up free from poverty.²

Learning and development outcomes in the early years frequently correlate with later life outcomes. Analysis by government of the National Pupil Database shows that around 55% of children who are in the bottom 20% at age seven remain there at age sixteen and fewer than 20% of them move into the top 60%.³ Many children from poor homes fall behind early and never catch up.



STEVE ALLEN/SAVE THE CHILDREN

PARENTS CAN SUPPORT CHILDREN TO OVERCOME THE EFFECTS OF DEPRIVATION

Young children face a number of risk factors or disadvantaging conditions, including poverty, parenting behaviour, home environment and nutrition, that can have profound effects on physical and mental well-being, cognitive function, educational attainment and later life outcomes.⁴ Goodall and Harris, in their 2009 review on the role of families in supporting children's success at school, state that it is 'only by preventing [this] loss of developmental potential that affects millions of children worldwide [that] it is possible to interrupt the cycle of poverty and help promote equity in society'.⁵

There is compelling evidence that parents can transform children's outcomes. Kiernan and Mensah matched data from the Millennium Cohort Study with data on parenting and concluded that parenting can partially negate the effects of poverty. They showed that 58% of children living in persistent poverty⁶ but with high levels of parenting had good educational achievement compared to only 19% of children living in persistent poverty and experiencing the lowest level of parenting.⁷ Washbrook and Waldfogel found that parenting style and quality of the home learning environment (factors like parental reading and trips to museums and galleries) account for up to half of the explained cognitive gap between the poorest children and their peers.⁸

However stresses on parents are numerous, and the greater the number and duration of stress factors, the less capable parents are of delivering positive parenting for their children. Gutman and Feinstein showed that financial hardship associated with low socio-economic status combined with social isolation characterised by lack of support networks can impact negatively on parenting.⁹ Therefore the poorest parents can partially protect their children from the effects of deprivation, but they face considerable challenges.

The academic evidence

- Advances in neuroscience have shown that **by the age of three, a baby's brain is 80% formed** and his or her experiences before then shape the way the brain has grown and developed.¹⁰
- Evidence from the Harvard Center on the Developing Child states that the '**formative structure of the brain needs to happen in a sequence** and needs to be adequate to support the long-term developmental blueprint' and that although the 'brain retains the capacity to adapt and change throughout life, this capacity decreases with age'.¹¹
- Research by the economist James Heckman shows that **the rates of return to human capital investment decrease as children get older**.¹²

PARENTING PROGRAMMES CAN HELP BUT MOST DO NOT FOCUS ON CHILDREN'S EDUCATION

An evaluation carried out at the University of Warwick has shown the effectiveness evidence-based parenting programmes on a range of outcomes for children and families. For example 79% of parents attending such programmes showed improvements in their mental well-being and the percentage of parents who reported that their child had serious conduct problems reduced by a third, from 59% to 40%. The average cost per parent completing the programme stood at approximately £1,658. The estimated savings associated with these improved outcomes far outweigh the initial expenditure (each child with untreated behavioural problems costs on average £70,000 by the time they reach 28 years old).¹³

Despite this success, proven parent support is still not widely available. Graham Allen's report, *Early Intervention: The Next Steps*, argued that 'the provision of successful evidence-based early intervention programmes remains persistently patchy and dogged by institutional and financial obstacles'¹⁴. Even where programmes are provided they do not benefit most poor families because many proven interventions are principally designed to support those with very high levels of need. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation argues that 'tackling child poverty and the rich-poor attainment gap requires significant changes to the outcomes of around 20% of the population not just the bottom 5%' and we must act to 'expand the evidence of effective interventions for broader groups'.¹⁵ This specialist focus stems from the fact most evidence-based interventions focus on reducing conduct disorder rather than helping children succeed at school. Pricewaterhouse Coopers examined the market for parental support in 2006 and found that demand for preventative family support that reaches broader groups of parents was high and rising.¹⁶

The case for early intervention

- Frank Field's review of poverty and life chances, *The Foundation Years: preventing poor children becoming poor adults* (December 2010), called for increased focus on children's education and development between birth and age five.
- Graham Allen's two reports, *Early Intervention: The Next Steps* (January 2011), and *Early Intervention: Smart Investment, Massive Savings* (July 2011), argued for the centrality of early years experiences to future outcomes and the rollout of evidence-based early intervention programmes.
- Dame Clare Tickell's report, *The Early Years: Foundations for Life, Health and Learning* (2011), made proposals to strengthen the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) framework and emphasised the importance of children's early home life to their later outcomes.

WE NEED A NEW ENTITLEMENT TO **FAST** SO THAT EVERY CHILD GETS THE BEST START AT SCHOOL

Save the Children would like to see the Families and Schools Together (FAST) programme in the most deprived primary schools across the UK. This should form a new tier of parent support for families with children preparing to start their first year at school.

FAST is an after-school, multi-family group programme which is offered to all children and their families in a school year group. The course runs for eight weeks and participants are encouraged to take part in a peer-support network for at least two years on completion. The programme is a socially inclusive intervention that brings together family, home, school and community to increase family well-being and improve children's performance at school. By strengthening relationships within and between families we can build social capital in deprived neighbourhoods. By making this an entitlement in primary schools with high numbers of poor children we can challenge the effects of deprivation on children's early learning. The programme has strong evidence from over 11,000 schools in 15 countries showing positive effects on children and families and strong retention rates in low-income communities.

Save the Children supported 15 FAST projects in 14 primary schools across the UK between April 2010 and August 2011. 338 families attended at least once and 80% of those families attended at least six of the eight sessions and graduated. 85% of families (providing income information) had an annual family income of under £20,000. Data compiled by Middlesex University show improvements that can be attributed the programme. Parent-child relationships improved by 13%, family expressiveness increased by 23% and family conflict reduced by 23%. Teachers reported a 9% improvement in children's academic competence and a 24% reduction in children's emotional symptoms. School to parent contact increased by 40%, parent to school contact increased by 57%

and total parent involvement in education increased by 73%. Parents reported that total social support increased by 13% and as a result of FAST 26% of parents sought further education, training or courses. Across the 15 projects parents scored their satisfaction with FAST as 9.4 out of 10.¹⁷

The programme can benefit large numbers of disadvantaged families on a cost-effective basis. Start-up costs are estimated at £26,000 per site for two cycles. Assuming that parents of 160 children are engaged in each FAST group the cost is £163 per child for the two-year programme including workforce training and capacity building.

WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN?

- 1. Governments across the UK should engage with Save the Children and FAST with a view to ensuring the programme becomes an entitlement in many more primary schools in disadvantaged localities.**
- 2. Primary school headteachers and local authority commissioners should explore how FAST could complement their existing provision.**
- 3. Early Intervention Foundations should be established in each nation across the UK with a remit to evaluate early intervention including evidence-based parent support programmes.**
- 4. Despite the fiscal climate, substantial additional resources should be made available for early intervention in the coming years.**

ABOUT US

**Save the Children works in more than 120 countries. We save children's lives.
We fight for their rights. We help them achieve their potential.**

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² Kiernan and Mensah (2011), 'Poverty, family resources and children's early educational attainment: the mediating role of parenting', British Educational Research Journal, 37 (2), 317-336

³ Field (2010), The Foundation Years: preventing poor children becoming poor adults. The report of the Independent Review on Poverty and Life Chances, HM Government, London

⁴ Schneewind (1981) Inequalities of children and families in different cultural contexts. Studies on development and on the reduction of inequalities in different socio-cultural contexts, especially with regard to children and family life-styles, UNESCO, Doha

⁵ Goodall and Harris (2009), Helping Families Support Children's Success at School, Save the Children, London

⁶ Defined as in poverty during each of the 3 Millennium Cohort Study surveys up to 2008

⁷ Kiernan and Mensah (2011) 'Poverty, family resources and children's early educational attainment: the mediating role of parenting', British Educational Research Journal, 37 (2), 317-336

⁸ Washbrook and Waldfogel (2010), Cognitive gaps in the early years. The Sutton Trust

⁹ Gutman and Feinstein (2010), 'Parenting behaviours and children's development from infancy to early childhood: changes, continuities and contributions, Early Childhood Development and Care, 180 (4), 535-556

¹⁰ Quoted in DCSF (2010), Breaking the link between disadvantage and low achievement in the early years – Everyone's business (page 7)

¹¹ Quoted in - An Independent Report to her Majesty's Government, Graham Allen (2011), Early Intervention: The Next Steps

¹² Heckman and Krueger (2004), Inequality in America: What Role for Human Capital Policies? Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

¹³ Lindsay, Strand, Cullen, Cullen, Band, Davis, Conlon, Barlow, Evans (May 2011), Evaluation of the Parenting Early Intervention Programme, DFE-RRO47, London and CEDAR (2011), Bringing families and schools together, Save the Children

¹⁴ Graham Allen (2011), Early Intervention: The Next Steps, Independent Report to HM Government

¹⁵ Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2011), Response to the UK Government's Tackling Child Poverty and Improving Life Chances: Consulting on a New Approach (page3)

¹⁶ Quoted in CEDAR (2011), Bringing families and schools together, Save the Children, London

¹⁷ Middlesex University (2011), FAST outcomes aggregate report, Save the Children, London



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