# Child development and early interventions

A child's early years are key stage of brain development and if a child falls behind their peers in certain areas of development, there can be long lasting implications for their education attainment and prospects when they reach adulthood. Studies have found that the persistence of underachievement can have significant economic costs for the nation, with those who are on a low-income being the most affected.[[1]](#footnote-1)

## Issues impacting child development

There are a variety of issues that can have an impact on an individual child's developmental progress and risk factors can interact in complex ways. One of the most pervasive issues is poverty and economic instability, meaning that the parent or caregiver does not always have the ability to provide an environment that encourages child development. Other factors that impact child development include; genetic disabilities (cognitive and physical), dysfunctional family environments, violence in the community and limited employment opportunities. Although these risk factors do not identify children who will go on to have a developmental delay, they can help to identify children who are vulnerable and who may need extra support.[[2]](#footnote-2)

### Parental influence

There can be a lack of awareness among some parents about why it is important to communicate with your baby and how. The Communication Trust found that one fifth of parents-to-be surveyed believed it was only beneficial to communicate with a baby from the age of three months and one in twenty believed it was only necessary at six months or older. There is clearly a lack of understanding of early development and the activities that can support it and qualitative research suggests some activities suffer from parental embarrassment and concerns about their skills, and by not appreciating the types of communication activities that are relevant at different child development stages. There are also issues when parents have low literacy skills themselves and this can mean some parents do not see a gap in skills or proactively seek information and support**.**[[3]](#footnote-3)

Reading is not necessarily an activity that time-pressured parents will choose to do with their children. A qualitative study conducted by Save the Children found that parents felt that reading for pleasure was an unsociable activity that they did not find necessary for their child's development.[[4]](#footnote-4) The same study found that fathers are less likely to read to their children than their mothers and that most fathers felt it was the mother's role to partake in these activities. Most evidence suggests that both parents reading to their children has a cumulative impact on their development and a father reading to his son can be particularly beneficial.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are a highly prevalent issue with studies suggesting at least a quarter of the population have experienced four or more adverse experiences during childhood. There is a strong association between the number of ACEs and the risk of poor outcomes later in life. ACEs are not predictive at an individual level and an ACE score is retrospective, the impact of adversity also differs widely between people and does not necessarily reflect a person's current situation, needs or risks. ACEs should not be used in isolation to determine who receive early intervention and careful assessments should be used to determine current needs of an individual.[[6]](#footnote-6)

### Deprivation and poverty

There are an estimated four million children living in poverty in the UK and this is expected to rise to five million by 2020. Poverty and economic disadvantage is well known to have a negative impact on children and young people and their development.[[7]](#footnote-7)The Millennium Cohort Study found that at the age of three, children in the lowest income group have language skills on average 17 months behind children in the highest income group, and at age five this gap increases to 19 months.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Families with limited financial resources could struggle to provide age-appropriate books, toys and days out for their children. Living in a community with poor housing and anti-social behaviour can make it difficult to go outside to access stimulating child-friendly activities. Parents may struggle to make time for these activities as work and other children may take precedent. Parents from lower socio-economic backgrounds are less likely to access enrichment opportunities in their child's first year of life, particularly those aimed at improving communication and interactions.[[9]](#footnote-9) A reading habits survey by Booktrust found that people in deprived areas are more likely to have never read books. As reading habits are passed through generations, children in poorer families are less likely to have the opportunities to develop a love of reading. Parents and carers in these families may also not understand how important their role is and see reading as something that happens at school.[[10]](#footnote-10)

### Language delay

More than 1.4 million children and young people in the UK have speech, language and communication needs (SLCN). Language disorders affect nearly 10% of all children throughout their lives and this can raise to 50% in areas of social disadvantage.[[11]](#footnote-11)It can be difficult to estimate the number of pre-school children whose language development is of concern.[[12]](#footnote-12) The long-term impact of under-identification and lack of support for SLCN is significant and high numbers of young people with mental health needs or behaviour difficulties have SLCN that was missed early on in their lives. Under-identification is also an issue within the justice system, with two thirds of young offenders found to have SLCN, with only 5% identified as having these issues before the offending began.[[13]](#footnote-13)

Early SLCN difficulties predict a wide range of negative outcomes. Children who struggle with language at age five are six times less likely to reach the expected standard in English and ten times less likely to meet the expected standard in Maths at age eleven compared to their peers.[[14]](#footnote-14) Consultations with children and young people have highlighted how difficulties with communication makes everything more challenging in and out of school. The amount of language used in schools can be overwhelming, especially if teaching staff are unclear on how to best support language in the classroom. Children understand how SLCN can impact their wellbeing and how a lack of understanding from adults makes things worse. Communication skills are highly regarded in the workplace but employers can have difficulties recruiting staff with adequate skill levels.[[15]](#footnote-15)

## Successful interventions

Early intervention means identifying and providing early support to children and young people who are at risk of poor outcomes and when this is effective, interventions prevent problems from occurring or getting worse.[[16]](#footnote-16) Early interventions help to strengthen parents' capacity to support child development. It can help to develop the skills children need to live healthy and successful lives and reduce the impact of economic disadvantage.[[17]](#footnote-17) High quality programmes for early intervention can have a disproportionate impact on later outcomes.[[18]](#footnote-18) A substantial number of early intervention approaches have been evidenced at improving children's outcomes when they are offered in response to an identified risk. Approaches can support the four key domains of children's development: physical, cognitive, behavioural, and social and emotional.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Parents have the biggest influence on their child's early learning and a strong relationship helps to build a child's confidence, and activities such as reading together helps to stimulate language skills.[[20]](#footnote-20) Parental interaction has a big impact on a child's language development and evidence suggests that interaction leads to infants vocalising more. Infants also produce more speech-like vocalisations when mothers smile and make eye contact with them and that they are more likely to be developmentally advanced. This evidence suggests that interventions should focus on training parents and practitioners to engage in social interaction with babies to develop more sophisticated vocalisation.[[21]](#footnote-21)

The HLE is key for encouraging child development and a good-quality environment should provide experiences that a child needs for brain and language development. This can be encouraged by having lots of books and opportunities for reading, to learn rhymes and sing songs. These activities have positive benefits throughout life. Research has shown that experiences in the HLE from just 14 months old have a measurable impact on language development by age three. Each aspect of the HLE has been shown to make a unique contribution to development and these activities reinforce each other over time.[[22]](#footnote-22)

## Restrictions of interventions

Constraints on public spending mean that local authorities are facing ongoing cuts in funding whilst demands are increasing. The Local Government Association predicts that children's services in England will face a £3 billion funding gap by 2025. The investment into early intervention is difficult to measure and track, but it has been estimated that it will have declined as much as 72% between 2010 and 2020. [[23]](#footnote-23) The Early Intervention Foundation estimated the national cost of late intervention was £16.6 billion, but this does not capture the long-term cumulative costs. The cost is derived from expenditure on social care, crime, anti-social behaviour and youth economic activity.[[24]](#footnote-24)

The Association for Child and Adolescent Mental Health found that there is a lack of national strategy to provide early interventions and most research is based on individual funding bodies and their priorities. [[25]](#footnote-25) It can be difficult for service leaders to deliver long-term strategies that require investing in services in a coordinated way across agencies. At the moment services for children and families are commissioned between one and three years, which makes it difficult to embed a new service or to demonstrate a positive impact. The current policy landscape is fragmented and works against the application of evidence in forming policy and initiatives.[[26]](#footnote-26) The Early Intervention Foundation found that there is not enough information available that shows the extent to which evidence-based interventions are taken up by local authorities and partners. The Children's Minister backed up this claim and suggested there is not enough evidence that value for money is being delivered or the right interventions.[[27]](#footnote-27)

It is particularly important to identify and support children with speech, language and communication needs (SLCN) at an early age; however, because of poor understanding and insufficient resources for SLCN, many children and young people do not receive adequate, effective and equitable support.[[28]](#footnote-28) A survey by the Royal College of Speech and Language Therapist suggests less than half local authority areas are implementing joint commissioning. Some CCGs have used the SEND Code of Practice as a driver to refocus commission of SALT services on just the most specialist provision or just pre-school children.[[29]](#footnote-29)

Fragmented commissioning means that many parents and carers find speech and language services difficult to access. There are too many children not getting the support they need and parents and carers are being let down by the system. Only 15% of survey respondents felt speech and language therapy was available as required. Parents and carers have often had negative experiences with accessing support and services are often poor, children and young people also felt the support they needed was not available. There are particular challenges for older children and young people accessing support and only 3% of survey respondents felt resources were available for young people aged 16-25 years.[[30]](#footnote-30)

There is no clear message for parents and carers about speech, language and communication and there needs to be a similar approach to those relating to the importance of a good diet or exercise. Without a clear and unified message from both education and health, the support will continue to be inconsistent and insufficient. This can mean children and young people missing out on the support they need and this will be costly for the economy and society as a whole. There is a lack of leadership at a national level and this impacts on how much priority is given to SLCN at a local level. Any areas with good practice needs to be replicated nationwide.[[31]](#footnote-31)

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