

# Independent Review on Poverty and Life Chances



## Action for Children response

September 2010

Action for Children is a UK-wide charity that speaks out for the most vulnerable and neglected children and young people, and supports them to break through injustice, deprivation and inequality, so they can achieve their full potential. Action for Children helps nearly 156,000 children, young people and their families through nearly 420 projects across the UK. We also promote social justice by lobbying and campaigning for change.

This consultation response is based upon our experience working with vulnerable children, young people and families on the ground. As such it draws on our expertise as practitioners, independent evaluations of our services and academic research we have commissioned to gather further broader evidence on effective service interventions to work with children and families to break the cycles of deprivation.

Our focus has been on developing effective evidence-based practice in children's services rather than looking more broadly at the tax and benefit reforms aimed to reduce structural inequality. We are members of the End Child Poverty coalition and are supportive of work by colleagues in the sector campaigning to implement these structural changes.

An IFS report commissioned by the End Child Poverty coalition found the overall effect of the new reforms announced in the June 2010 Budget to be regressive: *"Low-income households of working age lose the most from the June 2010 Budget reforms because of the cuts to welfare spending...Families with children lose out the most within each tenth of the income distribution as they are the group that is worst affected by the benefit cuts announced in the June 2010 Budget."* We are aware that the current financial context has put more pressure on families. We share concerns about the impact that possible cuts to entitlements may have on family life, especially if policies unfairly impact on the most vulnerable.

We are aware that without addressing the economic roots of social immobility, even the most progressive family support policies will not overcome structural disadvantage. For example, without improved apprenticeships schemes to support the most vulnerable young people there is a risk that those with the potential to become highly skilled, rather than academically successful, will end up in low-paid, unsatisfying employment.

Research from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation into the "low-pay-no-pay" cycle found that work is the most important route out of poverty for working-age people, but not a guaranteed one as some people move from unemployment into low-paid work and back again. Family origins determine future success too readily but good family relationships can provide a route out of poverty through building aspiration.<sup>1</sup>

Action for Children argues that the debate on how to lift families out of deprivation in the long term has been too simplistic in the past, concentrating on income alone when in fact the most vulnerable families experience complex deprivation made up of a range of severe needs and difficulties. We are not convinced that families who endure hardship over generations will be able to break the cycle of deprivation through policies which merely aim to increase income in the short term. Our focus is on improving life chances through making the case for early intervention and family support.

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<sup>1</sup> Kemp, P., Bradshaw, J., Dornan, P., Finch, N., Mayhew, E. (2004), *"Routes Out of Poverty"*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation

*as long as it takes*

## Early years and life chances

*Which aspects of children's early years are the most important determinants of positive outcomes and good life chances? What single aspect of early childhood has the greatest influence?*

*How can early years support, from parents, children's services and the community best deliver positive outcomes for the most disadvantaged children and their families?*

With suicidal thoughts and self-criticism echoing in her mind, Abi was encouraged by her concerned health visitor to attend a playgroup organised by an Action for Children children's centre. *'I'd no confidence. I don't know where I'd be without the centre. I wouldn't like to think what might have happened. And I don't want to think... I made a conscious choice that I didn't want to be like my parents. They say that abused children become abusers. I've broken that cycle. If there weren't places like this, well it would be that much harder.'* Now she wants to use her experience to help others. *'When Jake starts school next year, and if I've got spare hours, I'm going to volunteer so I can do my NVQ3 and then hopefully I can get a full-time job. The staff said I'd be good to work here. They said I'd be brilliant for a place like this. I've seen the potential of what I've got and that's how I know I'm a good mum. I've come a million miles. I've got a lot of confidence now. I've got a lot of self-esteem. I can speak my mind. If you've been told as a child that you need to be put in a home, that you're no good, that you've got nothing, you think you're worthless. But when I look at what I've achieved I have to give myself a pat on the back. I think: "Yeah. You've made it".'*

Abi (supported by an Action for Children project in a South Yorkshire town)

## Early Intervention services have a proven track record in turning lives around

Families need support to break inter-generational cycles of deprivation. Cycles can be broken if families, and particularly children, are supported early enough by the right services. Evidence shows that early interventions with very young children and with vulnerable parents can break long term negative behavioural patterns.

Not only are many families trapped in cycles of deprivation, as a society we are trapped in a very expensive commitment to pick up the pieces. So, for example, when we've failed to invest in parenting classes, when we've failed to identify a mental health problem, when we've not put in place the therapeutic support a child needs, and we've not picked up on their drug habit, then we spend £100,000 a year on putting them in a young offenders institute where there's an 80% chance of re-offending within one year.

## Develop emotional wellbeing in the early years

Everyday, Action for Children helps some of the most vulnerable and socially excluded children and young people across the country. The ability to develop resilience in the early years has a major impact on the later development of the emotional and social skills that enable a child to gain a good education, qualifications and employment. Emotional wellbeing means that a child can cope with uncertainty and adversity and can recover more successfully from traumatic events or episodes. Research Action for Children commissioned from the IPPR in 2007 showed that emotional wellbeing became four and a half times more important in determining social mobility of children born in 1970 compared with similar children born in 1958.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> "Emotional wellbeing and social mobility – a new urgency to the debate" (2008) Action for Children

The importance of character capabilities in determining success will continue to rise. Leon Feinstein's work shows how academic, psychological and behavioural attributes in childhood can impact on future success. Feinstein finds that non-cognitive abilities, character capabilities, at age 10 have substantial implications for adult outcomes. 'Conduct disorder' in boys, for example, predicts later adult unemployment, whereas 'self-esteem' predicts earnings. For women, 'locus of control', or agency, is a particularly important predictor of labour market success.

Poor early education outcomes appear to be most pronounced in areas of the highest need, which is particularly problematic considering that closing the academic gap between rich and poor is harder to achieve as children get older<sup>3</sup>. The early years are crucial as by age six, the attainment of a child from a poor socio-economic background with high cognitive skills will be overtaken by a child with poorer cognitive ability but from a better-off background.<sup>4</sup>

Thus the provision of targeted early intervention and support services for disadvantaged children and young people is essential to encourage the development of the skills and capabilities that increasingly underpin social mobility.

### **Social Return on Investment**

Social Return on Investment evaluations of three Action for Children services undertaken by the New Economics Foundation (nef) graphically set out the benefits to society as well as to individuals and communities of effective early intervention services to address social problems. For every £1 invested annually in Action for Children's targeted services designed to catch problems early, society benefits by between £7.60 and £9.20. By the end of year three, the state has recouped its investment in the project. In addition, for every £1 invested in an Action for Children children's centre, a forecast social return to society of £4.60 is expected to be generated.<sup>5</sup>

Action for Children's Wheatley Sure Start Children's Centre (SSCC) has found that children from disadvantaged families often have significant delay in personal, social and emotional development and also with communication, speech and language. Without the skills and abilities to make sense of how they feel, who they are, and develop a sense of belonging and well-being, they are in no position to learn more about the world around them, or to develop cognitive skills. A child's emotional well-being and ability to interact with and accept others is incredibly important. The ability to communicate effectively and to feel confident in their bodies, using large and small movements, also helps a child to feel more confident and develop self-esteem.

At Wheatley SSCC, each of the workers in the nursery team works individually with parents at home. Their work is often based around supporting parents to understand more about their child's development and how they can support them to move forward. Workers carry out specific pieces of direct work, and will carry out play sessions at home involving the child and parent. Parents and children feel more comfortable at home, so may be more open to learning there, also workers can be role model to parents/carers within the home.<sup>6</sup>

### **Key points:**

<sup>3</sup> Feinstein & Duckworth [2006] in CfBT [2010] *Effective early childhood education programmes: case studies*

<sup>4</sup> (Feinstein [2003] *How early can we predict future educational achievement?* in Action for Children, 2009a.

<sup>5</sup> Action for Children and nef [2009] *Backing the Future: Why investing in children is good for us all* [www.actionforchildren.org.uk/content/561/Backing-the-future](http://www.actionforchildren.org.uk/content/561/Backing-the-future)

<sup>6</sup> Action for Children and nef [2009] *The economic and social return of Action for Children's Wheatley Children's Centre, Doncaster* [www.actionforchildren.org.uk/uploads/media/36/9813.pdf](http://www.actionforchildren.org.uk/uploads/media/36/9813.pdf)

Action for Children believes that all children and young people should be able to aspire to succeed in their lives, in whatever they want to do. The challenge now is to boost early intervention and support for disadvantaged children to encourage the development of the skills and capabilities that increasingly underpin social mobility.

- The UK government needs a long term strategy to re-direct resources and invest in early intervention.
- The provision of targeted early intervention and support services for disadvantaged children and young people is essential to encourage the development of the skills and capabilities that increasingly underpin social mobility
- Struggling families facing difficulties need intensive, targeted support at the earliest possible opportunity to help prevent them from reaching crisis point

## Family environment

*In what ways do family and the home environment affect children's life chances?*

*What role can the government play in supporting parents to ensure children grow up in a home environment which allows them to get the most out of their schooling?*

*What role do family earnings and income play in children's outcomes and life chances?*

When Jan and Jamie were first referred to the project, they didn't know how to prepare a meal. They didn't know how to go shopping, or if they got to the shops they never had a list of what they wanted to buy. The three children were 'not dressed right'. *'Before we moved in here we didn't dress the kids properly, but since we moved in we take pride in what they look like. We don't want them to walk out and have people say "Them kids look like tramps."* Jan is now at college doing a three-year course in fashion and design, as well as GCSEs in maths and English. One day she'd like to create and design her own clothes and sell them. Jamie, who openly says he never gave a thought to what he wanted to do before he came to the project, hopes to do a Prince's Trust course in football coaching and is also interested in working as a mentor for other young people 'because of what I've seen and what I've been through'. The three children are at the same school and doing fine. Jan is determined they will stay at the school wherever the family is placed. Jan says: *'If we hadn't had come here, we'd probably be half dead by now and the kids would be with other parents.'* Jamie says: *'I'm proud of everything really. Just the way our lives have changed from what we used to do when we was just laid back and doing nothing, never thinking about the kids.'*

Jan and Jamie (supported by an Action for Children project in a large northern city)

## Research shows that parenting is the most critical influence on children's lives

Parents and carers have a significant influence on their child's learning and development. Our practitioners working in early years services tell us that parents want the best for their children but sometimes they do not know how they can best support them. Some parents think that everything is covered at school so there is no need for consolidation at home, whereas others think that the most important thing they can do is to get their child to read and write as early as possible. Given that learning takes place everywhere, parents need to be aware of the different areas of learning and development and how they can support these at home.

We conducted a survey of parents in 2008, which told us that parents consider emotional wellbeing and the social development of their children to be of central importance. Nurseries, Sure Start Children's

Centres (SSCCs), playgroups and any semi-structured social situations are considered by parents as the key sites for children developing these skills, bringing them into contact with other children and adults.<sup>7</sup>

Action for Children believes that all children and young people need a decent home and neighbourhood to provide the platform from which they can realise their hopes and aspirations. We know that housing impacts on health, wellbeing, life chances and service access.

In partnership with Kirklees Council, Action for Children SSCCs in Dewsbury and Mirfield have developed 'The Child's Journey' which delivers evidence-based services, activities and information that communicate key messages to all families with an emphasis on reaching the most vulnerable. The Child's Journey involves opportunities, experiences and activities that demonstrate and build on the infant's and parent's strengths. It delivers a positive model of parenting and child development that focuses on the parent's awareness and understanding about their impact on their child's journey regardless of the service that the family are involved with. The four key components of The Child's Journey are: attachment; communication and language; developmental movement; and play.

### **Supporting effective parenting**

Supporting effective parenting is crucial in improving long term outcomes for the most vulnerable children and closing the gap between them and their peers. Some parents have had a poor education themselves and do not see the need to engage with learning. When parental style and confidence are factored in, the difference in child character development between richer and poorer families disappeared.<sup>8</sup>

Action for Children has a long history of working with the most vulnerable families in society. We are now the largest provider of family support services in the UK, helping children and families with the most difficult problems. We have a wide range of evidence demonstrating the effectiveness of our approach, including independent evaluations of our children's centres in Cumbria and Norfolk.

An independent evaluation of four Action for Children family support services found that struggling families facing difficulties need intensive, targeted support at the earliest possible opportunity to help prevent them from reaching crisis point.<sup>9</sup> The research has helped Action for Children to develop a flexible continuum with non-stigmatising services designed to match the local spectrum of need while maintaining consistency and ensuring quality. This research highlighted a number of positive outcomes for children achieved through intensive family support provision.

It demonstrated that intensive family support services achieve the most optimal impact when the following conditions were applied:

- Continuity of support when the 'intensive support' period has ended
- The significance of the professional relationship as a vehicle for change when service users experience exclusion and disadvantage
- Removing stigma – intensive service worked when provided from a universal service base. The researchers noted in these four services that there was not a concern amongst service users

<sup>7</sup> Action for Children [2008] *Early years services and emotional wellbeing – what parents want*

<sup>8</sup> Demos [2009] *Building Character in Action for Children Deprivation and risk: the case for early intervention*

<sup>9</sup> Tunstill, J. Blewitt, J Meadows, P (2008) "An Evaluation of the Delivery of Targeted Family Support by Action for Children" <http://www.actionforchildren.org.uk/uploads/media/36/5020.pdf>

about feeling stigmatised even though the services offered a range of assistance geared towards those in need of targeted assistance with safe parenting. This is likely to link to the role of Action for Children as a voluntary sector provider of services.

- Working with families at the early stage of problems had significant impact in terms of avoiding problems becoming entrenched and irreversible.
- Positive impact in terms of reducing early signs of neglect of children. It was in these cases where the use of professional relationship was noted by the researchers to have a significant impact as vulnerable parents and carers were able to use the comfort and security of such a relationship in order to develop self esteem and provide improved parenting.

## Outreach

Our research found that robust outreach, whereby project staff make individual contact with families in the community in their own homes in the first instance - is essential to make a reality of access for those families who are seen as being the most “hard to reach”. Effective family support encompasses services which deliver both practical help and emotional support.

Outreach activity is most likely to be successful if outreach workers can offer a genuine “menu” of services to families, ranging from drop-in activities, fun days to individual sessions with a caseworker. Even families who are reluctant to use services can be successfully engaged through such a personalised approach. Once engaged, the possibility arises of “bridging” the families into the full range of services that can support their needs, develop parenting capacity and enhance childhood resilience.

### Key points:

We need a new settlement to enable local children services to embed early intervention, increase efficiency and break the cycles of deprivation and neglect in the UK.

- The worst outcomes for children and young people are associated with multiple problems across different members of the family. We need to get to the root cause of these problems; not just alleviate the symptoms
- Struggling families facing difficulties need intensive, targeted support at the earliest possible opportunity to build resilience and enable them to deal with life’s adversities
- Supporting effective parenting is crucial in improving long term outcomes for the most vulnerable children and closing the gap between them and their peers
- Robust outreach, whereby project staff make individual contact with families in the community in their own homes in the first instance, is essential to make a reality of access for those families who are seen as being the most “hard to reach”

## Poverty and life chances and how they are measured

*What constitutes child poverty in modern Britain?*

*How can our measures of child poverty be reformed to better focus policy development and investment on delivering positive outcomes and improved life chances for children?*

*What are the strong predictors of children’s life chances which might be included in any new measure of child poverty?*

Aileen acknowledges the contribution of the project, and Craig in particular: *‘It’s made me more confident in myself. It’s helped me learn about stuff, like saving money. It’s really good on the emotional side of things. If you know you have someone there who is going to support you, you feel more relaxed about*

*everything and you feel less stressed. I wouldn't have been able to do it without him. Everything would have gone wrong.'*

Aileen (supported by an Action for Children project in a rural town in the north of Scotland)

### **A broader measure is needed looking at access to services and resources**

In order to lift families out of deprivation, concentrating on income alone can be too simplistic when in fact the most vulnerable families experience complex deprivation made up of a range of severe needs and difficulties.

Estimates suggest that up to 1 million children are at risk of being trapped in the same cycle of deprivation and neglect as their parents.<sup>10</sup> Children living in deprived families have less support and resources from outside the family and struggle to build up resilience and self-esteem.

Action for Children worked with Oxford Brookes University to establish a definition of child deprivation. Researchers used an amalgamation of definitions of material deprivation coined by Townsend, Mack and Lansley, Sen, the Indices of Material Deprivation, the Children Act 1989 (s. 17) and the OECD (2007), which defined material deprivation as, 'the inability for individuals or households to afford those consumption goods and activities that are typical in a society at a given point in time, irrespective of people's preferences with respect to these items'.

We would urge the government to use the following definition of deprivation to assist in measuring and reducing child poverty in order to improve life chances for children:

*'A child is deprived if he is unlikely to achieve or maintain, or to have the opportunity of achieving or maintaining the standards of health, housing, environment, access to services, safety, education and employment enjoyed by those living above 60% of median income.'*<sup>11</sup>

As such the measures of poverty need to look more broadly at what services and resources are available, how capable families are to achieve them and what outcomes are attained in order to ensure a good standard of life for all and equitable life chances. Action for Children believes that improved emotional wellbeing, good health, attainment and education are all crucial outcomes that we should measure in order to assess local success in breaking the cycle of deprivation.

For many families living in poverty, their problems cannot be solved by money alone - they need intensive support to overcome their hardships. These may include

- mental and physical ill-health
- learning difficulties
- dangerous drinking
- unemployment
- drugs
- domestic violence
- chaotic relationships

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<sup>10</sup> Estimate based on Oroyemi, P, Damioli, G, Barnes, M and Crosier, T (2009) Understanding the risks of social exclusion across the life course: families with children, Nat Cen/Cabinet Office; 4%–7% of children are caught up in 'long-term multiple disadvantage', these families are more likely than others to have four or more children. Action for Children; Children England; Family Action (2010) *"The Smart Money: Making tomorrow better for children and families"* <http://www.actionforchildren.org.uk/uploads/media/29/10757.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Ritchie, C.; Appleton, J. (2009) "Effectiveness of interventions in assisting individual and groups of children to cope with deprivation.", Oxford Brookes University

- crime – both as victims and perpetrators

Children may experience:

- poor parenting
- poor social and emotional skills
- low attainment
- poor communication
- low birth weight
- poor health

In the long term the eradication of child poverty must include access to a wider range of services which families in need require to lift them out of poverty. Services such as employability and training schemes, child care, adequate housing especially in rural areas and transport are all vital ingredients of the long term, viable solution to poverty.

Given how crucial emotional wellbeing is to children in their ability to achieve and succeed and cope with adversity Action for Children believes a key focus for measuring improvements in life chances should be on how well early intervention is embedded in local areas. Without support for disadvantaged children, the skills and capabilities needed that underpin social mobility will remain underdeveloped and we will never be able to break intergenerational cycles of neglect and deprivation.

### **Early intervention**

Early intervention is critical to keeping down human and financial costs. It is planned, structured and measurable activity, the evolving evidence base means it is no longer a triumph of hope over adversity

Commitment to early intervention requires planners to rely on factors deeper than easily measurable processes and plan on the basis of the richness of research in the field and on the quality of human experience expressed by service users. Early intervention requires us to value the importance of emotional well-being and the role of the relationship with a vulnerable service user. It is not a single answer but a collection of answers to meet needs effectively requiring a flexible and adaptive approach to service provision and outcomes.

### **Key points**

Action for Children believes the following objectives will enable us to ensure children get the help they need as early as possible:

- New Local Authority early intervention accountabilities
- Establishing long-term contracts for children's services
- New funding arrangements to promote and facilitate early intervention
- Effective early intervention services available in every local area

Action for Children runs a range of services supporting families across the UK and would be very happy to invite the review team to visit one of our projects. Please contact Nadine Ibbetson on 07802 627136 or by email on [Nadine.Ibbetson@actionforchildren.org.uk](mailto:Nadine.Ibbetson@actionforchildren.org.uk)

Nadine Ibbetson  
Policy and Research Officer  
Action for Children  
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