

Stuck in the middle:
the importance of supporting
six to 13 year olds



as long as it takes



as long as it takes

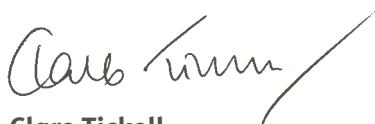
Introduction

In September 2008 we published *As long as it takes: a new politics for children*, which called for an end to the rapid change and short-termism which have characterised the last 21 years of policy, legislation and funding in relation to children and young people in the UK.

This latest report marks the next phase of our campaign to ensure that all of us who support children and young people are there for as long as it takes. Thus, it continues the same debate. Here, we focus on the importance of supporting children between the ages of six and 13, a time also known as ‘middle childhood’. Our research demonstrates the fundamental importance of this period to the emotional and physical development of all children, but especially the most vulnerable. Moreover, when we asked the young people we work with to highlight times when they needed support, they too identified this period.

Yet in terms of service provision, more attention is traditionally paid to early years and adolescence, leaving a gap around these crucial middle years. Until recently this gap was – in England at least – filled by the Children’s Fund, a positive initiative that we, as an organisation, welcomed. However, we are concerned that the gains made in this area are at risk of being eroded by new funding arrangements and cannot let this happen without making our feelings known.

Everyone involved in supporting vulnerable children – governments, the voluntary and third sectors, local authorities, communities, parents and families – must be committed to being there for them across the whole of their childhood. That means from the day they are born to the day they pass into adulthood and all of the years in between. It’s nothing less than we would expect for our own children. That’s what we mean by ‘as long as it takes’.



Clare Tickell
Chief Executive, Action for Children

Contents

Introduction by Clare Tickell, Chief Executive, Action for Children	1	Children’s ‘quietly dramatic transformations’ are crucial in the lives of the most vulnerable	6	Investment in middle childhood	10
Six to 13: an essential time for vulnerable children	2	Growing up in a changing society: social pressures on today’s six to 13 year olds	6	What do these transitions look like for vulnerable children? Key findings of Action for Children’s survey	12
Six to 13: a time of transformation	3	Dealing with a new school: the impact of the primary to secondary transition	9	Calls for change	15
‘Why middle childhood is so critical’ by Anastasia de Waal	4			References	16

Six to 13: an essential time for vulnerable children

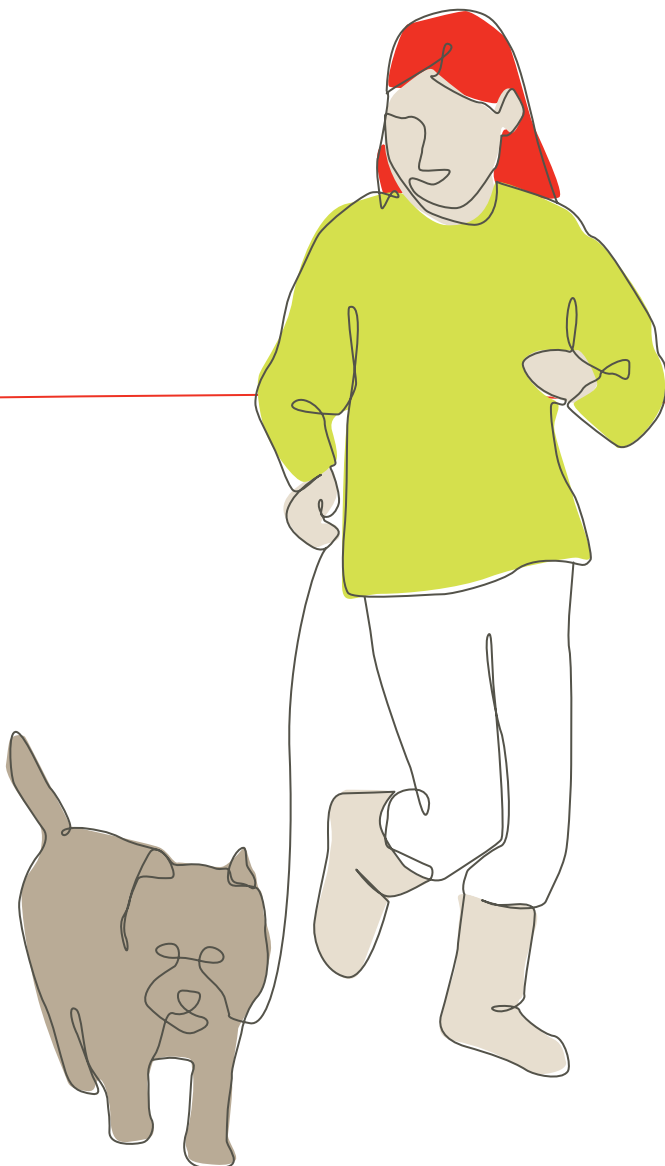
With unprecedented investment in children's early years and much government energy focused on tackling the 'problems' of older teenagers, the needs of children aged from six to 13 are often overlooked and neglected. But these years can be crucial in a child's development. This is when, in the words of one UK Government minister, 'our youngsters make the transition from idealism to realism'.¹ For vulnerable children, the challenges and risks at this time are significant. Not providing support can have a profound effect for years afterwards.

Based on qualitative research with our own service users and new research commissioned by Action for Children, as well as drawing on the available evidence that has so far been neglected, this report highlights the problems that vulnerable six to 13 year olds encounter, and calls on governments to help these young people by embracing our calls for change.

In 2007 Action for Children launched its Growing Strong campaign, highlighting the importance of emotional wellbeing for children and young people. In one of the campaign's first reports, independent experts highlighted the importance of children's 'middle years', suggesting that a child's emotional wellbeing at age 10 is 'a key factor in determining mental health outcomes at age 16 and life chances at age 30'.²

The significance of the years around the age of 10 has now been clarified by further research in 2008. Setting out to identify when vulnerable young people themselves feel that they need support, Action for Children conducted in-depth interviews with over 100 of the young people that we work with, and surveyed a further 500. Engaging with the most vulnerable children themselves is a major step forward in research and offers rare glimpses into these excluded groups. This report is the first in a series which, uniquely, draws attention to what they told us about the support they need and when they need it, and highlights this age as one of the key times in their development.

Since service users brought this issue to our attention, Action for Children has commissioned further work to support their voices, with a new report by Sonia Sodha from Demos and an article by Anastasia de Waal, Director of Family and Education at the think tank Civitas. Both confirm our belief that more must be done for children by the time they reach the key transitional period between six and 13 if we as a society are to equip our children to achieve their full potential as young people and adults. Policy makers and organisations working directly with children are beginning to recognise the importance of this period in childhood, and we expect the UK Government and devolved administrations to build upon our work as well as their own evidence to ensure that the most vulnerable six to 13 year olds have the support they need to succeed.



Six to 13: a time of transformation

Between the ages of six and 13 children are going through a succession of important transformations. They are becoming more independent, spending less time with parents, physical changes are happening, relationships are developing and they are spending more time with friends and peers. They become more self-aware and, as a result, more self-conscious about what makes them different.

For the most vulnerable children in particular, their exposure to a variety of adverse influences is also rapidly expanding. This is the age at which they may have their first real exposure to bullying and to damaging or dangerous peer group pressure. For the first time they may find themselves exposed to smoking, drug or alcohol use, juvenile crime, or risky sexual activity. They are also targeted as never before by the commercial world through both overt advertising and editorial, which use their self-consciousness and uncertain social development to suggest behaviours, role models and purchases.

As children grow through their middle childhood, inevitably more are affected by loss, by divorce and separation, and by poverty. As their material needs and living expenses grow, so more parents struggle to make ends meet. At a time when children are desperate to fit in, to be 'the same', to wear the 'right' clothes and have the 'right' things, factors like poverty, chaotic home lives, disabilities or non-standard family arrangements can be painful markers of difference.

These changes are challenging for all children, but vulnerable groups need particular help and support, including children who are disabled, living in poverty or in care, or growing up with a minority cultural heritage or in marginalised communities. With the right support these years can be the gateway to realised potential, but we will only know how to help if we first understand the nature of the transitions taking place, the pressure children face and the impact of these changes on the different areas of their lives.



Dan

'These days I feel like I really want to go the distance'

'I first got involved with Headlands, one of Action for Children's schools, about four years ago when my parents sought out help with my autism. Back then I wasn't a great brother or a son – I was noisy, obnoxious and bad tempered when I didn't get my way. I was a terror really. When I was 10 or 11 years old it started to get worse and I was constantly getting angry. I was afraid one day I'd leave my parents and something would happen and I wouldn't be able to survive.

After about a year of being at Headlands, I got a bit steadier and started being a bit more friendly with people. My key worker really helped. He was always the guy who helped me through things and gave me advice. Now I'm beginning to feel a lot more confident. People have said I'm a lot more respectful and more honest, and people have given me their trust.

These days I feel like I really want to go the distance; I want to run all the way and never stop and keep on until I reach my true potential. I just want to say thank you to my key worker and thank you Action for Children – you've made my life a lot better, you've made me the man I am now.'

Headlands School is an independent co-educational special school, providing support for pupils with challenging behaviour and autistic spectrum disorders.

*Illustration from Action for Children's advertising campaign featuring Dan's story.

The full advertisement can be viewed at www.actionforchildren.org.uk

Why middle childhood is so critical

Anastasia de Waal

When it comes to ‘vulnerable’ ages for children, we tend to think of infancy or adolescence. There is, however, another period in children’s lives which brings significant challenges: ‘middle childhood’.

The recurring theme children face at this age is change. Yet the changes affecting middle childhood centre less on ‘growth’ and more on children’s developing social and emotional worlds.ⁱ The first big change is that children in middle childhood spend around half as much time with their parents as they do in early childhood, while the time they spend with other children and alone increases significantly.ⁱⁱ

However, this shifting dynamic of children’s interactions coincides with a number of other developments. Firstly, children at this age become much more aware of themselves in relation to their peers, with the result that ‘fitting in’ takes on a vital significance. And, with greater exposure to potential like-with-like comparisons, children are more prone to judge themselves against other children,ⁱⁱⁱ leading to new feelings of competition, jealousy or inadequacy.

For many children, their primary school class teacher becomes an important source of stability. Thus, the move from primary to secondary school brings a loss of the continuity and security this contact represents, and this challenge can be particularly acute for children with unstable home lives. Being both new and the youngest in an unfamiliar environment can add to feelings of vulnerability, as can the loss of close primary school friends.

Middle childhood is also a period when children are particularly likely to experience parental separation or upheavals in their family life. Although this upheaval can produce better long-term outcomes for children, the short-term impact, as well as the possible negative prelude to separation, can be very difficult.^{iv}

At the same time, supporting children’s needs in middle childhood can become increasingly difficult, particularly for parents with their own problems. Poverty can affect children’s quality of life at school, by limiting their chances to participate,^v while parental support (for example helping with homework, reading together and instilling motivation through expectations) is a very significant contributor to children’s academic success. Children whose parents are less able to provide this support may find themselves at a disadvantage.

As children increasingly judge themselves against their peers, any sources of difference are worrying. As a result, any marker of ‘difference’ can have an amplified impact on their lives. Being disabled or having a ‘different’ family structure, such as being adopted or fostered, can become a worry for children at this age, by making them feel abnormal at a time when notions of normality have taken on a new importance.

The development of a child’s self-esteem during this period also affects their resilience. Children suffering abuse may begin to internalise it through feelings of shame and self-blame.^{vi} The new significance of self-esteem can also relate to feelings about being adopted, as children start to question their value if, in their minds, their biological parents gave them up.^{vii}

Unfortunately, research shows that negative experiences at this age can have long-lasting detrimental effects on children. The formative years of middle childhood are highly significant for outcomes in later life, ranging from mental health problems to aggressive and delinquent behaviour and engagement in criminal activity.^{viii} Cases of adolescent aggression can be traced back to formative experiences in middle childhood, such as those affecting self-esteem or family stability.^{ix} And the likelihood of drug use has also been linked to characteristics developed

in middle childhood, such as behaviour problems.^x In short, experiences in middle childhood can significantly hamper a child's future.

To avoid long-lasting detrimental outcomes, supportive adults are vital. Children in this age range inevitably spend less time supervised by adults, but it is fundamentally important that adults are available for children. Parents and professionals can both help to foster positive outcomes, for example by arranging shared care giving, or by providing dependable external advice and support.

All children in middle childhood face quietly dramatic transformations which can be distressing, and it is impossible to protect them from every difficult experience. But for vulnerable children, access to responsive adults who are aware of how children are coping in their daily lives is a prerequisite for good outcomes. Paying plenty of attention to children's needs in middle childhood is hugely important.



References

- i Harold, G (2003) 'Normal development in middle childhood,' *Psychiatry*, Volume 4, Issue 6, pp. 3–5
- ii Bianchi, S M, and Robinson, R (1997) 'What did you do today? Children's use of time, family composition and the acquisition of social capital,' *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 59, pp. 332–344
- iii Collins, W A (2003) *Middle Childhood and Early Adolescence: Growth and Change*, Children, Youth and Family Consortium, Institute of Child Development, University of Minnesota
Note: See, also, Jean Piaget's theory (through 'stages') of child development, for example.
- iv Maccoby, E E (1984) 'Middle childhood in the context of the family,' *Development During Middle Childhood: from Years Six to Twelve*, chapter 5, (ed.) Collins, W A, Washington: National Academy Press, pp. 184–239
- v Griggs, J, and Walker, R (October 2008) *The Effects of Child Poverty for Individuals and Society: a Literature Review*, Department of Social Policy and Social Work, University of Oxford, for The Joseph Rowntree Foundation
- vi Huston, A C (ed.) (2006) *Development Contexts in Middle Childhood: Bridges to Adolescence and Adulthood*, Cambridge University Press
- vii Van Gulden, H, and Bartels-Rabb, L M (1995) *Real Parents, Real Children: Parenting the Adopted Child*, New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company; Lindstrom, J and Schaffer, J (1989) *How To Raise An Adopted Child*, Crown
- viii Harold, G (2003) 'Normal Development in Middle Childhood,' *Psychiatry*, Volume 4, Issue 6, pp. 3–5
- ix Mayzer, R, Fitzgerald, H, Zucker, R (2006) *Does Middle Childhood Matter? Risk Models for Adolescent Aggression and Delinquent Behavior*, Los Angeles: American Society of Criminology
- x Fergusson, DM, Lynskey, M T, and Horwood, L J, (December 1993) 'Conduct problems and attention deficit behaviour in middle childhood and cannabis use by age 15,' *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*, Volume 27, Issue 4, pp. 673–682

Children's 'quietly dramatic transformations' are crucial in the lives of the most vulnerable

The period between six and 13 is undoubtedly a crucial time for all children, hitting the most vulnerable the hardest.

Handled well, children from all backgrounds can emerge from this tumultuous period with a solid foundation. They can find themselves at the start of adolescence with maturing confidence, good friendships, and the skills to get the most out of the opportunities presented by school and by their growing independence.

Handled badly, children can be unsettled or even derailed by these transitions. They can find their confidence eroded and their self-esteem under siege, experience deep sorrow as important friendships are severed and not replaced, and find familiar routines and contacts replaced with strange and bruising new encounters.

Some will overcome these difficulties, but the risks and challenges for the most vulnerable are significant. Without the right personal support, some will experience emotional/mental health difficulties, behavioural problems, offending (either as victims or

offenders), poor educational attainment, teenage parenthood or drug and/or alcohol dependence. Children do not simply grow out of these difficulties and many studies show a direct link between what is happening between the ages of six and 13, and what happens in adulthood.

Criminality is one example: Demos's Sonia Sodha argues: 'Prolific offending in later adolescence and adulthood is often part of a pattern of anti-social behaviour, beginning in childhood as early as age eight. Men with the most convictions and longest criminal careers were more likely to have displayed anti-social tendencies aged eight to 10.'³

Therefore, caring for six to 13 year olds matters. Children in and on the edge of care, disabled children and other young people with severe difficulties in their lives need our support. The right help at the right time will mean that they can handle the pressures of growing up in the UK today and stop an escalation of issues that may lead to a spiral of worse problems later in life.

Growing up in a changing society: social pressures on today's six to 13 year olds

In order to support the transitions children face between the ages of six and 13, it is important that we understand the pressures they face from the world around them. As well as the challenges middle childhood has always presented, children in 2008 face a bewildering array of new social and personal phenomena. Large-scale research and longitudinal studies have tended to focus on early years and later adolescence, leaving us with a lack of real insight into what middle childhood is really like in 2008 and how this compares with the experience of children in earlier decades.

However, in our work with vulnerable children and families we can identify a number of new and significant phenomena affecting young lives, including the impact and pressures of commercialism and consumerism,

the enormous opportunities and threats presented by the internet and social media, and unprecedented changes to the way families are built and children are brought up within them. These developments challenge every family, but present particular risks to the most vulnerable.

Consumerism and commercialisation

The last two decades have seen almost a revolutionary change in how children are viewed as consumers. Pre-teen children in the 'noughties' are now exposed to targeted advertising as never before, on television, radio, product packaging and, increasingly, on the internet. Often the line between advertising and entertainment is intentionally blurred, with companies such as Haribo and

McDonald's hosting games on their websites to attract children.⁴ Companies are spending millions making children 'brand aware', and research suggests that this investment is particularly effective with vulnerable children.⁵

According to research, children younger than eight find it difficult to distinguish advertising from other communication and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds up to the age of 12 are more likely than other children to say that brand name is important.⁶ Early and deep immersion into consumerism is associated with depression, anxiety and general dissatisfaction, and studies suggest vulnerable children are more exposed than most.

Bullying and cyberbullying

Bullying is also finding new ways to get into every corner of a child's life. It can take many forms – for children between six and 13 it could be being upset by being called hurtful names by other people, including via text or email; being excluded from a group of friends or from joining activities; being made to give other students money or personal belongings; being threatened by other students with hitting, kicking or violence; or being actually kicked, hit or experiencing other forms of physical violence from other students.

Bullying is a particular concern for pre- and early adolescents, with research suggesting that it reaches a peak among those aged 10 to 13.⁷ Increased access to interactive media such as mobile phones and the internet has

also been associated with the increased incidence of 'cyberbullying' – receiving hurtful comments by text message or being bullied on social network sites or online forums. Perhaps unsurprisingly, being a victim of bullying is associated with lower levels of self-esteem and more negative attitudes towards school.

Restricted freedom and opportunity to play

While some forms of freedom are increasing for children, others are dwindling. Children are often now far more restricted than they have ever been in terms of safe spaces to play and socialise. Surveys⁸ reveal that children are not allowed to play outside as much as they say they want to, and that the amount of time children spend outside is declining.

Family demographics

Family units are also changing. One study suggests that nearly four in 10 children born in the UK in the year 2000 were living with just their mothers and having no contact with their father by the time they were three.⁹ This has implications for the availability of male role models – something Michael Ekwue at the Action for Children Pinnacle project highlights as a problem for the black and dual heritage boys he works with (see the project case study on page eight).

Leon

'I'd like to be in the Air Force, as a pilot or an engineer'

'If I met someone like me who was getting angry, I'd tell them to keep calm, count to 10, and ask for some time out,' says Leon (13) who knows what it's like to find his anger bubbling over. When Leon was about seven, his behaviour started going downhill. According to his mum '...he started acting up in class, refusing to work and being disruptive. He has learning difficulties, and I think he was frustrated that he couldn't do what was expected of him. By the time he was nine we'd reached breaking point.'

Social services were unable to help, but Leon's school referred him to Action for Children Hillingdon Youth Inclusion and Support Project (YISP). Through YISP, Leon attended anger management and self-esteem building sessions, including a 'cook-off' and a trip to the Isle of Wight. Support from the project helped Leon

regain his control and composure at school, and his behaviour rapidly improved.

Leon moved to secondary school when he was 11. After a few months, his behaviour began deteriorating again – he was truanting and being aggressive. His mum got back in touch with YISP and they agreed to do some more work with Leon. Now, Leon's behaviour is no longer a problem. He and his parents are still in touch with the project and he has signed up as an Air Cadet: 'I've been flying in a training plane, and have been learning to shoot. I'd like to be in the Air Force – either as a pilot or an engineer.'

Action for Children's Hillingdon YISP is aimed at young people at risk of offending. It helps reduce and prevent their involvement in street crime.

Project case study:

Action for Children Pinnacle Project, south London

‘The three major issues for the boys that we see are the lack of good male role models, the influence of the media, and schools that identify more problems than solutions.’ So says Michael Ekwue, a project worker at Pinnacle, a unique early intervention service set up three years ago.

The project works exclusively with African Caribbean and dual heritage boys aged eight to 15 and their families, and is based in Streatham, south London. Most referrals to the project relate to behavioural issues, which have often manifested themselves in disruptive behaviour in the classroom or home. The project aims to support and empower boys and young men as they move into adolescence and adulthood, by working on existing strengths and helping them to make positive, informed choices.

‘Our model is centred on family support work, and we also deliver programmes for young people, parents and carers,’ Michael explains. ‘The project encourages meaningful relationships between boys and their families – particularly fathers or other significant males – in order to increase their emotional wellbeing and self-esteem.’

The work is based on a 12-week process, normally starting with a two-week assessment, which is then followed by a plan of work. Pinnacle runs Start, a young people’s programme, and Strengthening Families, Strengthening Communities, a specific parenting programme. Both programmes aim to empower and build on families’ existing strengths.

Michael argues that at the same time as black and dual heritage boys are undergoing all the normal transitions children this age

experience, they also often lack strong, positive black male role models within their community, the education system and the media.

He says: ‘Fortunately for me I had a reference point in my life, which was my dad. But a lot of boys don’t have that. So you have a whole generation who are doing things based on what they see on TV, or what they see on the street. A lot of them are also aware of the over-representation of black men within the criminal justice system and mental health institutions.’

‘Two examples are the way they respond to correction, and how they view the way that adults are supposedly meant to live their lives,’ he adds. ‘The media glamourise the benefits of being a successful, money making celebrity without showing the hard work, dedication and time it took to get there.’

Michael believes a more positive approach from some schools might help. ‘A lot of young people do have behavioural issues, so we know that they do have a part to play in their underachievement at school. But we also come across young people who have been written off as destructive or annoying, when actually a lot of them are very skilful, intelligent and talented. They need positive role models and more one-to-one support from their schools. And schools could benefit from a better understanding of how to approach and work with black and dual heritage boys and their families.’

Dealing with a new school: the impact of the primary to secondary transition

Along with all the gradual personal transitions and social changes taking place around them, children also have to handle the abrupt and imposed transition from primary to secondary school. For many vulnerable children, including the 500 we surveyed, this transition was far more significant than it might at first appear. In fact, more than one in four of the 11 to 13 year olds we spoke to said they were having problems in relation to changing school.

If you consider the changes that happen over a short period of time and with relatively little preparation, it seems unsurprising that some children – particularly those with difficult or unstable home lives – can be permanently derailed by these events.

For the majority, this move will be away from a small, familiar primary school to a much larger school which is often further away from home. They also have to cope with the switch from a stable group of classmates under a single class teacher, to a new environment in which they have to find their way between different classrooms and different teachers, six or more times a day.

In most cases, the result is that they and their parents have to negotiate new relationships with up to 13 different teachers. For vulnerable children whose parents have often had negative experiences of education, this can compound an already fraught situation. Research shows that parents' involvement

with school and their belief in the value of education are key factors in children's engagement and attainment at school.¹⁰

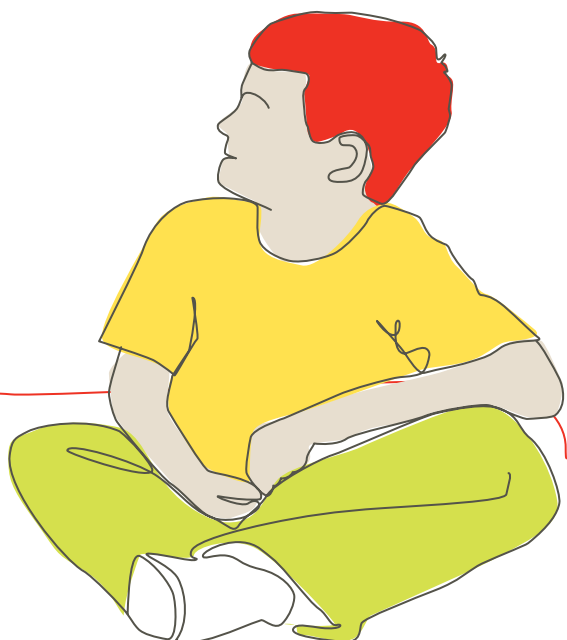
The school transition impacts vulnerable children more than others

The impact of this transition on a child's education can be dramatic. Research suggests that academically, many children actually go backwards during the first two years of secondary school.¹¹ There is also a well-documented 'dip' in attainment in English and science during the ages of 11 to 14. At the same time, levels of truancy and exclusion – classic signs of disengagement with education – start to increase for these age groups. Wellbeing scores drop significantly over this transition too: 65 per cent of primary school children rate their experience as positive, falling to just 27 per cent at secondary school.¹²

Unfortunately, studies also show that the disadvantage children are born with is enhanced, rather than eroded, as these transitions take place: children in receipt of free school meals perform more poorly on measures of attainment at age 14 than they did at age 11 and seven.¹³

Social pressures at school

The school transition also brings an enormous set of new social demands. Children go from an environment where their class teacher generally knows them and their parents, to one where they are almost entirely anonymous. For some this anonymity may be a relief, or an opportunity to 'reinvent' themselves. For others, the transition can be devastating. Action for Children research showed that bullying, or fear of bullying, was one of the things that concerned over one-quarter (27%) of the children we surveyed. In addition, many children we surveyed reported being grief stricken at losing highly valued friendships when they moved schools, and some said that they were finding it hard to forge new ones.



Investment in middle childhood

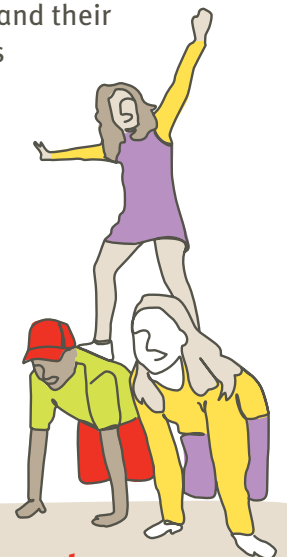
As Anastasia de Waal's article reiterates, these middle childhood years are vital in laying foundations for success in adult life. Yet there is little or no public discourse around the needs of children between six and 13. It is of little surprise then, that across many parts of the UK services for middle childhood have been largely overlooked. Children in their early years have Sure Start and other forms of family support services, and young people in their later teens are targeted by a number of different agencies that focus on helping them live independently.

But in between there is a severe shortage of both support services for children and families, and of the structured, supported activities that children need to help them practise the skills and develop the self-esteem they will need for the future. The restructuring of the Children's Fund in England (see below) has left a question mark over the few services that remain for this group, while a lack of clear incentives and long-term ring-fenced resources in other parts of the UK mean that there is a distinct lack of family or support services for children aged six to 13.

In looking at the needs of six to 13 year olds, it has been easy to focus on the visible and fixed education transition. The impact of this

change has been well documented and steps have been taken to make this change easier for all children (see the box opposite). Such policies are to be welcomed and supported.

But it is also important to remember that school-based services alone will never be enough for the most vulnerable; they require additional support which complements that provided by schools. Children who are traditionally seen as 'hard-to-reach' and those from marginalised groups require services that reach out to them where they and their families are able to accept support; disabled children need specialised family support services; and children in care often benefit from independent visitors or mentors who are not connected to their school. For children aged six to 13 and their families, these services are often hard to come by. These are the services that must now be championed.



Changes to the Children's Fund in England and the impact on services to this group of children

The Children's Fund was created in 2001 as a ring-fenced fund, making grants to promote and deliver innovative projects working with children aged five to 13. The fund has made £780 million of grants between 2003 and 2008.

In July 2007 the government announced that it was extending the Fund and allocating an additional £396 million over the years 2008 to 2011. But – and it was a big but – it also opted to give control of the money to local authorities and not to ring fence the budget. This decision has led to a drastic fall in the number and range of services that Action for Children is funded to provide. As one of the largest charities providing these services, we will see the number of our Children's Fund projects fall from 151 in 2001 to just 38 by

the start of 2009. The situation is likely to be replicated across other voluntary sector providers – a survey by Children England found that 65 per cent of Children's Fund managers were expecting services to be decommissioned from March 2008, and 58 per cent of service providers foresaw their project or service coming to an end then.

The Children's Fund has been a very positive initiative that Action for Children has welcomed in England, and we would support the development of similar funding streams in the rest of the UK. However, we are concerned that the gains of recent years are being eroded by the new funding arrangements.

Existing policies focusing on the transition from primary to secondary school

In responding to the transitions taking place for children aged six to 13, governments have nearly always concentrated their policies and actions on the transition from primary to secondary school. This is often the result of growing concern around an attainment dip following the move from one school to another, highlighted in one study that showed around four out of 10 pupils failed to make any progress in maths or reading in the year in which they moved up.¹⁴

Because these issues are very visible, each administration across the UK has introduced initiatives and programmes that aim to ‘smooth’ this educational transition. These include schemes that encourage buddying, welcoming new students, and curricula exploring the idea of change and coping with change.

In 2004 the **Scottish Government** published *A Curriculum for Excellence*, which sets out a single vision for all three to 18 year olds. The aim of this programme is to make all children in Scotland successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors.

In **Wales**, *Aiming for Excellence and Moving On...Effective Transition from Key Stage 2 to 3* provides more targeted support around Key Stage 3. As a strategy it is part of the wider Welsh Assembly’s vision of a Learning Country and consists of a programme of resources and practical advice, as well as extra funding to devise transition plans supporting pupils as they move from primary to secondary school. This agenda has been supported with the Cymorth Fund, targeting resources into specific services and projects, including those that support the education transition.

There has been greater prescription in **England**, with the Government focusing on tight lesson structures and ensuring that key initiatives (like literacy and



numeracy strategies) highlight the primary to secondary transition issues. Certainly there have been more resources, policies and pilots introduced in recent years, but these have nearly all addressed the mechanics of the school move and resourcing schools.

Similarly, in **Northern Ireland** both direct rule and devolved government have relied upon teaching and school-based resources as the way to manage this transition.

These initiatives have been broadly positive in improving the education transition. But the emphasis now must be to look at supporting and developing family-based services that address the holistic needs of children.



What do these transitions look like for vulnerable children? Key findings from Action for Children's survey

Alarmed at what the 'policy gap' for middle childhood may mean for children and their families at this crucial age, Action for Children surveyed more than 500 of the vulnerable children and young people we work with for this report.

Noted below are some of our findings, filtered by age group, that bring to light many of the problems and issues across the 'pre-transition' and 'post-transition' age groups. The survey is based on a sample of our service users, a cross-section of the most vulnerable children and young people in the UK, with a range of presenting needs including disability, the need for family support, being in care, offending or showing other difficult behaviour.

Reported	Six to 10 year olds (50)	11 to 13 year olds (115)	All children six to 13 (165)
Had problems with their temper	60%	49%	53%
Had problems with their family	40%	37%	38%
Had problems with their social life	30%	27%	28%
Had problems being bullied	33%	36%	35%
Said they were lonely	20%	27%	25%
Had problems changing schools	28%	27%	27%
Have been affected by crime	17%	15%	15%
Feel like an outsider and left out of things	20%	10%	13%
Single most important thing that can be done for children my age	Better parks and open spaces	More things to do when not at school	More things to do when not at school
One thing that would make the most difference	Doing well at school	Doing well at school	Doing well at school

Note: The number in round brackets indicates the number of children.

Some notable survey findings

As children moved from the ages of six to 13:

- ▶ They seem to get lonelier, although they were also less likely to report their social life or friends being a problem.
- ▶ They were less likely to say they felt loved.
- ▶ They were less likely to say they found it easy to make new friends.
- ▶ They experience more bullying.
- ▶ A much larger number said they have problems with school.

Bullying:

- ▶ Of the six to 10 year olds who took part in this survey, 33 per cent said they had problems with being bullied, and this increased to 36 per cent of 11 to 13 year olds.
- ▶ Of children between the ages of eight and 13 with learning difficulties, nearly 40 per cent said bullying had been a problem.
- ▶ Of children with learning difficulties aged six to 10, 77 per cent said they had had problems with bullying.
- ▶ Comments included: 'I am picked on all the time' and 'I have moved six times to different schools – I liked moving as I got away from bullies.'

Doing well at school

The research also demonstrates how high a priority doing well at school is to children themselves during this period. Thirty-one per cent of six to 10 year olds and 33 per cent of 11 to 13 year olds said that if they could pick only one thing that would make a big difference to their life, it would be doing well at school – the single most important factor in both age groups.

Loss of friendships

One of the major upheavals children report around this time is the loss of established friendships. These losses can be felt all the more keenly by children who may have already experienced a major loss or trauma in their life – for instance the death or departure of a parent or carer.

Comments included: 'I lost lots of friends' and 'I had two best friends who were very close and at my new school I couldn't find any real friends.'

Puberty

The onset of puberty can be a difficult time for children, particularly those with difficult home lives. Comments included:

- ▶ 'I didn't want to talk to my dad, but only because I was embarrassed. I had just started my periods and my dad was looking after me because my mum was in work, but by the end of the night I had to tell him because I hate secrets. People should know it's good to talk.'
- ▶ 'I don't feel that I can talk to my social worker or my foster carer about personal things as I get very embarrassed. If I really, really needed help then I might go to them but I don't like asking them about my personal problems.'

Parental separation/losing a parent/ unstable home lives

Children in this survey reported a huge range of distressing events in their lives, including parents splitting up, being bereaved, or simply having insecure and uncertain home lives. While these events are traumatic for all children, for children in the midst of all the other demanding transitions they can be particularly difficult. We asked children about times when they wanted help but couldn't get it, and they told us:

- ▶ 'When I had to leave my mum's house and go to live with my nana, because I didn't really understand.'
- ▶ 'Mummy and daddy were splitting up and getting divorced...[what would have helped was] more understanding in what happens to me.'
- ▶ 'Difficulties with dealing with problems with my dad as we had to stop seeing him.'
- ▶ 'I wouldn't talk to my mother – as she is mentally unstable and I would be concerned that I [might] push her over the edge.'

Project case study:

Action for Children Scotland Renfrewshire Primary Support Project

'We're trying to prevent children from becoming young offenders,' says John Duffy, manager of the Action for Children Scotland Renfrewshire Primary Support Project. 'Research suggests that there is a range of risk indicators linked with future involvement in the youth justice system. The Scottish Government wanted to establish an early intervention service – that's what we are.' The project offers support to children aged between five and 11, targeting eight primary schools in one of Scotland's most deprived areas. Part of the Scottish Government's youth crime prevention programme, the project was funded initially for three years and extended for a further two. It is now in its sixth year, funded by the local authority.

John has no doubts about the benefits of early intervention: 'I've worked in projects with older young offenders and it's harder to produce results because problems have had time to accumulate. Early intervention is demonstrably more effective.' Children referred to the project have usually been identified by behavioural indicators, including aggression or problems with self-esteem. But, says John, a difficult home environment is often a factor: 'The children we're targeting come from deprived areas. Parents may be affected by poverty, domestic violence or alcohol issues, limiting their ability to help their children get the best out of the education system.'

The project supports around 35 children, employing a variety of approaches, including one-to-one sessions, group work and intervention in schools and with the family. John says: 'We use a range of methods to create interest for the child and ensure their varied needs are met.' At the same time, the project engages parents in work to improve their parenting ability and build more positive relationships. One example is the 'Action Man' group, which brings together children and their male carers in an activity-based group, enabling workers to support the relationship and parenting in action.

Involvement with children typically lasts for around a year, but this will depend on the progress being made. 'Every child has their own pace at which they absorb work and improve,' says John. Occasionally, support can be extended beyond the age of 11 to help children make the move from primary to secondary school. 'The school move is a really challenging transition,' he adds. In order to prepare children to manage the transition, the project engages them in a focused programme of intervention, which builds the skills they will need to deal successfully with this change.

Handover to the school will normally be within the first few weeks of the child's first term at the new school. 'We'll meet the key people involved – the guidance teacher and support staff – to give an idea of the work undertaken, the areas which have improved and ongoing support needs,' John explains.

Independent evaluation by Edinburgh University has identified that key outcomes delivered by the project include reduced school exclusion, improved behaviour, improved parental relationships and increased parenting capacity. Despite the success of the project, however, there is a danger of early intervention services being lost because of a return to more crisis management-oriented services. John says: 'In terms of cost-benefits analysis, this type of project is worth its weight in gold.' The project works with children and their families to maintain children in mainstream schooling and avoid the need for statutory intervention through the Children's Hearings System. This, in turn, contributes to further benefits, in terms of children's fulfilled potential and longer-term savings for the community and the local authority.

Calls for change

In summary, the experiences spoken of by young people using Action for Children's services have identified an issue of real importance that policy makers and all adults involved in children's and young people's lives must recognise. The years of middle childhood, from six to 13, see many changes taking place in young people's lives, and for those who are already among the most vulnerable and hardest to reach, these transitions – whether natural or imposed – present real risks.

Action for Children is committed to supporting these children for as long as it takes during this significant period in their lives. Often that will mean regular contact from the age of six through to 13 and beyond. Sometimes it will mean timely support at a specific moment of crisis.

From our research, and from speaking to the children and young people who use our services, we know that the right policies can make a big difference. Anastasia de Waal notes how six to 13 year olds spend less time supervised by adults, even though it is fundamentally important that adults are available and play a role in their lives. Adults are vital in identifying sources of potentially damaging behaviour and mitigating their effects, and to provide children with a dependable and reliable compass with which to navigate the confusing pressures they experience. Similarly, Sonia Sodha has continued to build upon the evidence of our Growing Strong campaign, noting in her report for Action for Children that participation in community-based structured activities improves outcomes, particularly for those from disadvantaged backgrounds.¹⁵

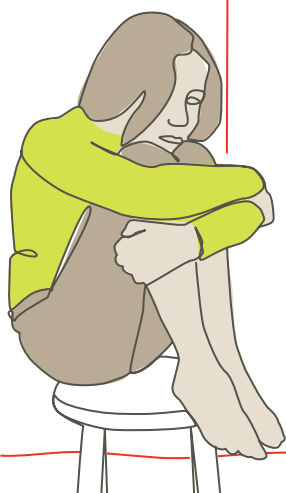
It is not merely the case that the needs of children of this age are insufficiently recognised. The level of investment in supporting them is actually diminishing. There is a risk that the gains achieved with younger children might be lost, and that children will enter their teenage years with difficulties which could have been addressed much earlier. Yet this group appears to be one which provokes an ambiguous response from policy makers and commentators. On the cusp between the presumption of innocence accorded to young children, and the negative

and fearful assumptions that increasingly attach to adolescents, there is little coherence to the legislative, policy or media responses to this age group. For example, we are collectively shocked by the commercial pressures they face, but scathing when those pressures lead to behaviour we disapprove of. We have reduced the choices available at school during middle childhood, yet treat 10 year olds as criminally responsible. We fear for children's safety and limit their freedom to explore and play, yet are horrified at their obesity and use of computer games.

Creating a climate of respect, support and encouragement for all children is everyone's responsibility. Governments across the UK must lead the way. We call on them to remember that, when it comes to supporting children and young people, nothing less than as long as it takes will do. As a society we are in danger of losing our most vulnerable children during their middle childhood, reducing our chances of being able to make up lost ground later on. For those children Action for Children works with, and children like them who will not achieve their full potential without a commitment for as long as it takes, much more is needed.

For all of these reasons, Action for Children makes the following recommendations:

- ▶ **A cross-party 21-year vision for children and young people must be established in each nation of the UK. It should describe how both public services and public bodies which influence or regulate the commercial sector will work together to ensure children receive the support they need at all key stages and transitions in their lives.**
- ▶ **All children need at least one trusted adult who is there for them for as long as it takes, especially at times of transition. Agencies and professionals working with children and families must do more to recognise and safeguard the vital role of continuity, commitment and relationships built on trust in children's lives.**
- ▶ **Governments and media across the UK must begin a responsible debate on the way our young people are perceived, and highlight young people's contribution to communities.**



References

1. Interview with Liam Byrne in *The Guardian*, Monday 15 December 2008
2. Margo, J, and Sodha, S (2007) *Get happy: Children and young people's emotional wellbeing*, London: Action for Children
3. Sodha, S (2009) "*Kidulthood*"? *Experiences of the pre-teen years today*, London: Action for Children/Demos
4. Pidd, H (2007) 'We are coming for your children', *The Guardian*, 31 July 2007
5. Margo, J, et al (2006) *Freedom's orphans: Raising youth in a changing world*, London: Institute for Public Policy Research
6. Margo, J, et al (2006) *Freedom's orphans: Raising youth in a changing world*, London: Institute for Public Policy Research
7. Gilby N, Hamlyn B, Hanson T, Romanou E, Mackey T, Clark J, Trikka N and Harrison M (2008) *National survey of parents and children: Family life, aspirations and engagement with learning*, London: DCSF
8. Beunderman et al, 2007
9. Calderwood, L (2004) 'At first infant: children of the new century' in Stewart, I and Vaitilingam, R (eds), *Seven ages of man and woman*, Swindon: Economic and Social Research Council
10. Nicholls, G and Gardner, J (1999) *Pupils in transition: Moving between Key Stages*, London: Routledge
11. Galton, M, Gray, J and Ruddock, J (2000) *Transfer and transitions in the middle years of schooling (7-14): Continuities and discontinuities in learning*, Norwich: DfES publications
12. Marks, N (2004) *The power and potential of well-being indicators*, London: New Economics Foundation (NEF)
13. Sodha, S (2009) "*Kidulthood*"? *Experiences of the pre-teen years today*, London: Action for Children/Demos
14. Research quoted by the National Literacy Trust at: www.nationalliteracytrust.org.uk/Database/secondary/transfer.html
15. *Young people growing strong: The role of positive structured activities*, Action for Children briefing paper, September 2007





Action for Children is committed to helping the most vulnerable children and young people in the UK break through injustice, deprivation and inequality, so they can achieve their full potential.

Action for Children

85 Highbury Park

London N5 1UD

Telephone: 020 7704 7000

Fax: 020 7226 2537

www.actionforchildren.org.uk