

START AS WE MEAN TO GO ON

**Putting child development in the early years
at the heart of the life chances strategy**



INTRODUCTION

One in three children across England arrive at school not ready to learn.¹ That is ten children in every reception class. There are even fewer children ready to start school from disadvantaged backgrounds.

One in two children who live in low income families.²

One in three children who live in the north of England.³

Two in five children who live in the most deprived communities.⁴

This shouldn't be something that any of us are willing to accept. Why? Because children who are not ready to learn, who are behind their peers, who are not achieving their potential even at this young age are at increased risk of poor health, worse employment prospects and lower educational attainment for the rest of their lives.

Sadly, this isn't a new problem. Although there has been progress in recent years in the number of children who are school ready, including from disadvantaged groups,⁵ there has been hardly any progress in closing the gaps between children from different backgrounds.

The gap between children from low income families and the rest is barely closing.⁶

The gap between the North and the South of England hasn't changed in three years.⁷

The gap between the boys and girls hasn't changed in three years.⁸

The gap between the most and least deprived communities is growing.⁹

Closing these gaps matters. It would show that progress is being made for disadvantaged children as well as their peers. This should be the Government's focus, because there are more children from disadvantaged backgrounds falling behind.

Something can be done about it. Starting with the Government fulfilling its promise to introduce a Life Chances Strategy to secure a brighter future for our children.

The Work and Welfare Act 2015 amended the Child Poverty Act 2010, introducing a new set of measures under a Life Chances Act 2015 for improving children's prospects. The new Act includes measures of educational attainment and parental employment.

To enact these changes, the Government committed to launching a Life Chances Strategy, and an announcement was expected immediately after the EU Referendum in June 2016.¹⁰ The importance of the early years has been spoken about repeatedly in recent months¹¹, and it has been increasingly clear that policies aimed at breaking cycles of poverty and increasing social mobility were to be a mainstay of the current Government's record.

Start as we mean to go on calls for urgent action from government and all political parties, to ensure the future of our children is not forgotten. It looks at the disparities in child development between children from different backgrounds at age five, and makes the case for why more needs to be done in the early years for disadvantaged children.

Whilst policy makers will be grappling with the implications of leaving the EU, this is no time to neglect policies that will make a difference to tomorrow's adults. As our country looks to the future, Action for Children believes that there has never been a more important time to put children at the heart of the political agenda.

WHAT IS THE LIFE CHANCES ACT?

The origins of the Life Chances Act can be found in the revised approach to tackling child poverty taken by the Coalition Government. Ministers wanted to improve “the life chances of children in low income families”¹² by looking at influences such as worklessness, unmanageable debt, poor housing and parental skills.¹³

These themes were reflected in the Conservative Manifesto where the Party pledged to introduce measures to drive “real change in children’s lives.”¹⁴

Last year the Government chose to replace the Child Poverty Act 2010 - which set out income poverty measures – with the Life Chances Act 2015. The Act includes three domains to measure and report on annually.

1. the number of children getting five GCSE A-C
2. the number of children living in low income households; and
3. the number of children living in workless households.

The Government chose to keep the domains they measure relatively limited, but recognised that wider influences will effect progress against these three measures, including the early years.¹⁵

The Queen’s Speech included plans to introduce life chances indicators to monitor progress in key domains linked to the measures in the Act.¹⁶

A speech by the Prime Minister, David Cameron MP, earlier this year outlined four domains where the Government would focus its efforts to improve results on each of the measures in the Act.

1. increasing opportunity for all
2. developing character and resilience
3. addressing treatable problems such as substance misuse
4. improving family life and the early years¹⁷

The last domain is particularly important. The evidence is overwhelming that what happens in the early years has a sizeable and long-term impact on children’s prospects. Evidence shows that parents have the biggest influence on their child’s futures especially in the pre-school years.¹⁸

What happens in the early years will arguably have the biggest influence on whether successive governments see progress on measures in the Life Chances Act 2015.

WHY THE EARLY YEARS MATTER

The last 20 years has seen a substantial increase in evidence about the importance of the earliest years of a child’s life. We now have a better understanding of how children develop and the long-term impacts this has.

The Institute of Health Equity has summarised the large body of evidence to show that children develop across four interdependent and reinforcing domains: cognition, communication and language, social and emotional development and physical attributes. All are important and mutually reinforcing.¹⁹

The different areas in which children develop in the early years have a huge influence on their future economic wellbeing, relationships, educational attainment and health.²⁰

The early years impacts upon:

1. Future economic wellbeing

Cognitive skills refer to skills such as memory, problem solving and reasoning.²¹ A person develops these cognitive skills more in the early years than at any other time in their lives.²² These skills have a strong correlation to future employment.

Research has found that children with strong cognitive skills, measured through things such as vocabulary and drawing tests, had higher incomes at age 30 than children with lower cognitive scores.²³

2. Positive relationships

Young children rapidly develop their abilities to experience and express different emotions, as well as their capacity to manage a variety of feelings.²⁴ The development of non-cognitive skills such as application, self-regulation and empathy are the emotional and social capabilities that enable children to make and sustain positive relationships²⁵ at school and into adulthood.²⁶

By the time they reach school, children who have acquired a strong emotional foundation have the capacity to anticipate, talk about, and use their awareness of their own and others' feelings to better manage everyday social interactions.²⁷

As a person develops into adulthood, these same social skills are essential for the formation of lasting friendships and intimate relationships, effective parenting, the ability to hold a job and work well with others, and for becoming a contributing member of a community.²⁸

3. Educational attainment

Almost all children (94 per cent) who achieve a good level of personal, social and emotional, physical development and communication and language development at age five go on to achieve expected levels of for reading at age seven – the end of Key Stage 1.²⁹ They are five times more likely to reach the highest level.³⁰ But children who start off at the bottom at age five are six times more likely to be in the bottom at the end of Key Stage 1.³¹

The impact of this good start carries on throughout primary and secondary school³² but so does a bad start. Over half (55 per cent) of children who are at the bottom of attainment at Key Stage 1 remain there at when they take their GCSEs.³³

Quite simply, children at the bottom at age five are much more likely to be there age seven. Those at the bottom at age seven are likely to be there when they sit their GCSE exams at age 16. This is important because a student who achieves five A*-C GCSE grades will earn on average £80,000 more over their lifetime.³⁴

4. Health and wellbeing

Parents have a big role in the early years in helping their children develop healthy behaviours. Maternal health, including stress, diet, drug, alcohol and tobacco use during pregnancy, has significant influence on early cognitive development.³⁵

During these critical years, the foundation is laid for a child's physical and mental health. Children who are overweight are at an increased risk of a number of health complications that could negatively impact their development and wider outcomes. Overweight children are more likely to suffer from cardiovascular disease and diabetes in later life, and asthma, emotional and behavioural problems sleeping problems, musculoskeletal problems and type 2 diabetes in childhood.³⁶

Good parent–child relationships help build children's self-esteem and confidence and reduce the risk of children adopting unhealthy lifestyles.³⁷

WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

The most recent data shows that there has been a continued improvement across England in recent years. The percentage of five year olds reaching a good level of development has risen from 51.7 per cent in 2013 to 66.3 per cent in 2015. There has also been improvement for different groups. It shows a positive direction of travel for the country as a whole.

But headline progress hides disparities between children from different backgrounds and areas across England. In 2015:

- Just over half (51 per cent) of children on free school meals are reached a good level of development compared to 69 per cent of children not receiving free school meals.³⁸
- In the South East 70 per cent of children reached a good level of development compared to 63 per cent of children in the North East.³⁹
- The best performing local authority had 76.8 per cent of children reaching a good level of development, compared to 51.5 per cent in the worst performing local authority.⁴⁰
- In the most deprived 20 per cent of local authorities, 61 per cent of children reached a good level of development compared with 69 per cent in the least deprived.⁴¹

Children in more affluent families and the least deprived areas are already more likely to be reaching a good level of development. These children's life chances are already going in the right direction. But some children are behind by age five. These children face an uphill challenge to catch up and many never will.⁴²

The Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP)⁴³ is an observational assessment completed in reception class for every child in England. The profile monitors whether a child has reached a good level of development (GLD) in a number of domains including personal, social and emotional development, physical development, and communication and language. These reflect the interdependent and reinforcing domains that underpin a child's early development. Given how important these domains are to learning, reaching a GLD is used by some including Public Health England, as a definition of whether a child is school ready.⁴⁴

Children falling behind isn't new

The difference between groups has been a persistent problem for a number of years.

- The gap between children eligible for free school meals and those not eligible has only shrunk 1.3 per cent since 2012/13.⁴⁵
- The gap between the north and south of England hasn't closed since 2012/13.⁴⁶
- The gap between children from the 20 per cent most deprived areas and the 20 per cent least deprived has grown 1.4 per cent in the last three years.⁴⁷

The gaps between different groups of children are important measures to look at. Whilst we want progress for all children, the persistent difference between the top and bottom, shows that disadvantaged children are not being helped to catch-up quickly enough, compared with their peers.

If the Government wants to see better long-term outcomes against measures in the Act they should be focussing their efforts here. It is these children who are more likely to be falling behind and at greater risk of not doing well in school.

BENEFITS OF FOCUSING ON DISADVANTAGED CHILDREN IN THE EARLY YEARS

1. Reduce the financial costs

It has been estimated that for each child who reaches a good level of development, schools save £1,053 in avoiding costs of remedial action to help a child catch up. With over 219,460 children not ready to start school this is a sizeable spend by schools that could be invested elsewhere.⁴⁸

2. Improve performance in the education system

Successive governments have made improving the education system a key plank of domestic policy. Performance and league tables are heavily reliant on test results. But schools alone can't deliver positive outcomes by age 18. The foundations for educational attainment are set by age five. If any government wants to see an improvement in school performance, using test results to measure this, we have to make sure children are ready to learn when they arrive at primary school.

3. Improve public health outcomes

A focus on improving support in the early years would align with the public health agenda. In 2014, Public Health England published seven priorities to improve health outcomes. These referred to a wide range of influences on someone's health and, to improve it, the need to address all of these. One of the seven priorities is to ensure every child has the best start in life and the measure chosen was the proportion of children reaching a GLD.⁴⁹ Aligning policies aimed at improving children's life chances with the existing public health priority, would ensure that two key policy initiatives are mutually reinforcing, and make the most of existing mechanism to delivery life chance strategy initiatives.

WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN?

A serious commitment to improving children's prospects needs to do more for children from disadvantaged backgrounds in the early years. Without this, longer term aims to improve children's future educational attainment, employment and health will not be realised.

It has been suggested that early years services should be targeted at getting children school-ready and current guidance broadly reflects this.⁵⁰ But there is no agreed definition of school readiness.⁵¹ Public Health England use the good level of development measure in the EYFSP as their definition and the Public Health Outcomes Framework.⁵² But this hasn't been adopted formally by government. Without a definition it is unclear what specific outcomes early years services should be aiming to support children to achieve by age five.

There are already services in local communities designed to support children in the early years. The vast majority of programmes delivered in children's centres are designed to support good child development by age five⁵³ and this is the overwhelming priority amongst staff.⁵⁴ The Government has said it will consult on the future of children's centres but this has been repeatedly delayed.⁵⁵ This creates a lack of national, strategic direction at a time when national government funding for early intervention services, such as children centres, will have fallen 71 per cent between 2010 and 2020.⁵⁶

There is also a lack of clarity about monitoring how children are developing in the crucial early years period. From September 2016 the EYSFP becomes non-compulsory. The reception baseline assessment, designed to replace the EYSFP assessment at age five, will no longer be introduced.⁵⁷ This means there will no longer be a robust national measure of child development at age five.

The Queen's Speech outlined plans for further life chances indicators.⁵⁸ But the Government hasn't confirmed whether this will include a new national measure to replace the EYSFP.

Overall there has been a lack action and detail from government. By acting on the promise made to launch a Life Chances Strategy in this Parliament, the government can do something about this.

IS THERE WIDER SUPPORT FOR GOVERNMENT TO DO MORE IN THE EARLY YEARS?

School readiness is a big concern for parents. Two in three (66 per cent) with children under five say they are worried their children won't be ready to start school.⁵⁹ There is widespread support for government to make this a national priority.

70% of the public think the Government should make sure all children reach a good level of development by age five.⁶⁰

Recent polling of school leaders found that almost one in three (30 per cent) think that the Government doesn't recognise the early years as an important period in child development.⁶¹ Separate research found that, in the view of teachers, one in three children arrived at school not ready to learn.⁶²

A number of organisations have recently called on government to set targets for improving child development in the early years. The Child Poverty and Social Mobility Commission (CPSMC) want a commitment to halve the development gap between the poorest children and the rest at age five.⁶³ CentreForum has proposed a target of 90 per cent of all children reaching a good level of development by 2020.⁶⁴ IPPR want government to close the gap between children in the North and South reaching a good level of development by focussing on the most deprived.⁶⁵



WHAT SHOULD GOVERNMENT DO?

Action for Children calls on the Government to fulfil its promise to introduce a Life Chances Strategy, and secure a brighter future for our children.

This is no time to ignore this vital goal, despite the scale of the political challenge in leaving the EU. The Government has said that it will finish its legislative programme, acknowledging the importance of seeing through reforms already made a priority.⁶⁶ This includes policies aimed at improving support for the most disadvantaged children in the early years.

The Government must:

1

Set a goal for increasing the number of children from disadvantaged backgrounds reaching a good level of development by age five compared to their peers.

The Government needs to be clear about the importance of the early years in improving children's future prospects. An ambitious goal would focus government action on those children whose life chances are being blighted from the earliest years.

2

Introduce a new national measure of child development at age five.

The decision to make the EYFSP non-compulsory means there is no way to produce a national picture of child development by age five. This means we will lose track of child development at a crucial transition point.

3

Develop a definition of school readiness built around child development.

A definition of 'school readiness' would remove the ambiguity around what outcomes government believes early years services should be delivering for children by age five. Given the importance of child development to future educational attainment this is vital.

4

Set out a programme for expanding parenting support in the early years.

This should include targeted initiatives to ensure more children from disadvantaged backgrounds reach a good level of development by age five, and outline how services in local communities designed to support children in the early years will help to achieve this goal.

METHODOLOGY

Between Friday 1 April 2016 and Wednesday 11 April 2016 Opinium conducted a poll of 4,000 adults aged 18 plus in England. This included 2,511 parents. Of these 1,149 parents had a child under 18 and 511 parents had a child under five. Respondents were asked their views on aspects of child development and life chances. The full results of the polling are available on the Opinium website. A review of relevant literature was completed.

Action for Children commissioned Education Datalab to conduct an analysis of the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile Results for England. The analysis looked at the number of children reaching a good level of development at age five by local authority level. This analysis also looked at levels of deprivation based on the Index of Multiple Deprivation. Our analysis is restricted to those pupils known to be resident in England. In contrast to the statistical first release produced by the Department of Education, we assign pupils to the local authority in which they are resident rather than the local authority in which they go to school. To avoid disclosure issues arising from small numbers, pupils resident in the City of London are merged with those resident in Hackney and pupils resident on the Isles of Scilly are merged with those resident in Cornwall.

ENDNOTES

¹ This briefing uses Public Health England's definition of School Readiness. This means a child reaching a good level of development within Early Years Foundation Stage Profile. In 2015 66.3 per cent of children reached a good level of development. See Department for Education (2015) *Early years foundation stage profile results in England: Additional tables by pupil characteristics*. London: Department for Education.

² Department for Education (2015) *Early years foundation stage profile results in England: Additional tables by pupil characteristics*. London: Department for Education. Low income families refers to children who receive free school meals.

³ Action for Children analysis of the Early Years Foundation Stage Results 2015. Action for Children have classed North West, North East and Yorkshire and the Humber as Northern England. In 2015 64 per cent of children reached a good level of development in Northern England.

⁴ Action for Children analysis of the Early Years Foundation Stage Results 2015. This refers to the bottom 20 per cent of deprived local authorities in England ranked by the Index of Multiple Deprivation.

⁵ Department for Education (2015) *Early years foundation stage profile results in England: Additional tables by pupil characteristics*. London: Department for Education.

⁶ Department for Education (2015) *Early years foundation stage profile results in England: Additional tables by pupil characteristics*. London: Department for Education. Low income families refers to children who receive free school meals.

⁷ Action for Children commissioned analysis of the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile Results 2013-15.

⁸ Action for Children commissioned analysis of the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile Results 2013-15.

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- ²⁴ Center on the Developing Child (2011) *Children's Emotional Development Is Built into the Architecture of Their Brains: Working Paper No. 2* [pdf] Harvard: Center on the Developing Child. Available at: <http://46y5eh11fhgw3ve3ytpwxt9r.wpengine.netdna-cdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2004/04/Childrens-Emotional-Development-Is-Built-into-the-Architecture-of-Their-Brains.pdf> [Accessed 14 Feb. 2016].
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- ³⁸ Department for Education (2015) *Early years foundation stage profile results in England: Additional tables by pupil characteristics*. London: Department for Education.
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- ⁴⁰ Action for Children commissioned analysis of the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile Results 2013-15.
- ⁴¹ Action for Children commissioned analysis of the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile Results 2013-15. This refers to the bottom and top 20 per cent of deprived local authorities in England ranked by the Index of Multiple Deprivation.
- ⁴² See Department for Education (2011) *Early Years Evidence Pack*. London: Department for Education for gap in attainment by age seven between children reaching a good level of development and those not. See Joseph Rowntree Foundation, (2010) *Poorer children's educational attainment: how important are attitudes and behaviour?* [online] Available at: <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/poorer-children%E2%80%99s-educational-attainment-how-important-are-attitudes-and-behaviour> [Accessed 23 July 2016] for gap between children from low income families and their peers in the early years and continual gap in primary school.
- ⁴³ The EYSFP is the end point assessment of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). The Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) sets standards for the learning, development and care of children from birth to five years old. At the end of the EYFS an assessment of every child is completed, this is the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP). Children are defined as having reached a good level of development at the end of the EYFS if they score 2 (or 3) in each of the early learning goals related the 3 prime areas of learning - communication and language, physical development and personal, social and emotional development and the 2 specific areas of learning of literacy and numeracy.
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⁶⁰ Opinium polling n=4000

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http://www.ippr.org/files/publications/pdf/state-of-the-north-2015_Oct2015.pdf?noredirect=1 [Accessed 6 May 2016].

⁶⁶ BBC, (2016) *Brexit: David Cameron's resignation statement in full*. [online] Available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-eu-referendum-36619446> [Accessed 27 June 2016].

Action for Children is committed to making sure every child has the love, support and opportunity to reach their potential. So we think putting the best foundations in place for every child is a no-brainer.

The Government's Life Chances strategy is in development. Investing in children under 5 is the best way to ensure their future wellbeing and success.

Fair by Five is calling on government to make child development a national priority by 2020.

You can read more about the campaign and get involved by visiting our website.



ABOUT ACTION FOR CHILDREN

Action for Children works with over 300,000 children, young people, parents and carers through 650 services across the UK. We are committed to helping the most vulnerable and neglected children and young people break through injustice, deprivation and inequality, so they can reach their full potential. Over the past six years we have developed our evidence base on child neglect, campaigned for change and drawn upon the knowledge and experience we have gained over 145 years of working with children to support practitioners and develop innovative services.

Action for Children

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Action for Children supports and protects the young and vulnerable as they grow up. We make their lives better: now, tomorrow and every day.

actionforchildren.org.uk

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 [actionforchildren](https://www.facebook.com/actionforchildren)

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Images: Children (and families) shown have all been helped by Action for Children. Names have been changed (or models used) when we need to protect identity.