

# 0-5: How Small Children Make a Big Difference

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## 0-5: How Small Children Make a Big Difference

### Introduction

This paper will demonstrate how vital the early years are to good economics, social mobility, quality of life, and consequently, government plans for modernisation and reform. It explores each of these in turn, and shows why parenting and early-year enrichment make such a big difference.



#### **All Roads Lead to Early Years**

There is a direct link between the experiences of early childhood and subsequent adulthood. And, what happens in the very earliest years of life makes the biggest difference. Brain development is most rapid in the months before birth and up to age five. If that is disrupted by drugs, alcohol, smoking, poor diet or stress then today's baby becomes tomorrow's disadvantaged child.

Once born, a child needs someone to love them and to respond to their needs. Even in the seemingly 'best' homes, parents worry about whether they are 'doing it right'. How much more difficult must it be for teenage single parents with multiple burdens? Research shows that support and education in parenting plus well-delivered, enriched day care, pay dividends to the family, the child and society.

If we do not engage with struggling parents and parents to be then, as night follows day, we know that their children will grow into the least healthy adults who are badly educated, cause their neighbours and the police most problems, and will be unemployed and on welfare benefits. In turn they will have children early and repeat the bad parenting. Current practice is to more or less grudgingly pick up the costs through a miscellany of public services from social work to the courts and prisons, hospitals and Jobcentre Plus.

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Schools and teachers are important but our parents, and what happens before we reach school, are more significant. It is estimated that by the age of three, 50% of our language is in place. At five, it's 85%. Language is either there or missing by the time a child starts primary school. And once a child starts primary school, they are only there for 15% of their time.<sup>1</sup>

What the theory and practical studies of children's early years show is that there is an alternative. By applying a systematic approach and focusing on root causes rather than symptoms, parents can provide sufficiently loving homes for children to have better lives. But this presents a challenge to central and local government in deciding where and how money is spent.

There is a very big prize for getting this right. Morally, of course, it is right. It accords with principles of equal opportunity. And, on a practical level, early engagement pays a very high rate of return. The dividend is 12-16% per year for every £1 of investment - a payback of four or five times the original investment by the time the young person reaches their early twenties and the gains continue to flow throughout their life.

Early year Investment economically delivers efficiency and equity. It promotes economic growth by creating a more able workforce and reduces costs borne by the criminal justice, health and welfare system. For government of all shades, the challenge now is how, through early years investment, to modernise and reform the public sector. Efficiency in dealing with hospital waiting lists or the number of criminals locked up has blinded us to effectiveness in reducing the number of obese children or the number of youths prone to violent or disruptive behaviour.

We insist on more formal education and training to drive a car than to be a parent. But better parenting is not just for the 'unfortunate' and the 'feckless'. More affluent homes play with fire in outsourcing their babies too early and for too long. A culture of work and status denies parents the space to be with their children. Italian holiday guidebooks might say how enticing the UK is as a place to take children but our attitudes to children need a makeover.

Getting 'early years' right benefits the whole of society. Through economic research, psychology, biology and neuroscience, the answers come out the same: treat what happens in the first years as gold. What is massively encouraging is that improving what we do in early years is already happening but only on a small scale and in disparate places.

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<sup>1</sup> Wishart R, Herald, 13 June 2006

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In the UK, we think that young children are the preserve of their mothers. The 'early years', we unquestioningly assume, are about children and mothers playing - not that important, and certainly not something that real men should spend much time on. Our most dangerous assumptions are the ones we do not know we are making.

This explains why, despite our best intentions, we have got it so wrong.

# 1. Where are we going wrong and can we do anything about it

### **Focusing on the point of impact**

The 'point of impact' obsesses public policy making. But by focusing on impact, we systematically fail to find out and then treat the root causes. Here's an example from my own childhood.

John Daily was eight and my best friend at primary school in Bellshill. We were working on the class newspaper and had been asked to write about a topic that loomed large in our lives: getting knocked down by cars or, more accurately, not being flattened.

'Cars need to be fitted with a bag of a special type of glue, just above the wheels,' wrote John. 'When the driver has to break hard to avoid knocking into a child, the sudden hit on the brake bursts the bag, the specially formulated glue hits the tyre and the car stops dead.' Masterful, especially when accompanied by John's stick-like drawings.

John's problem solving had come up with an ingenious answer. However, he made the common mistake of assuming that the solution would be found literally at the point of impact - forget about traffic calming, speed restrictions and drumming it into children that they need to be wary of all traffic and to look both ways before they cross the road. A child may be forgiven for seeing the 'obvious' solution but the quick fix, the point of impact fix, is too often espoused by society.

The welfare state is rapidly becoming one big ambulance picking up the casualties and patching them up. I live in Glasgow, a city with a violent reputation. Despite a reduction in reported crime, actual knife crime is on the increase. Hospital accident and emergency admissions for violent crime are 2 to 3 times greater than that reported to the police.<sup>2</sup> I recently attended a presentation given by a consultant doctor describing the medical attention he gave to a man and woman admitted during the past month. I had to look away from the photographs on the screen; the woman had a large open gash that stretched from her front round to her back. In a second slide the man had a flap of skin hanging off the end of his arm - this was apparently his hand. This was a domestic fight and neither party reported it to the police.

For years, the health service has responded by creating what is proportionately the biggest accident and emergency service in the UK. It caters for the spike in knifings, which takes place between 4pm on Fridays and 4am on Sundays. We are 'good' at responding to impact as can be seen from a number of areas of public life.

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<sup>2</sup> Warburton A L and Shepherd J L, *Tackling alcohol related violence in city centres' effects of emergency medicine and police interventions*, Emerg Med Journal 2006, [www.emjonline.com](http://www.emjonline.com)  
Shepherd J, Cardiff Violence Prevention, Home Office.

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Why have we spent so much public money on 'areas of deprivation', which are as much on the skids as ever despite their new designation as 'regeneration initiatives'? We diagnose poor housing and a mix of social problems including unemployment and set out to tackle both. We allocate money and seek two sets of results: auditable benefits and political kudos. While tangible gains are desirable, they usually mean that programme managers and politicians succumb to the route of least resistance or most easily measurable. That means 600 houses refurbished and 300 new homes built, contracts let, timescales and budgets set and monitored, and construction firms put to task.

Quietly, and over time, the social problems get squeezed and forgotten as we squabble about how much to spend per house and where to start construction. It is much easier to improve houses than people and to audit the results. So, even before we have paid off the interest on the public borrowing, we see the new housing deteriorate because the quick technical fix improved the houses but left the social problems untouched.

Failures are hailed as victories as figures show splendid outcomes. However, they are the wrong measures of outcome and although the professional managers know this they are obliged to conspire, whether willingly or with heavy hearts. Tick the box and meet the target, even if it is the wrong target.

Across the Organisation of Economic Cooperation and Development, the UK is in the bottom 25% of member countries in getting young people into work, education or training. Periodically, there is a headline or political initiative to tackle school leavers who have earned the acronym NEET (not in education, employment or training). In turn, we have launched a flotilla of initiatives aimed at the point of impact, from Youth Opportunity Schemes to Skillseeker Programmes. We have turned over much of the further education system to stem the effects of years of neglecting and failing young people. Every so often, youth programmes are attacked for being ineffective, and the structures are changed; we blame the programmes for failing young people who have all the odds stacked against them. This is yet another example of intervening at crisis point, when it is too late.

### **Putting the lifelong back into learning**

In education, this failure has been elegantly turned into the very currency of language. Of course people need a chance to learn in later life. However, so much that passes for 'lifelong learning' is an escape clause giving each institution permission to fail. In management and process control, the guiding principle is to get it right first time. A mistake multiplies and becomes progressively more

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expensive to fix as customers are lost or one problem leads to another. Either we scrap lifelong learning or we take it seriously and start from day one.

We would like to see fewer suicides, less alcohol and drug abuse, obesity controlled, safer neighbourhoods and workers with better attributes. But typically, we treat the symptoms and not the causes. We come up with policies for housing and social support; harm reduction and methadone programmes; anti-social behaviour orders and job seeking initiatives. Of course, we have to treat symptoms; people face pain and predicament. But the balance is wrong and we are spending disproportionately on symptoms at the point of impact rather than treating the causes.

### **Family life**

We know that stable families are more likely to produce well-balanced, capable children. But it is not easy. Working parents have a hard time juggling commitments and responsibilities. My purpose is not to add to the guilt, but to help us move beyond our current mindset and the child-minding status quo. Supernanny on television, and bookshelves full of manuals may help some individual parents. But they do not tell us what we are collectively doing to our small people, about culture and norms and nor do they reflect what research suggests.

Listen to the language we use to describe looking after children. We drop them off at 'childcare' on the way to work and pick them up at 5.30. Not dissimilar to what we do with our cars which we leave in the office car park, knowing they will be safe until we pick them up at night. Staff in both places are unlikely to have done well at school, and are on roughly the same (low) wage.

In several childcare centres I visited, managers and staff typically commented, 'I sometimes look into the baby room and wonder about what we are doing'. Children start as early as six weeks old, and for some, it is an 8am to 6pm shift.

Described by the New York Times as the most compelling window into modern family life, a website, soon to be launched in the UK, is in no doubt about its target audience: 'UrbanBaby has revolutionised and simplified the way in which time-consuming parents...'. 'Time-consuming' – great - we no longer need to fret about balancing children, work and a social life. Double-income, middle class families are consumed by time, and that is all right as long as they get the outsourcing of childcare right.

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Too many middle class homes indulge their children with hand-made leather bootees and expensive flashing toys as a demonstration of how much they care. We have created and been encouraged by our culture to think that we can have it all and do it all. But instead of achieving satisfaction and wellbeing, our choices often lead to bad parenting, frustration and disappointment.

'I needed my mum and dad to be there for me' is an often repeated remark made by young people who have come through a blighted childhood, 'and they were not there'. Irrespective of background, children need their mum or dad or a main carer who is there to look out for them.

In the majority of working-age households, both parents work. In one out of six households of working age no one goes to work, creating for the children an environment that is most likely poor in money and poor in culture. Commuting distances are longer. Many people in low-income jobs struggle to keep themselves afloat and have to navigate zero hour contracts, where the working parent does not know from one day or one week to another how many hours they will work or at what time of the day they will work. Higher earners lock themselves into strenuous financial commitments. The consequence is longer hours at work.

We are stealing our children's time. Parents spending the first year or more with their children are seriously undervalued. You will have been party to the conversation, 'And what do you do?' and the glaze of incomprehension or smart change of topic to the response 'I am at home looking after the kids'.

Family members who could provide support now live hundreds of miles away. And the delay in having children means that adoring grandparents if they are still alive are not fit to look after the children.

Outside work, social mores have changed. One in two marriages end in divorce. Our legal system is well engineered at the time of divorce to divide the family assets. We do not, like many other countries have a family counselling and court system that helps to reconcile contact between the children and their mother and father. Children for emotional reasons still want to see both their mothers and fathers. Financial support follows contact, a lesson ignored and contributing to the failure of the Child Support Agency.

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Families face significant social problems. For example, prescription and non-prescription drug taking has soared. Across the UK, there are between 250,000 and 300,000 children between the ages of 0 and 16 with drug abusing parents.<sup>3</sup> An average primary school has 400 children. If all the children of drug abusing parents were of primary school age, they would fill 625 schools.

More people report mental health problems than ever before, and judging by the prison population we have an increasing number of criminals. In 1993 the average prison population across England and Wales was 44,500; by 1997 when Labour came into power it was 61,100 and by November 2006 a total of 77,000 people were in custody.<sup>4</sup>

But this is a whole-society problem, not just that of the 'feckless'. It is like the alcohol epidemic we are in the midst of. We all drink too much and there is too much drink around and it is too easily afforded. We need to move the national mean so that we all drink less. Similarly, we need to shift the mean so that parents find the wherewithal and permission to spend more time with their very young children.

Any one of the above causes stress in households with children. Add the cumulative effect of two, three or four of them and you seriously destabilise a household and increase the risk of young children suffering.

### **A Sense of Urgency**

Two major trends, differential fertility and rapidly increasing violent crime create a particular urgency for getting to grips with what happens in the years 0-5. Before we come to that it is not commonly understood just how poor the position of UK children is compared to other European countries.

In *An Index of Child Well-being In the European Union* published in 2006 Jonathan Bradshaw and Petra Hoelscher trawl through the official data of the 25 countries of the European Union. They collect eight clusters of information; material situation, housing, health, subjective well-being, education, children relationships, civic participation and risk and safety. Within each cluster they reach down to examine particular manifestations. For example under 'material situation' statistics are collected on deprivation and workless families. In total 51 statistical indicators are examined and a comparative table produced for each cluster. Below is reproduced the average scores across

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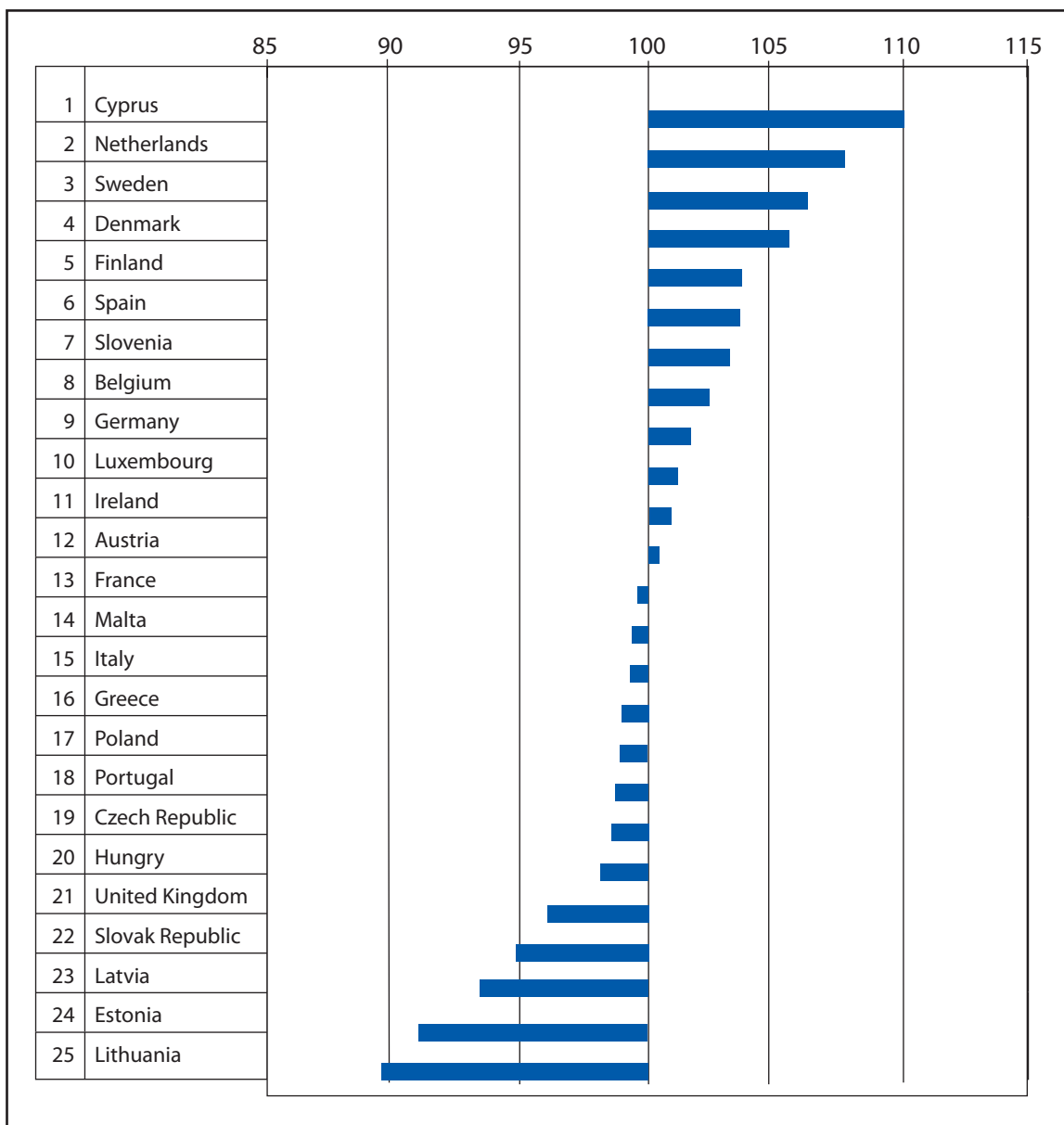
<sup>3</sup> *Hidden Harm: Responding to the needs of children of problem drug users*, Advisory Council on the Misuse of Drugs, 2003

<sup>4</sup> Home Office Research and Statistics Directorate, Research Findings

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all the domains in order to rank the results. It shows that the top performing countries are Cyprus, Netherlands, Netherlands, Denmark. and Finland. At the very bottom of the league is Lithuania followed by Estonia, Latvia, Slovak Republic, UK and Hungary - apart from the UK a collection of ex-Soviet satellites and client states. This comparative position should shame us into action. However it will likely be the more concrete consequences of what is happening all around us that will spur us into change.

**Table 1: An index of child wellbeing in the European Union**



Source: Bradshaw J and Hoelscher P, *An Index of Child Well-being In the European Union*, 2006

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As the sixties' swingers metamorphose into SAGA sweeties, we need to make sure there are enough working-age people to keep the economy turning over and to contribute to health and pension payments. However, within this demographic picture, there is a more significant sub plot. Children from poorer-functioning households tend to have children earlier and more often than the offspring of more affluent or stable households.<sup>5</sup>

I recently asked the director of a major charity, specialising in helping single mothers, why the predominately young women had children in the first place. 'Most have never been loved,' he answered, 'and they see this as the way of getting love into their lives.' Single mothers have not experienced Immaculate Conception but many young men do not accept responsibility for the consequences of their sexual proclivity – children. They perpetuate poor parenting and disadvantage.

Say a young woman aged 17 to 20 from a dysfunctional household has two children. In turn, those children are likely to have children young. Within a 40-year time span, that makes four children most likely raised both poor in money and poor in culture. An increasing number of more affluent women have no children or have their first child in their mid thirties. So, in the same 40 years, the more affluent household is likely to have one child. And so the geometric progression continues.

Public debate has taken account of the estimated shortage of people but not enough about differing behaviour and ability. This goes some way to explain why despite the best efforts of the welfare state it cannot adequately cope with the increasing volume of difficult school age children, life-style health problems and criminality.

### **Violent crime**

Violent crime is increasing alarmingly, as police records attest. But even the police acknowledge that while they are getting better at recording violent crime, they are still grossly under reporting the actual occurrence of violence. Accident and emergency department figures for violent crime hugely exceed police records. Its impact is enormous and is estimated to cost more than £20 billion every year.<sup>6</sup>

Violence is not a great respecter of boundaries. Domestic violence represents 25% of all reported violent crime and it occurs right across all social classes. And while gun and knife carriers, almost exclusively men, do tend to live in poorer parts of our cities they practice their trade more widely.

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<sup>5</sup> Joshi and Wright, *Starting Life in Scotland, New Wealth for Old Nations*, Princeton University Press

<sup>6</sup> Hoskings G, *Violence and What to do about it*, The Wave Report for 2005, [www.wavetrust.org](http://www.wavetrust.org)

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I went on holiday 27 years ago with an old school friend visiting 1<sup>st</sup> World War battlefields, climbing hills and camping. He now lives a few hundred miles away but we did manage to have lunch a year ago and he told me with pride about his son's character and achievements; he was about to enter St. Andrew's University to study history. While I was writing this paper the news came through that a man boarded a Virgin train in Lancaster with a woman and three young children. He set about verbally abusing her. His behaviour caught the attention of a young student who looked at him 'the wrong way'. The man stabbed the student to death. Thomas Grant was the student killed, my friend's son.

Violence takes different form; physical, emotional and, in the case of young children, neglect.

If we are to be tough on violence and the causes of violence it helps to know what the causes are and how we identify the risk factors. In a report, *Violence and what to do about it* the Wave Trust correlated a team of international violence experts. Their message boiled down to this; violence results from an interaction between two components, an individual propensity (personal factors) and external triggers (social factors such as overcrowding, bad housing, alcohol). On their own social factors do not cause crime. The experts argue that 'the propensity to violence develops primarily from wrong treatment before age 3.'

To the Wave experts who have studied violent and non-violent societies throughout the world, violence is not inevitable, we are not fated to be violent. Whole societies record no violence. The diagnosis of the causes of violence provides a foretaste of the solution; 'Empathy is the single greatest inhibitor of the propensity to violence. Empathy fails to develop when parents or prime carers fail to attune with their infants. Absence of such parental sensitive caring combined with harsh discipline is a recipe for violent, antisocial offspring.' A recipe of neglect plus harsh discipline is most likely to produce a difficult child and a violent adult. This is especially true for men who strike out. Women are more likely to internalise problems and develop mental health problems, often chronic.

If lack of empathy is the cause of violence, how do we identify the risk factors and act early? Before a baby is born there is likelihood of neurological impairment if the mother smokes, drinks alcohol, uses drugs or suffers stress. By stress I do not mean a bad day at the office, I mean domestic violence or its equivalent. Evidence tells us that domestic violence (almost exclusively perpetrated by men on women) often first occurs and escalates during pregnancy. It is also a risk factor for low

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birth weight, an indicator for postnatal depression and may seriously affect children who witness the abuse of their mothers or who are abused themselves.

Once a child is born the risk factors are associated with young mothers, single parents, neglect and incompetent care, maternal rejection and a mother's mental health. Young children, as well as being a target for physical or sexual abuse, have a ringside seat, as observers of violence.

Young babies learn about the world and interpret what is happening through relationships – for good or bad. Children learn through relationships to speak and say thank you or how to take their turn or how to strike out or how to move away from blows. Poor parenting skills are a strong predictor of anti-social behaviour.

Without a greater commitment to reducing domestic violence we will not reduce youth violence. This couldn't be further removed from the conventional Victorian wisdom 'spare the rod and spoil the child'.

A multi agency tool for case reviews and risk assessment<sup>7</sup> has been designed and tested for women at risk but now needs to be more comprehensively used. Some health authorities train midwives to engage and win the trust of mothers to establish if domestic violence is taking place. Vulnerable women need help and violent men need to be supported to address their violence.

Institutionally the Home Office, the criminal justice system and the police have to be encouraged to tackle causes and pursue prevention.

There is sympathy in the police for this approach because they know from their own experience on the ground, from the records of their analysts and from hospital accident and emergency services, that while most crime is reducing, violent crime is increasing. We know from the long-term monitoring of disadvantaged children who have gone through good-quality early-year programmes that the most marked improvement is found in reduced criminal and violent activity. Financially this converts to the greatest saving to the taxpayer.

The World Health Organisation has advocated that violent crime be set within a public health model. Violent crime in its causes and effects for perpetrators, victims and onlookers is a public health issue. In Scotland the police have already established a national violence reduction unit,

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<sup>7</sup> Multi-Agency Risk Assessment Conferences, currently being trialled in different parts of the UK

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which has at its centre the concept of violent crime being seen within a public health model. In England any regional or a national violent reduction unit has still to be created. Violence reduction units could become major drivers of national change in tackling the causes of violence and criminality. The police know more than most what is happening on the streets and behind closed doors.

**Recommendation:** Establish a violence reduction unit working from a public health model in England or in English regions. This would act as a major driver of change and produce significant long-term savings.

Differential fertility and the increase in violent crime create the urgency for getting 0-5 years right. There are other very good reasons for acting.

### **The moral and economic arguments for change**

It is close on ten years since Labour came into government. It has pledged to abolish child poverty by 2020. Increased in-work benefits and the minimum wage have lifted hundreds of thousands of families out of the worst of poverty. In England, a new and wholly commendable, 10-Year National Childcare Strategy and implementation plan was published in 2005. Sure Start and children centres, which I will return to later, have made a promising start but need to do more to match the scale, management and human complexity of the challenge. In Scotland, the picture has been patchier.

In both countries, parents have the prime responsibility as agents of change. But the state has a role in helping parents be better at parenting. Through risk assessment and outreach work parents who are struggling can be supported. Good day care enriches the experience of children and, if rooted in the community, can support parents and demonstrate appropriate caring skills.

Enriching early childhood experience and supporting parents in the crucial early years is pragmatic, challenging and economically efficient. Such an approach encourages fairness and equity; children have no choice in their parents. And, morally, it is the right thing to do. If we get the early years right, we will help people to look after themselves and, in time, get work. Instead of being a threat on the streets and a cost to the criminal justice system, a drag on their classmates and a liability to the health and the welfare system, they will turn into adults who can contribute positively to society.

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### **Fixing the problems at source**

There is also a big message for government. Systematic analysis of early years and a flow of criminal justice, health, education, and welfare and work problems show that investing in early years pays off. If there is rain coming through your ceiling, you stick a bucket beneath the drips. You then either have to find ever-bigger containers to catch the flow or a roofer or plumber to solve the problem at source. In business, it is not enough to know that you have a cash flow problem; you want to know who is not paying, how the debtor register is being managed or if you have problems in your order book. In government and public sector reform, we need to move beyond exaltation and technical fixes. We need to get into causes and create aspirations that are worth getting out of bed for.

### 2. The evidence for early years enrichment

Why do some children grow up to be little angels and others to be out and out rogues? Is the way we turn out predetermined or susceptible to influence?

Before going into some of the complexities, let me give you the straightforward answer. Children are a reflection of the world in which they develop. If that world is safe, full of strong relationships, predictable and enriched by conversation and good experiences, the child will grow up to be a self regulating, thoughtful and productive member of society. If, on the other hand, the child's world is chaotic and threatening, devoid of close relationships, stimulation and supportive words, the child is much more likely to be impulsive, violent, inattentive and have difficulties with relationships.

The more we create the right kind of environment for our children with good relationships and appropriate stimulation, the more angels we create and the fewer rogues.<sup>8</sup>

The most important six years in a person's life are up to the age of five.

We really ought not to be born when we are. Our brains and bodies have been busy forming inside the womb, but while we have the requisite number of fingers and toes when we arrive, our brains have not nearly finished taking shape. Stephen J Gold, the eminent palaeontologist and evolutionist, points out that nature has to send us out early, otherwise we would, in evolutionary and physical terms, be well and truly stuck. Longer in the womb and the foetus would grow a head size that would prevent it coming through even the best childbearing hips.

I thought the first five years of a child's life were the most critical. But Professor Vivette Glover, professor of perinatal psychobiology at Imperial College London, persuaded me that the nine months before seeing the light of day absolutely had to be included in this paper, and this is why.

Vivette's words summarise the work of a series of research scientists, '(The) programming hypothesis brings a new perspective to public health. Diseases that were once thought to arise near the time of their manifestation in adult life are now known to have roots in pre- and early postnatal life.'

Prenatal stress results in increased behavioural and emotional problems and impaired cognitive and language development. It can also contribute to Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder.

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<sup>8</sup> Professor Perry B, Maltreatment and the Developing Child: How Childhood Experiences Shapes Child and Culture, Margaret McCain Lecture, 2004













































































