# Early Intervention: Good Parents, Great Kids, Better Citizens

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**Executive Summary**

## 1. Introduction

Large parts of our society are massively underachieving and the financial and social costs of this are both enormous and multiplying. This is an evidence-based analysis and plan of action for the radical new social policy of 'Early Intervention': true prevention to break the intergenerational cycle of underachievement in many of our communities. The 'Early Intervention' paper looks at:

- Problems and costs of social dysfunction, violence, drugs, alcohol and family breakdown
- Why 0-3 years is the vital period for parents to build children's emotional and social foundations
- Key interventions to prepare 0-18s to be parents
- Early Intervention locally and internationally
- Necessary commitments for all Governments over the next generation to tackle the roots of underachievement

## 2. Defining the problem

In polling undertaken for *Breakthrough Britain: The Next Generation*, of those expressing an opinion, 74 per cent of parents (and 62 per cent of adults) agreed that 'the present government's policies concentrate too much on punishing anti-social behaviour rather than tackling the causes of behavioural problems.'

YouGov polled 2827 expectant parents or parents (27-29 May 2008) and 2337 adults, not just parents, (11- 15 July 2008)

The fabric of society is crumbling at the margins, leaving behind an increasingly isolated class of people whose lives are characterised by deprivation, dependency and family breakdown. This group is expanding as its members have children earlier and faster than average. Focusing too narrowly on economic and educational factors ignores the need to build capabilities and tackle the precursors of social problems in children aged 0-3.

The Government needs to enable parents to give their children effective and early nurturing, warmth and attention, and to equip

those who will raise the next generation with the skills for being good parents: skills which can be learnt throughout childhood itself.

## *3. The scale of the problem*

Violence

- 1.5 million children (one in eight) are growing up in 'at risk' situations
- Violent offences were 25 times higher in 2003 than in 1950 in England and Wales
- Violence by young people on young people is the most significant cause of fear and concern about community safety in London after terrorism

Educational failure

- By age three, social and educational development of children from disadvantaged families lags a full year behind middle-class contemporaries and they are five times more likely to fail academically
- Last year 60,000 children a day were absent from school. 38 per cent of school leavers do not attain five A*- C grade GCSEs

Dependency

- 350,000 children have drug-addicted parents and one million have alcohol-addicted parents
- Children's alcohol consumption has doubled in the last 15 years accelerating most rapidly among 11-13 year olds
- 10 per cent of 11-12 year old boys and 60 per cent of 15-16 year old boys binge drink at least once a month
- Binge drinking leads to injury, drug-taking, dangerous driving, problems with the police, teenage pregnancy and unsafe sex

Family breakdown

- We have the highest rate of teenage pregnancy in Western Europe
- 15 per cent of children are born into homes without a resident biological father
- 25 per cent of young offenders are already fathers

The UK's high rates of family breakdown are strongly implicated in the recent UNICEF study of child wellbeing, which ranked the UK at the bottom of the 21 countries evaluated – below three former communist states.

***Link between family breakdown and low well-being of youngsters***

A YouGov survey found 2,447 UK adults not brought up in a two-parent family were:

a) 75 per cent more likely to fail at school
b) 70 per cent more likely to be a drug addict
c) 50 per cent more likely to have alcohol problems
d) 40 per cent more likely to have serious debt problems
e) 35 per cent more likely to experience unemployment / welfare dependency

Youth mental health problems

- 361,832 prescriptions per annum for Ritalin (ADHD treatment)
- One in 15 children and adolescents now regularly self-harm e.g. by cutting and blood-letting. They have often suffered tragic early experiences which have led them to find such extreme coping devices

Later life dysfunction

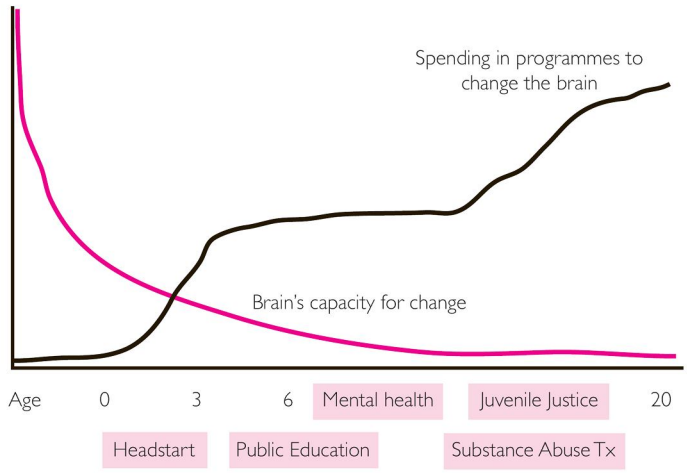
- People who had high levels of adverse childhood experience are more inclined to use such psychoactive substances as nicotine, alcohol, prescription and street drugs

Cost

- Annually violence costs the country at least £20 billion
- Children in care cost £2 billion and dealing with the consequences of child abuse costs at least £1 billion

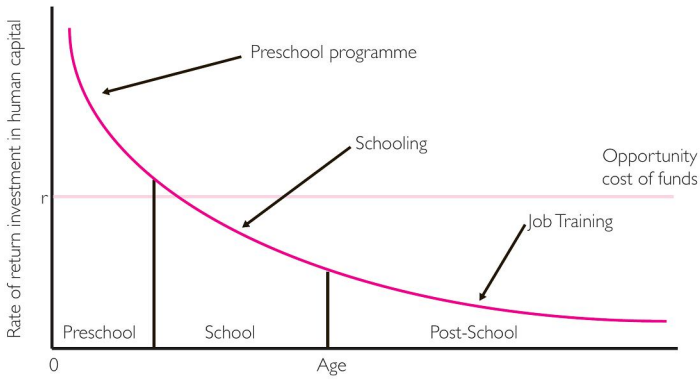
However, we tend to spend money at points when change will be much harder to effect, when children's brains (which have developed to 85 per cent of potential by age three) and habits have largely formed (see graphs below). F*or every £1 invested in effective prevention services, the Government will save £7 in the future*.

**Brain's capacity to change versus public spending on programmes for change**




Source: Wave Trust

**Rates of return to human capital investment initially setting investment to be equal across all ages**




So urce: Cunha F, Heckman J J, Lochner L and Masterov D V. , 'Interpreting the Evidence on Life Cycle Skill Formation', *NBER Working Paper Series*, National Bureau of Economic Research, Cambridge, MA, USA, May 2005

## *4. The roots of the problem*

The graphs above strongly suggest that an investment fulcrum lies in 'primary prevention' focused on 'at risk' groups under the age of three.

<u>The evidence base for Early Intervention</u>

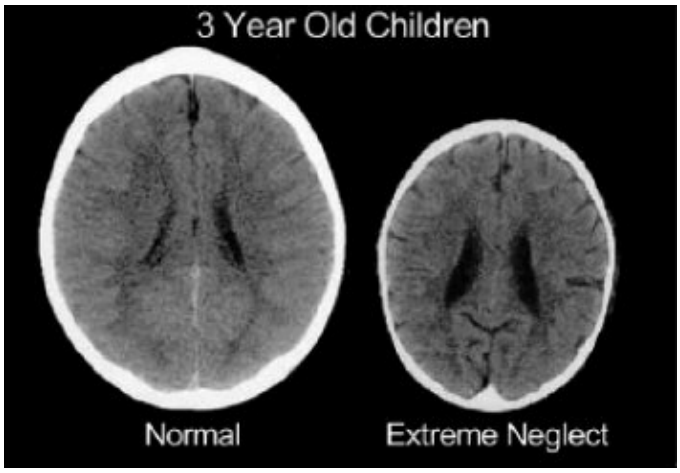
The Dunedin Study, first published in 1996, and the US Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study demonstrate the hidden causes of dysfunction and provides evidence long-term that Early Intervention is effective.

<u>Importance of the first 3 years of life</u>

Human infants are born premature in comparison with most other mammals and have brains whose completion must be achieved in a sensitive period after birth. Neuroscience shows that our brains are largely formed by what we experience in early life. Synapses or brain connections are strengthened by experience. Early learned behaviour is highly resistant to change and the more positive stimuli a baby is given, the more brain cells and synapses it will be able to develop.

When parents are attuned to their babies and understand their needs, this develops empathy, and a pro-social child is likely to be happier, healthier and more intelligent than one deprived of these essentials.

Human brain 'plasticity' renders infants acutely vulnerable to trauma. The brain of an abused or neglected child is significantly smaller than the norm, its stunted developments the direct result of much less stimulation (e.g. sight, sound, touch) than is required for normal development.




(The *combined* stressors of poverty also appear to have a significant impact on development scores. One study of 22 month old babies showed, on a scale of one to 70, that high SES infants averaged 57, medium SES averaged 48 and low SES 43).

The early years are so critical to later social development that pathways to violence are often laid down by the age of two or three. Untreated early-onset aggression can establish a lifelong tendency to be aggressive.

Parents may fail to attune because they had little nurture themselves, or because of postnatal depression, domestic violence or other severe stresses. Infants 'catch' emotions from their parents and daily neglect conditions a baby to expect isolation. So getting help to parents as early as possible is essential – but such intervention goes against our cultural tendency to treat pre-school child-rearing as the exclusive province of parents (without obvious maltreatment).

Better life skills and higher intelligence arising from better emotional adjustment, enable better learning and greater employment prospects. In turn, all these produce lower levels of addictive behaviour, a reduced likelihood of being trapped in poverty and a greater likelihood that people will be good parents to their own children. This pamphlet does not suggest that the Government intervene within families in whatever circumstances: the aim of Early Intervention is to focus on the dysfunctional and those at risk.

## *5. The toughest step is implementation – real world Early Intervention*

Effective intervention requires the right structure as well as the right policy framework and programmes. But this is not 'one size fits all': the Early Intervention approach in the USA, for example, is much more influenced by the private and charitable sectors than in Europe. Government cannot successfully resolve the most serious social problems on its own and the voluntary sector's people-centred approach is often more effective for empowering the most vulnerable people.

*Invest in Kids, Colorado, USA.*

Invest in Kids (IIK) recommends the Nurse Family Partnership and the Incredible Years Parenting Programme. IIK is novel because:

- It has brought together philanthropists (corporate lawyers) and community leaders to promote Early Intervention strategies at a local level
- It aims to implement programmes in communities throughout Colorado

The UK equivalent would be an organisation connecting all local council leaders across the country to propagate an early years approach.

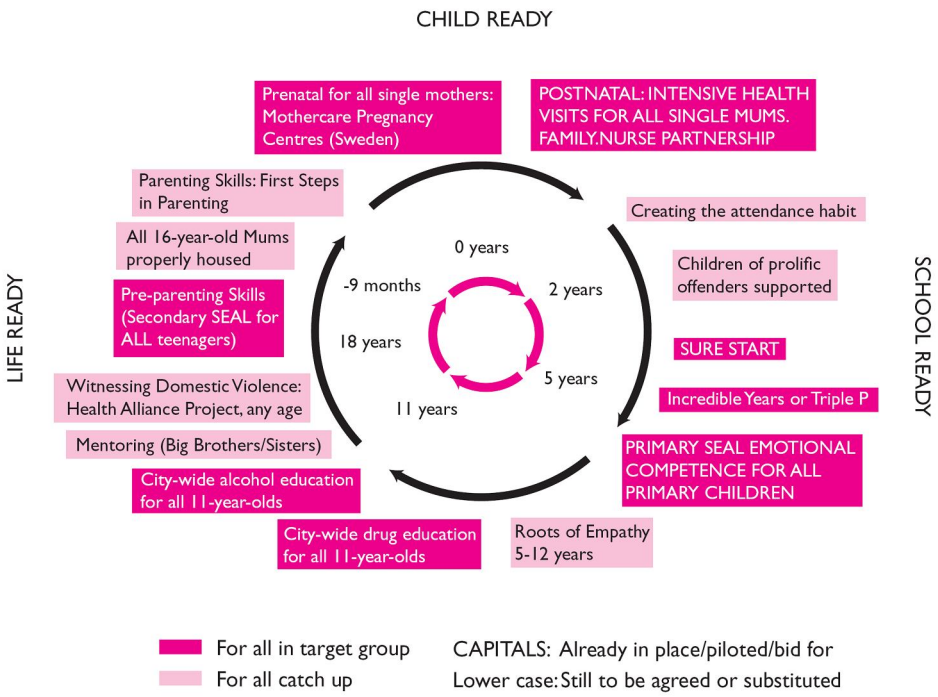
*Nottingham – Early Intervention City*

Nottingham North, (co-author Graham Allen's constituency) has

- The highest teenage pregnancy rate in Western Europe
- At 8 per cent the lowest proportion of people going on to higher education

In response to these challenges, Nottingham's Local Strategic Partnership has spread a number of Early Intervention initiatives and Nottingham is now an 'Early Intervention City'. If Early Intervention can work in Nottingham, it can work everywhere in the UK. Its own version of the 'virtuous cycle' (see below) draws on the core menu of six foundational building blocks described in the next section.

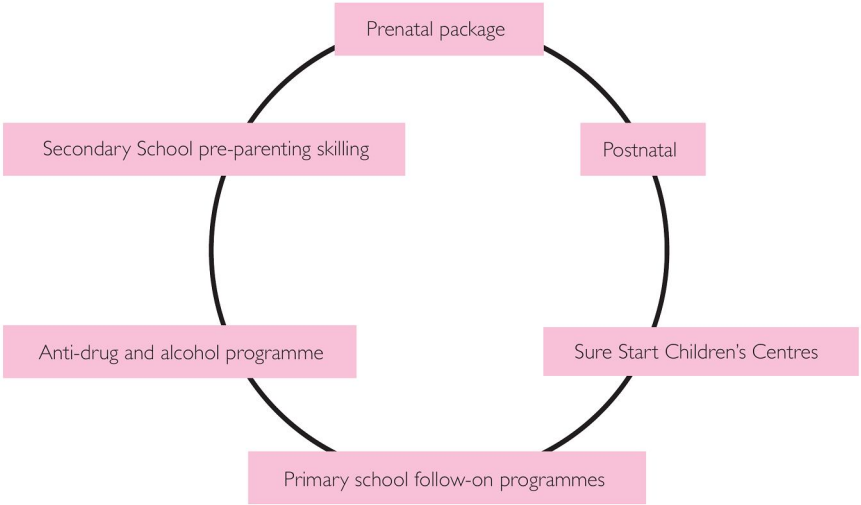
**Early Intervention Package: by age, intervention and aim**




## *6. The Early Intervention menu for 0-18s*

Our research identified six foundational elements which must be part of a general programme aimed at breaking the intergenerational transmission of disadvantage. These will influence a high proportion of children and provide the basis for a virtuous circle to improve future parenting:

1. A prenatal package
2. Postnatal (Family/Nurse Partnership) support
3. Sure Start Children's Centres
4. Primary school follow-on programmes, focusing on parenting support, language, numeracy and literacy, and the development of children's social competences:
5. Anti-drug and alcohol programmes
6. Secondary school pre-parenting (i.e. pre-conception) skilling




## 7. Early Intervention: A Guide for Government

Breaking the intergenerational cycle of underachievement more widely in the UK requires that Early Intervention strategies become standard rather than unusual. The final section of the pamphlet describes how national politics and central Government can make this happen. Success requires

- The right policy framework
- A significant shift in culture (proactive instead of reactive approaches)
- Accepting the concept that Early Intervention is good social policy while continuing with late intervention is not sustainable in the long term. Early Intervention is *less expensive* and *more effective*
- A cross-party approach: investing for such long-term payback will need the commitment not only of the present Government but also of all those likely to be in power nationally and locally during the next 20 years
- Letting localities get on with it: central Government should support and drive but delivery of Early Intervention must be sensitive to local circumstances.

In his speech to the Local Government Association in 2007, Rt Hon David Cameron said

> *There is a depressing journey too many of our young people take – a journey of three letter acronyms. From an EBD unit to a PRU. From the PRU to a YOI. And finally to an HMP. Early*

*intervention is the best hope we've got to get people off this journey.*

## *8. The 'Early Intervention' Commitments*

The authors of the pamphlet will encourage party leaders to include a number of commitments in their election manifestos:

1. The Manifesto Framework

*We ask for a clear commitment to pursue an Early Intervention strategy should be made in party manifestos and party leaders should all make an unequivocal public commitment to the intergenerational change which Early Intervention needs.*

2. A Research Base

*We ask for a commitment that a future UK Government commission a long-term study, similar to the New Zealand Dunedin Study, comparing the development of cohorts of children with and without early intervention to inform the policy as it develops.*

3. A National Policy Assessment Centre

*We ask for a pledge to create a National Policy Assessment Centre to assess and recommend the most robust and sustainable Early Intervention policies in the UK.*

4. Local Government

*We request that the Local Government Association, in cooperation with central Government should host an Early Intervention Leader's Network within the UK.*

5. The Comprehensive Spending Review

*To help place Early Intervention at the heart of the public policy debate, we ask each party leader to name the next Comprehensive Spending Review the 'Early Intervention CSR', so that steps can be taken now to initiate serious financial reorientation and investment alongside the serious Treasury research and planning which always precedes a CSR.*

6. Local Early Intervention vision for each area

*We request that central Government asks every local council and/or Local Strategic Partnership to produce a short Early Intervention vision for their area, learning from best available practice.*

7. A Treasury Study

*We urge a modestly funded, multi-departmental study, led by the Treasury and Cabinet Office research, to devise a new form of financial instrument to fund Early Intervention sustainably by releasing for use now some of the massive future savings of Early Intervention.*