

A close-up photograph of a woman with long brown hair smiling warmly as she reads a book to a young child. The child, wearing a pink top, is looking down at the book. The woman is wearing a red and white striped top. The background is a soft, out-of-focus light color.

**Parenting
matters:**

early years and
social mobility

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CENTREFORUM

About the author

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■ Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Executive Summary | 4 |
| Introduction | 9 |
| 1 Building the brain: the science of early skill formation | 18 |
| 2 Focus on parenting and families: lessons from the science of early skill formation | 23 |
| 3 Shifting attitudes: international perspectives and a national parenting campaign | 29 |
| 4 SKIP: the national parenting campaign for New Zealand | 35 |
| 5 A UK parenting campaign: '5-a-day for child development' | 38 |
| 6 Encouraging targeted participation: parenting education and social mobility | 46 |
| 7 Incentivising targeted participation? parenting education and social mobility | 53 |
| Conclusion | 60 |

■ Executive Summary

The coalition government has nailed its colours to the mast on social mobility in language that could not be clearer or more committed:

“Improving social mobility is the principal goal of the Coalition Government’s social policy... tackling the opportunity deficit – creating an open, socially mobile society – is our guiding purpose.”¹

While advocating efforts to tackle the issue at all stages in the life cycle, the government has also very clearly identified and embraced the key message driven home by both the Frank Field and Graham Allen reviews that it is by intervening in the *early years* of a child’s life – the ‘Foundation Years’ of 0-5 – that the biggest differences can be made. This reflects the overwhelming evidence that investments designed to create firm foundations at an early stage in a child’s life are dramatically more efficient (both practically and financially) than later remedial interventions.

The overwhelming evidence also suggests that – within the context of these Foundation Years – the single most important factor influencing a child’s intellectual and social development is the quality of parenting and care they receive and the quality of the Home Learning Environment that this creates: *what parents do is ultimately more important than who parents are*. Parents from all social and educational backgrounds *can and do* provide home environments that are highly conducive to child development. However, the evidence also suggests that “children from poorer backgrounds are much less likely to experience a rich home learning environment than children from better-off

1 HM Government, ‘Opening doors, breaking barriers: a strategy for social mobility’, 2011.

backgrounds”². This fact is one of the crucial factors perpetuating the pervasive discrepancies in life opportunities that mark the invisible and pernicious barriers of social immobility.

However, in a context where parenting remains largely viewed as an intensely private matter, any proposals for wide-scale interventions in this area – any serious attempt to influence or ‘interfere’ *with what parents do* – has traditionally been beset by fears of ‘nanny-statism’. Perhaps inevitably, such a view has been particularly prominent among conventional liberal thinking. This paper will argue strongly, however, that the government is correct to take the bold step of embracing the firm evidence on child development in seeking to create a strategy that:

“sets out plans to support a culture where the key aspects of good parenting are widely understood and where all parents can benefit from advice and support...what is needed is a much wider culture change towards recognising the importance of parenting, and how society can support mothers and fathers to give their children the best start in life. *We want parenting advice and support to be considered the norm* – just as many new parents choose to access ante-natal education.”³ [emphasis added]

Indeed, this paper not only firmly endorses such a commitment, but will argue that it is one that must be carried through fully and bravely. Moreover, it must be implemented very carefully if it is to maximise the desirable effects, not least in relation to the ‘principal goal’ of improving social mobility. In particular:

- The paper will outline, as a basis for all that follows, the key scientific concepts behind the development of early brain architecture and skill formation and identify the crucial challenge these present to the desire to improve social mobility. It will argue that these concepts create the imperative for greater efforts at intervention directed at the family sphere to prevent the squandering of individual potential (particularly among children from lower-income backgrounds) – however

2 Joseph Rowntree Foundation, ‘The importance of attitudes and behaviour for poorer children’s educational attainment’, 2010.

3 HM Government, ‘Opening doors, breaking barriers: a strategy for social mobility’, 2011.

counter-intuitive this may feel from a traditional liberal perspective. Indeed, if we consider a core element of liberalism to be allowing each individual to realise their full potential, such a squandering is in fact itself deeply and fundamentally *illiberal*.

- The paper will then challenge the more recent stance that the key to improving child development outcomes is, first and foremost, to implement policies focused on enabling parents to spend more *time* with their children. While unquestionably an important factor, the evidence points heavily to the fact that time alone is not enough: it is what parents are *doing* with this time that has the biggest impact. Crucially, there is also evidence of significant behavioural and information asymmetries between different social groups in relation to these basic mechanics of child development in the home. After examining briefly the comparative international context, the paper argues that a significant cultural shift is required (akin to those involving seat belt wearing and drink driving) towards recognising that parenting has a societal aspect and importance and is something about which it is socially acceptable for people to seek advice, learn and improve.
- As part of the effort to engender such a culture shift, the paper takes up the possibility of a national parenting campaign as recommended in the Graham Allen Review and gestured towards in both the Social Mobility Strategy and the recent Foundation Years policy statement. Drawing on international experience, this paper will propose and explore a basis by which a such a campaign might successfully operate by building on the established '5-a-day' concept in relation to fruit and vegetables. Drawing directly on the science of early child development, such a '*5-a-day for child development*' campaign could successfully identify a series of small, manageable steps based on easily graspable, tangible and readily packageable 'hooks' that would enable the key messages to take hold in parents' minds. It would also maximise the potential for private sector engagement. To illustrate this concept, a tentative package of encouraged child development

activities is proposed, based on discussions with child development academics and individuals from child and family welfare organisations.

- ⌚ Any such campaign would be designed to supplement the direct parenting initiatives set to be actively encouraged by the government. It is important that, in keeping with a desired culture shift towards viewing parenting as something about which *all* can learn and improve, these initiatives should be available universally to all parents. However, keeping always in mind the ‘guiding purpose’ of tackling the opportunity deficit, within this need for universality also lies the seed of potential problems. The provision of free pre-school education places for three and four year olds and the experiences of some Sure Start centres indicate the strong potential for a (middle-class biased) social gradient in the take-up of child-development initiatives. As such, there is a very real possibility that not only could the proposed parenting initiatives fail to do anything to improve social mobility, but they could even *exacerbate the gaps* in development between children from different backgrounds. This is particularly problematic given the evidence of existing and damaging behavioural and information asymmetries between social groups in relation to the Home Learning Environment.
- ⌚ The coalition has tied itself firmly to the commitment to improving social mobility such that its claims to be a socially progressive government cannot help but live and die by this sword. This paper will argue that – with this key touchstone in mind – it is therefore imperative that the government investigate how to take the vital *further step* to address these asymmetries and to ensure that participation among those from lower-income backgrounds in the proposed parenting initiatives is actively encouraged.
- ⌚ The final section of the paper will therefore identify a series of possible mechanisms by which such targeted participation within a universal scheme could be made to work without stigmatising those most in need. Such mechanisms would be intended to provide this vital

further step and therefore enable the government's willingness to focus on the crucial area of the Home Learning Environment and parenting to go beyond being a general tool for child development and become an *active weapon to counteract disadvantage*. As part of this process, it is argued that the government must be willing to explore inventive and even potentially controversial options. One such option would be an incentivisation mechanism designed simultaneously to tackle poverty and inequality both in financial terms and also in terms of the unequal life chances that perpetuate intergenerational immobility.

■ Introduction

*"The true test of fairness is the distribution of opportunities. That is why improving social mobility is the principal goal of the Coalition Government's social policy"*⁴

Government Social Mobility Strategy

*"The true measure of child affluence and poverty is the quality of parenting. A lone mother living in financial poverty can create a stimulating environment for her child"*⁵

James Heckman, Nobel Prize winning economist

Social mobility and the foundation years

The coalition government has nailed its colours to the mast on social mobility in language that could not be clearer or more committed: "tackling the opportunity deficit – creating an open, socially mobile society – is our guiding purpose"⁶. Any such ambitious attempt will require efforts on multiple fronts, from tackling income inequalities generally through to youth training, university access and employment opportunities, a fact recognised by the 'life cycle' approach to the issue advocated in the coalition's Social Mobility Strategy. However, within this, the government has also very clearly identified and embraced the key message driven home by both the Frank Field and Graham Allen reviews that it is by intervening in the *early years* of a child's life – the 'Foundation Years' of 0-5 – that the biggest differences can be made:

4 HM Government, 'Opening doors, breaking barriers: a strategy for social mobility', 2011.

5 J Heckman, 'The American family in black and white: A post-racial strategy for improving skills to promote equality', 2011.

6 HM Government, 'Opening doors, breaking barriers: a strategy for social mobility', 2011.

“We have found overwhelming evidence that children’s life chances are most heavily predicated on their development in the first five years of life”.⁷

This in turn reflects the overwhelming evidence that investments designed to create firm foundations at an early stage are dramatically more efficient (both practically and financially) than later remedial interventions.

As it stands, gaps in development between children from different social backgrounds emerge early and persist. (See figures 1 and 2 opposite.)

Evidence of the pervasive, long lasting effects of these early emerging discrepancies abounds, but two striking statistics are sufficient to paint the picture:

- while only one in nine children with parents from low income backgrounds reach the top income quartile, almost half of those with parents in the top income quartile remain there themselves; and
- while almost one in five children receive free school meals, this group accounts for fewer than *one in a hundred* Oxbridge students.

The purely pragmatic warping effects of such an ossified social structure are themselves alarming. The Boston Consulting Group, in conjunction with the Sutton Trust, has estimated that failure to improve levels of social mobility could cost the UK economy as much as £140 billion *each year* by 2050 in wasted child potential.⁸ Repayment of the deficit is currently forecast to ‘cost’ 16.5 billion a year in spending cuts for the next five years.⁹

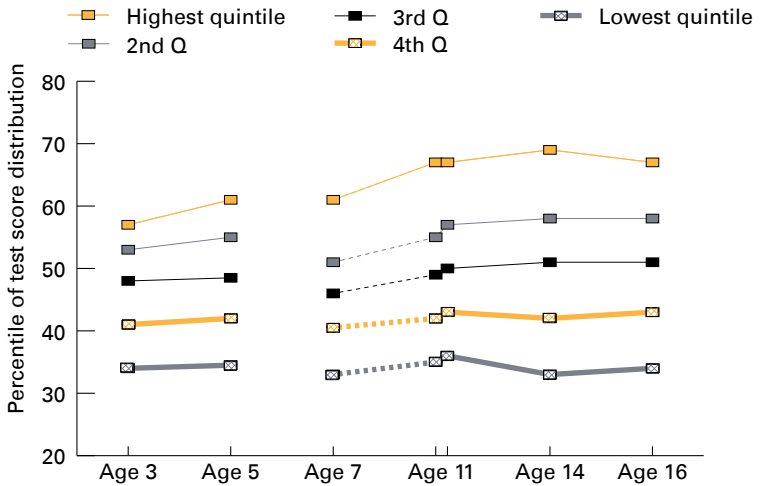
More importantly, however, above and beyond these practical points, there is a danger in the sheer weight and number of the social (im)mobility statistics that are rehearsed and rehashed, from the constant sight of the gradients of the below graphs, that one becomes jaded – almost struck by a sense of deterministic despair – such that it can dull the glaring truth behind them.

7 F Field, ‘The foundation years: preventing poor children becoming poor adults. The report of the Independent Review on Poverty and Life Chances’, 2010.

8 Sutton Trust (2010), ‘The Mobility Manifesto’

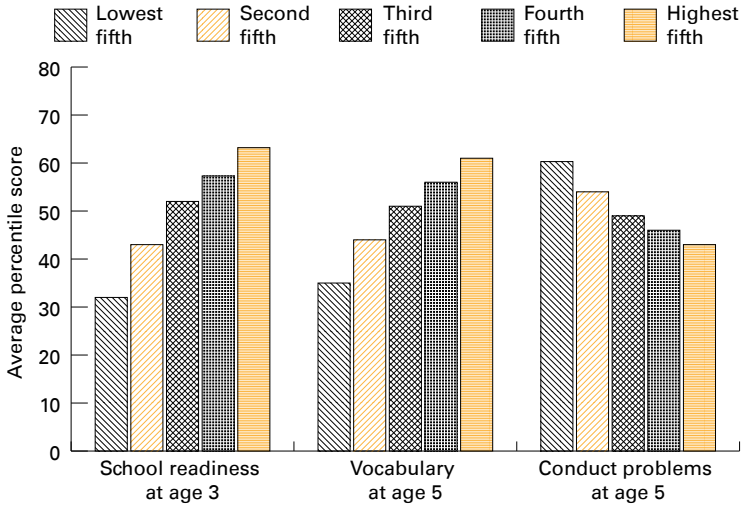
9 HM Government, ‘Emergency Budget 2010: executive summary’, 22 June 2010.

Figure 1 – Cognitive outcomes by socio-economic quintile across age groups



Source: Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 'The importance of attitudes and behaviour for poorer children's educational attainment', 2010.

Figure 2 – Performance across a range of early years outcomes by socio-economic quintile



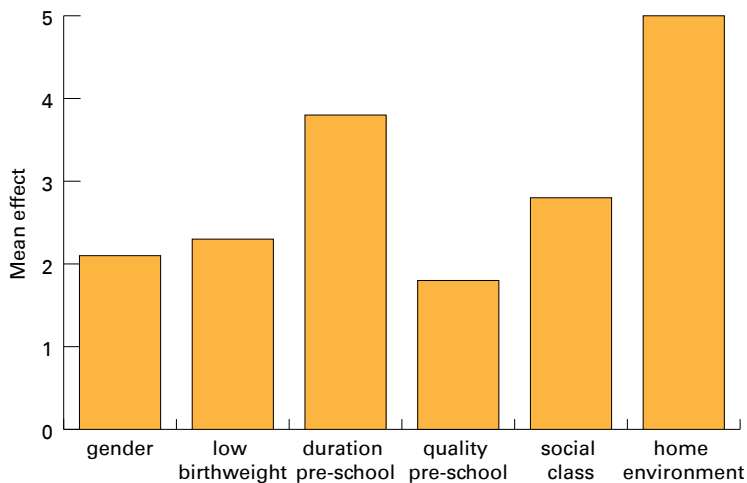
Source: HM Government, 'Opening doors, breaking barriers: a strategy for social mobility', 2011.

The fact that modern Britain, more so than almost any other developed nation, is a society in which where a child will *get to* is in such large part dictated by where they have *come from*, is deeply unfair and unjust in the most basic sense. Crucially, it is also – if we consider a core element of liberalism to be allowing each individual to realise their full potential – deeply and fundamentally *illiberal*.

The Home Learning Environment and parenting

It is now firmly established that the single most important factor influencing child intellectual and social development is the quality of parenting and care that a child receives and the quality and conduciveness of the Home Learning Environment (“HLE”) that this creates.¹⁰ As shown in the graph below, the quality of the HLE is not only the factor with the single biggest impact on child development – in this case, with specific reference to literacy at age 5 – but it has up to three times the impact of the quality of pre-school attended.

Figure 3 – Effects upon literacy at age 5



Graph reproduced with the kind permission of Edward Melhuish, co-author of EPPE, 2008, based on EPPE data.

10 K Sylva, et al, 'Effective pre-school and primary education 3-11 project (EPPE 3-11). Report from the primary phase: pre-school, school and family influences on children's development during key stage 2 (age 7-11)', 2008. Hereafter referenced as 'EPPE, 2008'.

These findings are particularly significant given that it has been established that vocabulary at age five is the *single best predictor* of later social mobility for children from lower-income backgrounds.¹¹

Indeed, crucially, the quality of the HLE for all children is more important than parental occupation, education, income or social class: as the invaluable EPPE studies have shown, *what parents do is ultimately more important than who parents are*. As suggested in the Heckman quote above, parents from all social and educational backgrounds *can and do* provide home environments that are highly conducive to child development:

“Poor mothers with few qualifications can improve their children’s progress and give them a better start at school by engaging in activities at home that engage and stretch the child’s mind”.¹²

However, the evidence also points to the fact that, *on average*, “children from poorer backgrounds are much less likely to experience a rich home learning environment than children from better-off backgrounds”¹³. As will be outlined, this fact is one of the crucial factors perpetuating the pervasive discrepancies in life opportunities that mark the invisible and pernicious barriers of social immobility.

However, seeking to interfere with or influence ‘what parents do’ is not something that has conventionally sat easily with a traditional view of liberalism. As Steve Webb and Jo Holland identify in their chapter of The Orange Book:

“By instinct, Liberals are suspicious of the power of the state. Liberals believe that individuals should be free to lead their lives in the manner they themselves see fit, provided that the exercise of that freedom does not restrict the freedom of others. In few areas is this wariness of state interference more acute than in our approach to what might loosely be described as ‘family policy’....Where families break down completely and

11 J Blanden, ‘Bucking the trend – what enables those who are disadvantaged in childhood to succeed later in life?’, 2006; cited in DfE / DoH, ‘Supporting families in the foundation years’, 2011.

12 EPPE, 2008.

13 Joseph Rowntree Foundation, ‘The importance of attitudes and behaviour for poorer children’s educational attainment’, 2010.

children are suffering abuse or neglect, we have always been prepared to intervene, but beyond this *our approach to what happens inside families has been laissez-faire in the extreme.*"¹⁴ [emphasis added]

Indeed, parenting in the UK as a whole remains largely viewed as an intensely private matter, with proposals for wide-scale interventions in this area beset by fears of 'nanny-statism'. However, the government has indicated a clear willingness to run this risk and to look to make a difference in this crucial area of the HLE, as outlined in the Social Mobility Strategy:

"Investing in the early years and putting parents and families centre stage is the key to children's development... [our] strategy sets out plans to support a culture where the key aspects of good parenting are widely understood and where all parents can benefit from advice and support...what is needed is a much wider culture change towards recognising the importance of parenting, and how society can support mothers and fathers to give their children the best start in life. *We want parenting advice and support to be considered the norm* – just as many new parents choose to access ante-natal education."¹⁵ [emphasis added]

This commitment has been reiterated and developed in the recent Foundation Years policy statement with the government's stated desire for all families to be able to benefit from parenting advice and support by ensuring that "high quality parenting classes becom[e] widely available" through active efforts to "work with voluntary and private sector partners to look at ways of making these classes accessible to more mothers and fathers".¹⁶

This paper not only firmly endorses such a commitment, but will argue that it is one that must be carried through fully and bravely. Moreover, it must be implemented very carefully if it is to maximise the desirable effects, not least in relation to the 'principal goal' of improving social mobility. In doing so, it will:

14 P Marshall and D Laws, 'The orange book: reclaiming liberalism', 2004.

15 HM Government, 'Opening doors, breaking barriers: a Strategy for social mobility', 2011.

16 DfE / DoH, 'Families in the foundation years', 'supporting families in the foundation years', 2011.

- examine the science behind early brain and skill development and the challenge that this poses in terms of social mobility and the rationale it provides for greater willingness to intervene in the family sphere;
- examine briefly the comparative international context on attitudes towards parenting and parenting policies and analyse the highly successful SKIP national parenting campaign in New Zealand;
- argue that a similar type of campaign in the UK could help to engender the necessary attitudinal shift towards recognising parenting as something that has a societal aspect and importance and something about which it is socially acceptable for people to seek advice, learn and improve;
- propose a basis for such a UK based campaign by building on the success of the '5-a-day' concept in relation to fruit and vegetables to create a campaign structured around the concept of '*5-a-day for child development*';
- argue that, always keeping the key touchstone of social mobility in mind, the government must take steps to explore mechanisms by which, within the desired universal offer of parenting advice and education, participation among lower-income parents can be encouraged (and potentially even directly incentivised), and;
- identify and explore a series of such potential mechanisms that could facilitate this vital further step and thus move beyond a general tool for child development to create a genuine weapon against disadvantage.

1 Building the brain: the science of early skill formation

“Public policy needs to be reformulated to recognize the dynamics of skill formation – the biology and neuroscience that shows that skills beget skills; that success breeds success; that disadvantage gets embodied into the biology of the child and retards the development of children in terms of their health, character and smarts”¹⁷

In his recent Young Foundation lecture ‘Creating a More Equal and Productive Britain’, Nobel prize winning economist and child development expert James Heckman identified an alarming challenge to the coalition’s commitment to improving social mobility: “In the next generation, a group of children will have had a major advantage and I would expect to see a big increase in inequality”¹⁸. Heckman’s argument, in essence, runs as follows: success in modern society is based on skills – both cognitive and non-cognitive (or ‘soft’) – and it is *inequality in skill acquisition that is the primary driver of inequality in achievement between different social groups*. Society is in danger, in effect, of dividing into affluent ‘haves’ and disadvantaged ‘have nots’, with skills primarily determining advantage and disadvantage.

As seen in the graph in Figure 1, gaps in skills between those from affluent and lower-income backgrounds emerge early and persist, in large part due to the fact that: “Skill formation starts in the womb. The early years of a child’s life before the child enters

17 J Heckman, ‘The American family in black and white: a post-racial strategy for improving skills to promote equality’, 2011.

18 See M Bunting, ‘Why character skills are crucial in early years education’, www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/may/20/character-skills-early-years-education, The Guardian, 20 May 2011.

school lay the foundations for all that follows”¹⁹. Crucially, as such, it is *families* – and *parents* in particular – that are the major producers of skills and it is what they *do* in these early years that is of paramount importance. To understand fully why this is the case, it is necessary to grasp the science behind this early brain development and skill formation.

The science of skill formation – evidence from the Centre on the Developing Child, Harvard University

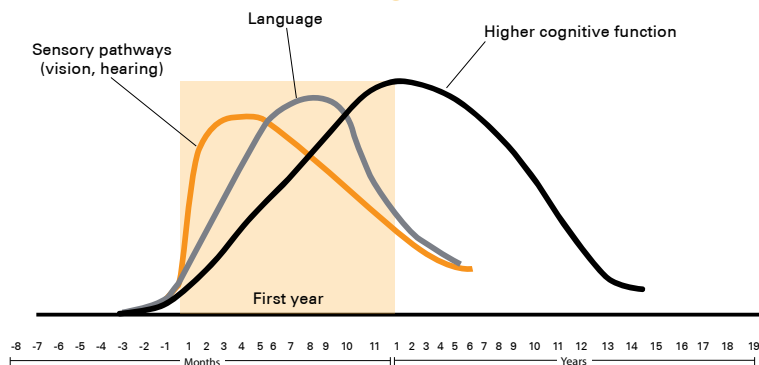
Since 2006, the Harvard University Centre on the Developing Child has drawn together the full breadth of the intellectual resources available across Harvard University’s schools and affiliated hospitals to generate, translate and apply knowledge in the service of improving life outcomes for children throughout the world. As part of this mission, the Centre has published a series of booklets and briefing papers (all available at www.developingchild.harvard.edu) outlining in great but accessible detail the well established science behind the early development of the brain and how its life-long architecture is established by experiences in the early years. The following core principles are drawn directly from, and summarise key elements of, these invaluable booklets and briefing papers.

Brain architecture and developing abilities are built from the bottom up over time

The basic architecture of the brain is constructed through an ongoing process that begins before birth and continues into adulthood. Much like the construction of a home, however, the building process begins with laying the foundations, and the strength of these foundations is fundamental to the success and strength of everything that follows. Brain circuits (i.e. connections between brain cells) that process basic information are wired earlier than those that process more complex information and higher level circuits build on lower level circuits such that adaptation at higher levels is much more difficult if lower level circuits have not been wired properly. Brain architecture is built over a succession of ‘sensitive periods’, each of which is associated with the formation of specific circuits that are associated with specific abilities.

19 J Heckman, ‘The American family in black and white: a post-racial strategy for improving skills to promote equality’, 2011.

Figure 4 – Neural connections for different functions develop sequentially during ‘sensitive periods’



Source: Centre on the Developing Child, ‘InBrief: The science of early childhood development’, Harvard University.

In parallel to the construction of brain circuits, increasingly complex skills also build on the more basic, foundational capabilities that precede them. For example, the ability to understand and then say the names of objects depends upon earlier development of the capacity to differentiate and reproduce the sounds of one’s native language. Similarly, the circuits that underlie the ability to put words together to speak in phrases form a foundation for the subsequent mastery of reading a written sentence in a book. Put simply, circuits build on circuits and skill begets skill. Through this process, “early experiences create a foundation for lifelong learning, behaviour, and both physical and mental health”²⁰. In short, a strong foundation in the early years significantly increases the probability of positive outcomes and a weak foundation increases the odds of later difficulties.

The interactive influences of genes and experience shape the developing brain

Importantly, the highly integrated sets of neural circuits that compose this crucial brain architecture are ‘wired’ under the continuous and mutual influences of both genetics and *the*

²⁰ Centre on the Developing Child, ‘The science of early childhood development’, Harvard University, 2007.

environment provided by early experiences. In effect, genes determine when specific brain circuits are formed and individual experiences then shape how that formation unfolds. Crucially, *it is appropriate sensory input (e.g., through hearing and vision) and stable, responsive relationships* that build the healthy brain architecture that provides a strong foundation for lifelong learning, behaviour, and health.

The most significant ingredients in this developmental process are the interaction, mutuality and reciprocity between the child and the adult figures closest to them, particularly and primarily parents and family members. This process can be thought of as akin to the ‘serve and return’ process in tennis. In early childhood development:

“serve and return happens when young children naturally reach out for interaction through babbling, facial expressions, words, gestures, and cries, and adults respond by getting in sync and doing the same kind of vocalizing and gesturing back at them, and the process continues back and forth.”²¹

However, in the absence of such responses – or if the responses are unreliable or inappropriate – the brain’s architecture does not form as expected which can lead to disparities in learning and behaviour. Another important aspect of the serve and return notion of interaction is that it works best when embedded in an ongoing relationship between a child and an adult who is responsive to the child’s unique individuality. In short:

“Decades of research tell us that mutually rewarding interactions are essential prerequisites for the development of healthy brain circuits and increasingly complex skills.”²²

Toxic stress damages developing brain architecture

Learning how to cope with adversity is an important part of healthy child development. When an individual is threatened, the body activates a variety of physiological responses, including increasing heart rate, blood pressure, and stress hormones such as cortisol. When a young child is protected by supportive

21 *ibid*

22 *ibid*

relationships with adults, they learn to cope with everyday challenges and their stress response system returns to normal – this is considered as *positive stress*. *Tolerable stress* occurs when more serious difficulties, such as the loss of a loved one or a frightening injury, are buffered by caring adults who help the child to adapt, which mitigates the potentially damaging effects of abnormal stress hormones.

However, when strong, frequent, or prolonged exposure to adverse experiences – such as extreme poverty, abuse or neglect – are experienced in early life without adult support, the stress caused can become literally *toxic* to the developing brain architecture. Exposure to such toxic stress in these crucial early years can have a cumulative toll on an individual's physical and mental health and significantly increase the likelihood of developmental delays and other problems. As such:

“Studies show that toddlers who have secure, trusting relationships with parents or non-parent care givers experience minimal stress hormone activation when frightened by a strange event and those who have insecure relationships experience a significant activation of the stress response system. Numerous scientific studies support these conclusions: providing supportive, responsive relationships as early in life as possible can prevent or reverse the damaging effects of toxic stress”.²³

Maternal pre-natal and child post-natal nutrition impact on both child brain development and long term health

Health at every stage of the life course is influenced by nutrition, beginning with the mother's pre-conception nutritional status, extending through pregnancy to early infant feeding and weaning, and continuing with diet and activity throughout childhood and into adult life. In particular, inadequate maternal nutrition during pregnancy can impact on the foetal and infant immune system and is associated with a range of undesirable outcomes in the offspring, including obesity in childhood and adulthood as well as subsequent hypertension and cardiovascular disease. Furthermore, adequate intake of

23 Centre on the Developing Child, 'InBrief: The Impact of Early Adversity on Children's Development', Harvard University.

both macronutrients (e.g. protein, carbohydrates, and fats) and micronutrients (e.g. vitamins and minerals) is particularly important in the early months and years of life, when body growth and brain development are more rapid than during any other period.

Similarly, the World Health Organisation heavily emphasises the importance of breast feeding in the first six months. Indeed, a recent ISER study indicates that:

“there is a strong association between breastfeeding and cognitive outcomes...breastfeeding for four weeks has a positive and significant effect on test scores... Thus, interventions which increase breastfeeding rates may improve not only children’s health, but also their cognitive skill”.²⁴

Furthermore, research suggests that a child’s tastes and eating habits are formed early in life with consequences for child health, obesity and also *attainment*.²⁵ In this context, therefore, nutrition again serves as another important example of how early influences contribute to developmental patterns over time.

The brain’s capacity for change decreases with age

The brain is most flexible, or ‘plastic’, early in life to accommodate a wide range of environments and interactions, but as the maturing brain becomes more specialized to assume more complex functions, it is less capable of reorganizing and adapting to new or unexpected challenges. Once a circuit is ‘wired’, it stabilizes with age – it loses its plasticity – making it increasingly difficult to alter.

For example, by the first year, the parts of the brain that differentiate sound are becoming specialised to the language the baby has been exposed to; at the same time, the brain is already starting to lose the ability to recognise different sounds found in other languages. Although ‘windows of opportunity’ for language and skill development and behavioural adaptation remain open for many years, trying to change behaviour or

24 Institute for Social & Economic Research, ‘The effect of breastfeeding on children’s cognitive development’, 2010.

25 Cooke et al in Sorhaindho & Feinstein, ‘Relationship between child nutrition and school outcomes’, 2006; Feinstein et al, ‘Dietary patterns related to attainment: the importance of early eating patterns’, 2008.

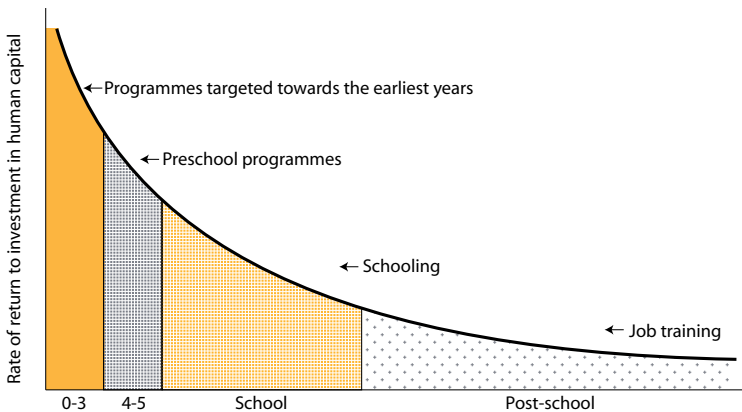
build new skills on a foundation of brain circuits that were not wired properly when they were first formed is much harder and requires more intensive effort.

For the brain, this means that greater amounts of physiological energy are needed to compensate for circuits that do not perform in an expected fashion. For society, this means that remedial education, clinical treatment, and other professional interventions are more costly than the provision of nurturing, protective relationships and appropriate learning experiences earlier in life. As such:

“Investment and interventions in the early years are generally more cost effective in improving outcomes than investments and interventions later in life. Particularly those preventive programmes aimed at disadvantaged children.”²⁶

Stated simply, getting things right initially is more efficient and ultimately more effective than trying to fix them later – early plasticity means it is easier and more effective to influence a baby’s developing brain architecture than to rewire parts of its circuitry in later childhood or adult years.

Figure 6 – Relative efficiency of interventions



Source: J Heckman, 'The American family in black and white: a post-racial strategy for improving skills to promote equality', 2011.

■ 2 Focus on Parenting and Families: lessons from the science of early skill formation

"A strategy that places greater emphasis on parenting resources directed to the early years is a strategy that prevents rather than remediates problems. It supplements families and makes them active participants in the process of child development... We need to listen to the logic of developmental biology to devise strategies to reduce disparities in parenting across all...groups"²⁷

The two key lessons, therefore, that become abundantly clear from the core principles of the science of child development outlined above are that:

- intervening early is better and earliest is best (both practically and financially); and
- it is the nature of the relationship and the quality of the interactions between a child and their parents, carers and family – what these adults do with and around the child – that has such a fundamental impact on all that follows.

In effect, *families are the factories of skill development* and it is the nature and quality of the interactions that occur within this environment which, more than anything else, shape the quality of brain architecture and skill foundations that emerge in a given child. Thus, as Heckman puts it:

"An overwhelming body of evidence suggests that parenting plays a crucial role – what parents do and

²⁷ J Heckman, 'The American family in black and white: a post-racial strategy for improving skills to promote equality', 2011.

do not do; how they interact with and supplement the lives of their children, especially their early lives...

The true measure of child poverty and advantage is the quality of parenting a child receives, not just the money available to a household."²⁸ [emphasis added]

The crucial point to note again is that it is not about time spent with the child as such, but about the *quality* of that time, what is *done with it*. In their chapter on family policy in the Orange Book, Steve Webb and Jo Holland, while identifying the crucial importance of the early years and identifying certain positive interventions by some voluntary sector bodies, focus overwhelmingly on State backed policies with the goal of "enabling parents to spend more time with their children"²⁹. However, this runs the risk of missing something crucial – it is at best only part of the story.

As Heckman argues, even though they work more than less educated women, studies from the US clearly show that university educated mothers devote more time to child rearing than less educated mothers, especially in providing child enrichment activities – for example, they spend more time reading to their children and less time watching television with them.³⁰ Mothers from lower-income backgrounds, by contrast, tend to talk less to their children and are less likely to read to them daily with corresponding evidence suggesting that, as a result, lower-income children exhibit substantial differences in verbal skills on starting school.³¹

The evidence from the UK is similar and potentially even more striking. A recent Department for Education report has identified that children's language development *at the age of 2* is very strongly associated with performance across all subject areas upon entering primary school (in the context of seeking to understand the well established phenomenon that children from lower-income backgrounds tend to have poorer language and other skills at this point).³² The study then also identifies,

28 Ibid

29 P Marshall and D Laws, 'The orange book: reclaiming liberalism', 2004.

30 S Bianchi et al in D Anderton, 'Changing rhythms of American family life', 2006.

31 S Neuman, 'Changing the odds for children at risk: seven essential principles of educational programs that break the cycle of poverty', 2009.

32 S Roulstone et al, DfE, 'The role of language in children's early educational outcomes', 2011.

crucially, that it is the quality of the child's 'communication environment' that is the key to this early language development, to the extent that:

"There was...no association between the child's social background and their language development after taking account of the communication environment. This suggests that *in these early stages of language development it is the very particular aspects of a child's communication environment that are associated with language acquisition rather than the broader socio-economic context of the family*".³³ [emphasis added]

The crucial factors influencing the quality of this 'communication environment' were identified as including the range of activities (such as reading and playing) undertaken by parents with the child, the number of books available to the child, the frequency of visits to the library, the number of toys available to the child and the amount of television on in the home environment.

It is therefore in this context that the fact that "children from poorer backgrounds are much less likely to experience a rich home learning environment than children from better-off backgrounds"³⁴ is so crucial. For example, tellingly, children from lower-income backgrounds (around 40 per cent) are roughly half as likely to be read to every day as those from the most affluent quintile (around 80 per cent) at an early age.³⁵

The significance of this should not be underestimated given the evidence from the National Literacy Trust that parental involvement in reading to a child is the single most important determinant of early language and literacy skills³⁶ coupled with the evidence that vocabulary at age five is the *single best predictor* of later social mobility for children from lower-income backgrounds.³⁷

33 Ibid

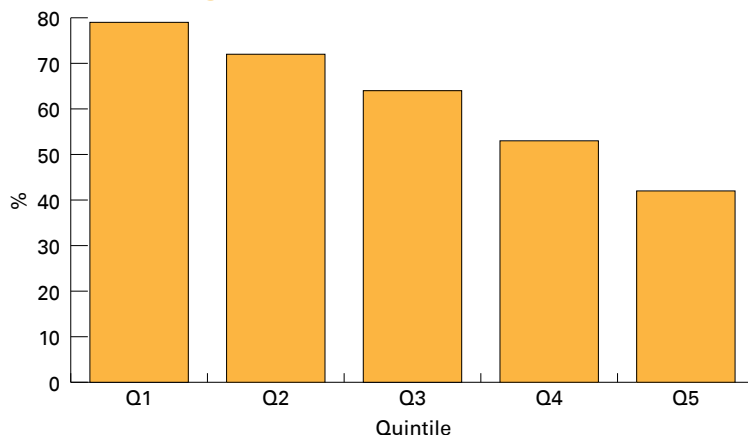
34 Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 'The importance of attitudes and behaviour for poorer children's educational attainment', 2010.

35 Ibid

36 www.literacytrust.org.uk, cited in DfE / DoH, 'Families in the foundation years: evidence pack', 'supporting families in the foundation years', 2011.

37 J Blanden, 'Bucking the trend – what enables those who are disadvantaged in childhood to succeed later in life?' 2006; cited in DfE / DoH, 'Supporting families in the foundation years', 2011.

Figure 7 – Percentage of children read to every day at age 3 by socio-economic quintile



Source: Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2010), 'The importance of attitudes and behaviour for poorer children's educational attainment'

One particularly striking study – although based on US data – serves to illustrate these points about a child's 'communication environment' well.³⁸ This study identified that a child in a welfare-dependent family home hears on average 616 words an hour; for a child in a working class home, the figure is around double (1,251 words); and for a child in a professional home, it is 2,153 words an hour. Furthermore, in a typical hour, the child in the welfare-dependent family home will hear on average 5 positive affirmations and 11 negative prohibitions; the child from the working class home 12 affirmations and 7 prohibitions; and the child in the professional home will hear 32 positive affirmations to only 5 negative prohibitions. As the tables below identify, when extrapolated out to give annual averages, such discrepancies are staggering.

38 B Hart and T Risley, 'Meaningful differences in the everyday experience of young American children', 1995.

Figure 8 – Cumulative vocabulary experiences of children from differing backgrounds

| Family Status | Words heard per hour | Words heard in a 100-hour week | Words heard in a 5,200 hour year | Words heard in 4years |
|---------------|----------------------|--------------------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Welfare | 616 | 62,000 | 3 million | 13 million |
| Working class | 1,251 | 125,000 | 6 million | 26 million |
| Professional | 2,153 | 215,000 | 11 million | 45 million |

Source: J Heckman, Young Foundation lecture, 'Creating a more equal and productive Britain', www.youngfoundation.org/files/images/Heckman_Lecture_19_May_2011.pdf, 2011.

In a similar vein, mothers from lower-income backgrounds have been shown to encourage their children less, to tend to adopt harsher parenting styles and to be less engaged with their child’s school work.³⁹ Similarly, children from lower-income backgrounds typically score “significantly lower on measures of mother-child closeness” than children from more affluent backgrounds.⁴⁰ They also typically experience less consistently positive parenting strategies including less structured routines (including regularity of mealtimes and bedtimes).⁴¹ Furthermore, babies from poorer backgrounds are much less likely to have ever been breastfed (around 50 per cent of the poorest babies compared to almost 90 per cent of the richest).⁴²

As Matthew Taylor identifies, the evidence clearly indicates that:

“It is devastatingly obvious that poor parenting leads to underachieving children, and eventually creates

39 R Ferguson in G Loury et al eds, 'Ethnicity, social mobility, and public policy', 2005.
 40 Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 'The importance of attitudes and behaviour for poorer children’s educational attainment', 2010.

41 Ibid

42 Ibid

another generation of poor parents... successful parents are often repeating the successful parenting they experienced themselves – not because they are ‘better’ or more committed to their children, but because they imitate their own parents, as probably will their children in turn.”⁴³

None of this is to say that the government’s proposed policies for fairer and longer terms of parental leave or flexible working are not important, but it is to say that they are not, in and of themselves, *sufficient*. A prerequisite for children to benefit fully from greater time spent with their parents in the earliest months and years is better parental knowledge, particularly among those from lower-income backgrounds, of just how important it is to utilise this time and which activities and actions are conducive to child development in these crucial stages. As the government itself recognises in its recent Foundation Years policy statement:

“There has often been insufficient focus on the central role of families in children’s earliest years, which has meant that mothers and fathers have not always received enough, or sufficiently timely, advice and support. We recognise that families are the most important influence of all in the foundation years and want to encourage improved advice and support to help with parenting.”⁴⁴

43 M Taylor, ‘The politics of parenting: confronting the F word’, in D Brack et al, ‘Reinventing the state: social liberalism for the 21st century’, 2007.

44 DfE / DoH, ‘Supporting families in the foundation years’, 2011.

: 3 Shifting attitudes: international perspectives and a national parenting campaign

"What is needed here is a whole society attitude shift to parenting akin to those achieved with seat belt wearing and drink driving. Instead of being seen as a private matter which must not be invaded...it should be celebrated as a matter where achieving high standards is in everyone's interest, and it is socially acceptable for everyone to recognise they are able to learn."⁴⁵

Comparative international perspectives on parenting and parenting policy

In its 2010 review 'International experience of early intervention for children, young people and their families' the WAVE Trust (in conjunction with C4EO) conducted an in depth review of international literature and practices on early intervention. This report identifies and outlines in detail 47 such practices from around the world that were deemed to be the most worthy of consideration and in doing so provides both an invaluable tool for policy makers and derives a core set of overarching, key messages gleaned from the perspective provided by this international approach.

The first of these key messages, fully in keeping with the science of child development, is that '*Those who prioritise investment in the earliest years secure the best outcomes*'. The second, crucial 'key message' – based on this analysis of practices in over 20 countries and again reflecting the scientific concepts outlined

⁴⁵ WAVE Trust / C4EO, 'International experience of early intervention for children, young people and their families', 2010.

above – is that: ‘The quality of parenting/care is *the* key to a successful society’.

In this context, an examination of the attitudes and policies towards parenting in the top two countries across the UNICEF league tables for child well-being – Holland and Sweden – is highly illuminating.⁴⁶

Holland

In 2007, the Dutch government initiated the Youth and Family Programme ‘Every Opportunity for Every Child’. At the core of this programme is the philosophy that prevention is better than cure: the problems of children and families must be detected and addressed as early as possible to prevent them from becoming more serious in later life. As such, the primary emphasis is placed on ensuring a healthy and conducive developmental environment for children from birth to age 4. One of the central principles is to emphasise and confirm the family’s natural role in bringing up children and, in particular, ensuring that parents are recognised as being primarily responsible for raising their own children but that *they are to be given extensive help to do just this*. As such, *parenting support and programmes are offered to all families universally*. Such a policy directly reflects the fact that:

“International reviews of evidence support the use of a range of parenting interventions which start during the antenatal period and continue through infancy and early childhood.”⁴⁷

A national network of youth and family centres was created to provide advice and help on parenting at local level with community schools, youth and family centres and other local facilities also offering advice and support on parenting. Indeed, where the development, health or safety of a child is recognised to be at risk, parents are obliged to accept help, with those reluctant to do so being legally compelled to work with professionals to improve their parenting skills.⁴⁸

46 The comparative international examples outlined in the remainder of this chapter and the next are drawn directly from and summarise the wealth of detailed information presented in the WAVE Trust report.

47 J Barlow et al, ‘Family and parenting support in sure start local programmes’, 2007.

48 WAVE Trust / C4EO, ‘International experience of early intervention for children, young people and their families’, 2010.

Sweden

In Sweden the approach to infancy and early childhood also consciously puts a heavy emphasis on prevention rather than cure by looking to intervene as early as possible to ensure the best possible support for parents at the beginning of a child's life. Ninety-eight per cent of all maternity clinics offer parenting education in groups to first-time parents, with 60 per cent allowing repeat parents to participate. Parents are directly invited to join such groups and take-up, as in Holland, is high – in Stockholm County, for example, 61 per cent of all first time parents participated in at least five sessions in 2002. Additional parenting support in the form of specialised groups is then also provided to mothers with particular needs, for example young and single mothers. Furthermore, 99 per cent of all families make use of the child healthcare services available in Sweden (with an average of 20 individual contacts) and, as part of this, parenting education accounts for around 10 per cent of midwives' working time. To facilitate this, 65 per cent of midwives receive regular professional training on parenting education, with 72 per cent having been given specific instructions on the subject by a psychologist.

Leksand Model

One particular Swedish practice – initially operated in the community of Leksand and now being extended across the country – is worthy of particular attention in view of the UK government's stated desire to make "parenting advice and support... the norm – just as many new parents choose to access ante-natal education"⁴⁹.

Under the Leksand model, expecting parents are invited ante-natally to join a group within their local community and this group provides the hub for everything that follows. A specially trained midwife is then generally invited to run an antenatal class for this group of parents. However, rather than being disbanded at the point of childbirth (i.e. the end of the antenatal course), the group itself continues to meet over the first few years of the children's lives (up even to the age of 5) to provide a platform for parenting education programmes as well as a network for mutual support and advice.

⁴⁹ HM Government, 'Opening doors, breaking barriers: a strategy for social mobility', 2011.

The results of this model have been particularly impressive. Attendance at the parenting groups is high across all social groups. In 1999-2000, parents from 91 Leksand families took part in parent group activities during pregnancy. In 2004, when the children were between 3 and 5 years old, around half of the parents were still continuing (46 women and 46 men). Due to the continuing nature of the group, it was found that fathers participate to about the same degree as mothers – which is not the case in relation to other forms of parenting programmes elsewhere in Sweden – suggesting a particular potential merit of the Leksand model. This may be of interest to the government in light of its expressed commitment to always “consider the needs and perspective of both parents” and to “think about how better to engage fathers in all aspects of their child’s development”.⁵⁰

It is strongly recommended that the possibility of piloting and fully evaluating a similar model in the UK is explored. The model itself provides significant advantages that dovetail well with the government’s objectives. In terms of easing an attitudinal shift towards normalising parenting education, the model has the significant benefit of flowing directly out of and building on the degree of social acceptance already attained by antenatal classes. Indeed, the continuing nature of the group from pre-birth through into the early years lends itself to the neutral idea of ‘child-development classes’, with the potentially more palatable connotative nature of this term to specific ‘parenting classes’ possibly easing the desired attitudinal shift.

Another significant benefit of the model is that it provides a *platform* for the provision of evidence based parenting programmes (such as, for example, the now well established and evaluated ‘Incredible Years’ programme, as occurs in some groups in Leksand) without these initiatives actually themselves serving as the rationale for the gathering. It is not an Incredible Years parenting group (say) that parents are attending, but an established parenting group to which an Incredible

50 DfE / DoH, ‘Supporting Families in the Foundation Years’, 2011.

Years practitioner is invited to attend. This concept of a platform also opens up significant possibilities for local community involvement and development conducive to a 'Big Society' context: subject of course to a degree of regulation as to what they contain, the platform provided by the groups could be open to local, charitable and other organisations to develop and put forward specific and tailored programmes free from excessive central proscription and control.

The UK: the challenge of changing attitudes

The difference between the position outlined above in terms of attitudes and policies towards parenting in Holland and Sweden – the top two countries in the UNICEF Child Well-being tables – and Britain – occupying 21st place in the same tables – is striking. Significantly more energy and resources have been directed towards parenting based interventions in Britain in the past decade. However, these remain heavily remedial in focus, designed for and targeted specifically at children exhibiting severe behavioural problems rather than viewed as a more general tool for child development or a broader weapon to counteract disadvantage.⁵¹ In general, parenting in the UK remains viewed as an intensely private matter:

“Children are treated as, essentially, possessions of the parent, and interference from outside is seen as an unacceptable intrusion. Any suggestion of government involvement brings cries of ‘the nanny state’ as if nannies were ogres. The implication is that all parents can be left to do their job without outside support or advice”.⁵²

However, the evidence – from the science of early brain and skill development to the practices employed in countries that, put simply, provide a better and fairer environment for their children – is now overwhelming. If it *is* deemed desirable to tackle the deeply *illiberal* wastage of the individual potential of so many children (particularly among those from lower-income

51 Family and parenting institute, 'Ten years of family policy: 1999 – 2009', 2009

52 WAVE Trust / C4EO, 'International experience of early intervention for children, young people and their families', 2010.

backgrounds), to seek to take strides to remedy the harm (recognised by John Stuart Mill) caused by *inaction* as well as actions, then it is necessary for liberals to show an increased willingness to actively (importantly, not to say proscriptively) engage with what *does* take place within the family sphere.

The seemingly pervasive, almost intuitively perpetuated idea that a parent will (or *should*), at the point of their child's birth, sufficiently grasp the key elements of child rearing through a natural and automatic osmotic process is fundamentally misconceived. This is a truth placed in sharp relief by the directly contrasting stance relating to adopting couples who are required to undertake six major areas of study relating to childcare and development.⁵³ What is required, in short, is a significant societal attitudinal shift (akin to those involving seat belt wearing and drink driving) towards recognising that parenting is something that has a societal aspect and importance and about which it is socially acceptable for people to seek advice, learn and improve.

Creating such a broad cultural shift will be by no means easy. However, as part of the effort to create just such an attitudinal transformation, Graham Allen has argued strongly that a powerful and effective weapon could be "a new National Parenting Campaign as the crown jewel of the Big Society project, pursued with enough passion and vitality to make it irresistible even to the most jaundiced"⁵⁴. This paper firmly endorses such an idea. The following chapter will examine how one such highly successful campaign was designed and operated in New Zealand with a view to then proposing a concept and format around which a UK parenting campaign – drawing directly on the key scientific evidence outlined above – could be designed and implemented.

53 F Field, 'The foundation years: preventing poor children becoming poor adults. The report of the Independent Review on Poverty and Life Chances', 2010.

54 G Allen, 'Early intervention: the next steps', 2011.

■ 4 SKIP: the national parenting campaign for New Zealand

A third key message identified by the WAVE Trust comparative international analysis of family and childhood early interventions seems to have been derived almost exclusively from the example provided by the SKIP national parenting campaign in New Zealand: ‘*Galvanising the community is the secret of success*’. Faced with concerning levels of childhood and youth dysfunction and crime, a decision was made at government level that the key to healing this trend lay in the quality of family life and parenting in particular. Although some of the specifics of the detailed initiatives that accompany the broader campaign have a degree of cultural specificity (with particular reference to the indigenous population) it is the nature of the overarching “national community” campaign and the “resounding success” with which its message has been conveyed that are of particular relevance here.⁵⁵

In short, SKIP (‘Strategies with Kids, Information for Parents’) is a campaign specifically designed to transform the way people think about parenting in New Zealand. The key to this programme is that, through its universal, non-judgemental approach it is taking “the whole topic of parenting into the light”, establishing the idea that good parenting is a *learned skill* (and that there is nothing ‘wrong’ with people who engage in learning it) and, crucially, “*putting parenting to the forefront of people’s minds and speech*”⁵⁶: [emphasis added]

“SKIP targets all parents and caregivers of children aged five and under. This allows parents and caregivers

55 WAVE Trust / C4EO, ‘International experience of early intervention for children, young people and their families’, 2010.

56 *Ibid*

to seek help without feeling they are poor parents. SKIP's message is that parenting is a very important and a very demanding job. We all need all the support we can get to do it well".⁵⁷

At the core of the success of SKIP has been the clarity and 'graspability' of the message and, even more fundamentally, the strength and effectiveness of the *communication* of this message. Motivated and designed with a focus slightly more on child discipline than development, the campaign is structured around six core, research based, distinct principles identified as being necessary for children to grow into happy, capable adults:

1. 'Love and warmth';
2. 'Talking and listening';
3. 'Guidance and understanding';
4. 'Limits and boundaries';
5. 'Consistency and consequences'; and
6. 'A structured and secure world'.

This clear sense of structure to the message being communicated and the tangibility and packageability of the distinct concepts has lent itself directly to the production of highly visible and memorable materials – from adverts to pamphlets and educational manuals, postcards to DVDs and even to fridge magnets – that serve to give the message *salience* in people's minds. In doing so, the campaign has sought to move the concept of learned parenting away from being something hidden away, private or even shameful and instead to celebrate it as a highly beneficial community activity.

The recent qualitative evaluation of the programme identified that the result of this high profile, open style of communication has been so successful as to result in commonplace, open discussion of the topic of parenting in the workplace (including among fathers) and reports that, citing the impact of SKIP, many parents report significantly higher levels of parenting efficacy and confidence.⁵⁸

57 Ministry of Social Development, 'SKIP: what it is and why it works', 2009.

58 Ibid

Equally crucially, particularly in light of the coalition government's stated desire to encourage and normalise participation in parenting advice and education, the high profile campaign appears to have served to provide just this type of desired attitudinal 'nudge' in New Zealand, as outlined by a community worker in the field:

"Prior to SKIP we would run a parenting course and hope we would get enough people there to break even...Now our events are alive and buzzing. They are outstanding. And with every event, we just get more and more people coming and wanting to attend".⁵⁹

With this in mind, important lessons can be learned from this SKIP campaign, described in the WAVE Trust international analysis as nothing short of:

"a truly national community initiative, a benign revolution in the way people live together and raise the next generation".⁶⁰

59

Ibid

60

WAVE Trust / C4EO, 'International experience of early intervention for children, young people and their families', 2010.

: 5 A UK parenting campaign: '5-a-day for child development'

"It is one of the most successful indoctrinations in modern Britain, filtering into every aspect of public life. I start my day on a bus decorated with the injunction to eat five-a-day, I drop my son off at a nursery where he learns to count using the Government's five-a-day fruit and vegetable quota, and at the supermarket it is... anywhere it will confer a commercial advantage"⁶¹

Structuring a UK parenting campaign: the '5-a-day' concept

What then might a UK parenting campaign look like? Can the lessons outlined above from New Zealand be adapted – taking into account the different cultural context and the desire to focus particularly on early child development (and the science behind it) – and used to create a genuinely workable concept and format for a UK national parenting campaign? This paper will argue that they can and that the well established and hugely successful '5-a-day' concept used in relation to fruit and vegetables in a healthy eating context could provide a strong model.

As was clear in relation to the SKIP campaign, almost as important as the message itself is the strength, clarity and memorability of the communication: clear, succinct concepts offering guidance towards practical and manageable steps can operate almost as tangible 'hooks'. Their ready packageability can then lend itself directly to highly visible materials that in turn reinforce the salience of the key messages in people's minds. This tangibility and visibility then serve to bring the core message itself – the concept of parenting as a learned skill at which all can improve

61 H Rumbelow, 'How the five-a-day mantra was born', The Times, 13 April 2010.

– out into the light, to become an open and topical ground for discussion. This further increases the willingness across society to engage with, and act upon, the key concepts. The process, if it works well, is mutually reinforcing.

In this light, the ‘5-a-day’ concept could therefore operate as an ideal structure. It is recommended here that a campaign should be fully designed – with expert input both from child development and marketing and communications experts – that identifies the *5 most beneficial things that could be done by parents on a daily basis to aid their child’s development in the earliest years*. Not only could this structure provide the desirable clear, manageable and packageable steps but it builds directly on a concept and brand that – as is clear from the quote at the beginning of the chapter – already pervades the national consciousness, particularly among parents. The campaign then would be one based on the key idea of ‘5-a-day for child development’. This concept would then provide the necessary, memorable platform from which more in depth advisory materials (in the form of DVDs, pamphlets etc) can be launched and upon which more direct and succinct messaging (be it television and radio advertising, billboards or posters, postcards or stickers) can be based.

The other highly significant benefit of the ‘5-a-day’ structure is that – again, as gestured towards in the opening quote – it potentially provides a ‘hook’ for private sector involvement and investment (crucial, perhaps inevitably, in the context of potentially limited resources). The ‘5-a-day’ for fruit and vegetables was, in part, so successful in lodging itself in the collective consciousness precisely because private companies (product manufacturers, supermarkets etc) fell over themselves to be associated with it. There was credit to be gained and thus profit to be made from having the ‘5-a-day’ logo on a product.

In the same vein, companies are likely, if the opportunity arises, to wish to associate their products with a national campaign to aid child-development. This creates the potential for a similar exercise in relation to a ‘5-a-day for child development’ initiative. Under the initial ‘5-a-day’ for fruit and vegetables campaign, a corresponding logo was produced which was designed for use on promotional materials as well as product packaging. However, if a company wished to make use of the credibility associated with

such a logo, it was required to apply for a licence and (if it was a profit making organisation) pay a small fee for the privilege.

In a similar vein, an appropriate branding or logo – a ‘Positive Parenting’ symbol say – could be designed to accompany a ‘5-a-day for child development’ campaign. This could be used both as a promotional concept as well as something private companies may wish to attach to appropriate products (for example, a publisher to an early reading / children’s book). As such, the possible use of the ‘5-a-day’ concept could again operate in a beneficially reinforcing way. Awareness of learned parenting and child development would be raised in society in a positive and non-stigmatising way. Private companies would wish to become associated with this positivity and therefore, in turn, bring the key messages more squarely into the public arena as an open and acceptable topic for discussion.

‘5-a-day for child development’

If the concept of ‘5-a-day for child development’ were to be adopted as a basis for a national campaign in the UK it would inevitably need significant expert input to determine the specific content: which are the optimum five, manageable daily steps that parents could take that would be of most benefit to their developing child and how could these best be packaged and conveyed? The following proposal – placing the evidence of the science of early brain and skill development at its core and based on discussions with child development academics and individuals from child and family welfare organisations – is designed to give a tentative example of how such a campaign *might look*, both as an effort fully to illustrate the concept and potentially stimulate further debate.

1) *Read to your child for 15 minutes*

As outlined in detail above, one of the core components of a positive Home Learning Environment for a developing child is being read to regularly from a young age (with evidence from the National Literacy Trust suggesting that this is the single most important determinant of early language skills)⁶². As the graph at Figure 4 illustrates, the brain’s language learning capacities are significantly higher in the early months and

62 EPPE, 2008; DfE / DoH, ‘Supporting families in the foundation years’, 2011.

years of a child's life than at any other point. Being read to consistently throughout this period – providing exposure to as large a vocabulary as possible – is one of the most effective ways of building the language centred neural connections in the brain. It is also highly conducive to the development of literacy skills and has positive impacts upon memory and other skills.⁶³ Furthermore, the process aids broader emotional and social development, in part through the fact that the repeated shared reading experience itself fosters the bonding and closeness of the parent-child relationship that has been shown to be so central to early childhood development.

Conveying these benefits and providing clear advice on how important it is to read consistently to a child, how early it is beneficial to start (as early as the first few months) and what types of reading materials are particularly suited to particular stages of development are all aspects that could be conveyed under this strand of the campaign. Indeed, as outlined in Chapter 2, this is one area in particular where there is evidence of significant behavioural asymmetries between social groupings. For example, there is evidence that more affluent parents spend significantly more time reading to their children than those from poorer backgrounds and that this has a direct impact on verbal and literacy skills upon starting school.⁶⁴ This is again particularly significant in a context where the evidence suggests that vocabulary at age five is the *single best predictor* of later social mobility for children from lower-income backgrounds.⁶⁵

This particular strand could, as suggested above, lend itself well to private sector engagement with book publishers and bookshops being potentially keen to associate products with the campaign and potentially carry on them a corresponding logo.

2) *Play with your child on the floor for 10 minutes*

At the core of the crucial 'serve and return' developmental relationship between child and parent is the idea that when young children naturally reach out for interaction through babbling, facial expressions, words, gestures, and cries, the

63 B Zuckerman, 'Reach out and read: evidence based approach to promoting early child development', 2010.

64 S Neuman, 2009; S Roulstone et al, 2011; Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2010.

65 J Blanden, 'Bucking the trend – what enables those who are disadvantaged in childhood to succeed later in life?', 2006.

relevant adult responds by getting in sync and doing the same kind of vocalizing and gesturing back at them (with the process then continuing back and forth). The most effective way of carrying out this process in the home is simply through the activity of playing with the child and, because a crucial element of this process lies in the child sensing and seeing the full effect of the reciprocal process, the full benefit is gained when adult and child are at the same physical level (i.e. sitting together on the floor).

Indeed, the importance of 'play' in child development has been heavily emphasised in both the Tickell report and in the Foundation Years policy statement itself: "The Government recognises the great value of fun and play during the foundation years".⁶⁶

Although in essence it is the parent / child interaction that is particularly crucial in the process of play there is also further scope for private sector engagement in terms of the actual products that the play is based around (toys, games, dolls, characters, building sets etc), perhaps especially as the child gets slightly older and the products themselves can begin to inject some more specific developmental / educational benefits. Indeed, one of the factors identified as conducive to a positive 'communication environment' in the report referenced above was the range of toys to which a child has access.⁶⁷ As such, again, product manufacturers and retailers might wish to engage with the campaign and the corresponding logo / branding in relation to this strand.

3) Talk with your child for 20 minutes with the television off

One rationale for this proposed strand of the campaign is inevitably similar to that behind the emphasis on reading to children but it serves to reinforce just how crucial the exposure to language is in the earliest years of development. As outlined in Chapter 2, the discrepancies between the average number of words heard in a given hour by children from different social backgrounds is staggering, particularly when considered on a cumulative basis. Indeed, evidence again points to more affluent

66 DfE / DoH, 'Families in the foundation years: evidence pack', 2011.

67 S Roulstone et al, 'The Role of Language in Children's Early Educational Outcomes', DfE, 2011.

mothers tending to talk more to their children than lower-income parents, with this more conducive communication environment tending to have a direct impact on verbal and literacy skills at school entrance.⁶⁸

The further rationale for emphasising this strand in the campaign would be as another direct element of the crucial ‘serve and return’ process outlined above. It is in this context that allowing for full engagement – for the full effect of the reciprocal process to operate – by switching off external distractions, such as the television, is crucial. Again, evidence points to the fact that mothers from lower-income backgrounds are more likely to spend more of their time with their child watching television than more affluent mothers, with a corresponding negative effect on the conduciveness of the HLE.⁶⁹

However, there is an important point here not to stigmatise television watching as some kind of blanket evil. There are now numerous children’s programmes – for example CBeebies – that are specifically and deliberately designed to aid the process of child development at an early age. As such, again, it could be that the proposed campaign could engage directly with such programmes, perhaps displaying the relevant ‘Positive Parenting’ logo at a point in the opening credits / sequence or on the outside of the DVD box.

4) Adopt positive attitudes towards your child and praise them frequently

Almost as staggering as the statistics outlined in Chapter 2 on the differences in the quantity of words heard in an average hour by children from different backgrounds is the difference in the *quality* of those words. In the relevant study, a child in a welfare-dependent home was hearing 11 negative prohibitions to 5 positive affirmations whereas a child in a professional home was hearing 32 positive affirmations to only 5 negative prohibitions.

There is significant evidence that more positive parenting strategies are significantly more conducive to desirable child development outcomes in the early years than more negative or

68 S Neuman, 2009; S Roulstone et al, 2011; Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 2010.
69 S Bianchi et al in D Anderton, 2006; S Roulstone et al, 2011.

critical strategies.⁷⁰ One aspect of this is that positive strategies maintain and strengthen the crucial bonding relationship that facilitates healthy child development and enables young children to deal positively with situations that could otherwise give rise to toxic stress levels. Positive parenting also impacts more directly on early social and emotional development in terms of self-esteem, confidence, outlook and attitudes as well as impacting directly on brain development itself.⁷¹

Conveying the key benefits of adopting a more positive and sensitive parenting approach – of positive and consistent discipline and structure, of *praising* a child frequently and criticising in a constructive manner whenever possible – would be the core message to be developed under this strand of the campaign. As the government Foundation Years policy statement identifies in its survey of the evidence:

“Children do better when they have a close and positive relationship with their parents, and mothers and fathers work together to provide warm, authoritative, responsive, positive, and sensitive parenting”.⁷²

5) Give your child a nutritious diet to aid development

As outlined in Chapter 1, appropriate nutrition is crucial to child development both in terms of the mother’s diet during pregnancy and the child’s diet during the early months and years of life when body growth and brain development are more rapid than during any other period. At this point, the proposed ‘5-a-day for child development’ campaign would, up to a point, intersect directly with the original ‘5-a-day’ fruit and vegetable concept potentially adding to its credibility and salience.

However, the extent of the information that could be conveyed under this strand is much broader: for example, which nutrients and vitamins are particularly important at which stages of development and which foods are strong providers of such nutrients / vitamins. Similarly, information about potentially beneficial dietary supplements – such as Omega-3 oils etc – could also be provided. The importance of breast-feeding – as detailed

70 D Utting, ‘Parenting services: assessing and meeting the need for parenting support services’, 2009.

71 Ibid

72 DfE / DoH, ‘Families in the foundation years: evidence pack’, 2011.

above – could be emphasised under this strand, particularly given the evidence of the existing social gradient. Similarly, the emphasis on and advice relating to a healthy diet at the earliest stages of development would be important in order to reflect the research indicating that a child’s tastes and eating habits are formed early in life with consequences for child health and obesity and also for later attainment.⁷³

This strand of the campaign would again – in the same way as the initial fruit and vegetables campaign – lend itself well to private sector engagement, with products with proven health benefits potentially licensed to carry the campaign logo (perhaps particularly specific baby foods and early childhood directed products). There would be a major opportunity to engage the major supermarkets – across all ranges of the price spectrum but perhaps especially targeting those at the less expensive end of the market – with any such campaign.

Indeed, there may in fact be a clear opportunity to look to attract some of the bigger supermarket operations (which would be likely to carry products that may fall under more than one strand of the proposed campaign) as well as specialist child focused stores and organisations more broadly as ‘National Partners’ for the campaign (with the possibility of utilising the publicity such organisations would attract as a result to secure significant funding). Such an approach would fit well with the government’s desired ‘Big Society’, inclusive approach to improving child development outcomes:

“Giving children the best possible childhood involves all parts of society: it is not something that Government can or should do alone. We want to encourage communities, voluntary groups, businesses, social enterprises and public services to play their part. *Businesses selling goods and services to families... should all have children’s best interests at the heart of what they do.*”⁷⁴ [emphasis added]

73 Cooke et al in Sorhaindho & Feinstein, ‘Relationship between child nutrition and school outcomes’, 2006; Feinstein et al, ‘Dietary patterns related to attainment: the importance of early eating patterns’, 2008.

74 DfE / DoH, ‘Families in the foundation years’, 2011.

: 6 Encouraging targeted participation: parenting education and social mobility

“Improving social mobility is the principal goal of the Coalition Government’s social policy... tackling the opportunity deficit – creating an open, socially mobile society – is our guiding purpose”

Government Social Mobility Strategy

“In the next generation, a group of children will have had a major advantage and I would expect to see a big increase in inequality”

James Heckman

Universal provision: necessary but potentially problematic

Any such parenting campaign as outlined above would be designed as a direct supplement to the government’s stated intention – as part of its Social Mobility Strategy and Foundation Years policy proposals – to give all parents of young children equally the opportunity and the right to benefit from parenting classes and advice. As part of the desire to improve child outcomes by seeking to normalise such parenting education, the provision of such a universal offer is unequivocally the correct thing to do. Precisely the culture shift that has been identified in this paper as being both desirable and necessary – the shift towards recognising that parenting is something that has a societal aspect and importance and about which it is possible and desirable to learn – is entirely predicated and reliant on the idea that it is something that *all* can learn about and improve.

Similarly, as outlined in Chapter 4, at the core of the highly successful SKIP parenting campaign in New Zealand is its non-

judgemental, non-stigmatising approach that seeks to transform the conception of parenting from an intensely private matter to a community matter in which *all* can benefit and learn together. Making the proposed access to parenting classes and advice available to all therefore not only reflects this message and avoids stigmatising effects, but also facilitates the recognised benefits of mixed social groupings in child development settings.⁷⁵

However, the government has also inextricably tied itself to the commitment to improving social mobility. As such, in all social policy considerations, the government must keep this ‘principal goal’, this ‘guiding purpose’, firmly and squarely in its mind at all times. In this context, a straightforward universal offer in relation to parenting education and advice may actually also carry potential problems.

Take, for example, the universal offer of 15 hours per week of free pre-school for all 3 and 4 year olds. As outlined in the Frank Field Report, while take up across the board is relatively high, there is a clear social gradient in participation: only 79 per cent of children in families with an annual income under £10,000 receive some of their free entitlement compared with 97 per cent of children in families with annual income over £45,000.⁷⁶ While the recent Foundation Years policy statement identifies an increase in overall take-up (particularly among 4 year olds), it again recognises clearly that “research shows children from disadvantaged families are less likely to take up their free place”.⁷⁷ As the recent IPPR report ‘Parents at the centre’ identifies:

“despite a great deal of expansion and investment in early years provision over the last decade in the UK, it is children from disadvantaged backgrounds – arguably with the most to gain – who use these services least”.⁷⁸

The lesson that the government appears to have taken on board in relation to Sure Start – that universal child development services are at risk of being utilised more by affluent parents than those from lower-income backgrounds unless direct efforts are made

75 EPPE, 2008.

76 F Field, ‘The foundation years: preventing poor children becoming poor adults. The report of the Independent Review on Poverty and Life Chances’, 2010.

77 DfE / DoH, ‘Supporting families in the foundation years’, 2011.

78 IPPR, ‘Parents at the centre’, 2011.

to counteract this tendency – must be borne in mind. In short, if a universal offer gives rise to a significant social gradient in take up, not only will it be unlikely to have a positive impact on social mobility, it could in fact *exacerbate the attainment gap between different social groups*. This potential problem is particularly acute in relation to parenting skills given the evidence that a significant degree of the discrepancies in outcomes between young children are a direct result of existing asymmetries in practices that aid development in the crucial early years.

The government has recognised that making efforts to intervene to improve the Home Learning Environment of children in the Foundation Years is key to improving child outcomes. It is imperative, however, that it must now go *one step further* and take significant strides to ensure that, if this policy is to pay dividends in terms of social mobility, the message is conveyed to and accessed by *the parents and families of the children who – from a social mobility perspective – need it most*.

Only if this further step is achieved can the proposed parenting focused policies be transformed from a general tool for improving general child development into a genuine weapon to counteract disadvantage. As the government itself recognises:

“Mothers and fathers are highly motivated to learn and care well for their children. While most do an excellent job some will need more support than others. This is why our focus must be on the factors that we know affect children’s development, particularly for children growing up in disadvantaged families who may not have the same level of support or benefit from the same opportunities as others. *Their experiences in the foundation years can either embed disadvantage, or give them the opportunity to break free from cycles of disadvantage and poverty to help build a stronger, fairer society.*”⁷⁹ [emphasis added]

The remainder of this chapter and the next will therefore identify and explore a range of possible mechanisms that could play a role in facilitating this crucial next step. These measures need to be given further, detailed consideration if the government is to hold true to its firm commitment on social mobility.

79 DfE / DoH, ‘Supporting families in the foundation years’, 2011.

Encouraging targeted participation: parenting initiatives and social mobility

General targeting of national campaign and direct parenting initiatives

As argued in detail above, one crucial tool in encouraging participation in direct parenting initiatives would be an accessible, well communicated national campaign designed to shift societal attitudes on parenting away from viewing it as an intensely private matter towards being seen as a communal matter precisely about which it is possible and desirable to learn.

To the extent that such a campaign may begin to counter the apparent behavioural asymmetries between social groups in relation to child development it may well have a particular impact upon parents from lower-income backgrounds. Similarly, the de-stigmatising effects of the message that parenting is a learned skill about which it is desirable to seek help may also have an impact on parents from lower-income backgrounds and thus encourage increased participation in more direct initiatives. These effects could be, while retaining the universalism of the campaign message, strongly accentuated by targeted marketing strategies (in relation to advertising and the methods of communication generally).

In relation to the direct offer of, and attempt to normalise participation in, more direct parenting education initiatives, significant effort should also be directed at how this offer and the message behind it can best be conveyed to parents from lower-income backgrounds such that participation among this group is significantly encouraged. This might most usefully be done by the Behavioural Insight Team or 'nudge unit' in the Cabinet Office. Important factors here are likely to relate to a consideration of the *practical barriers* that may prevent participation among those from lower-income backgrounds, perhaps most significantly (on top of the already discussed stigma issue), location and timing.

In the study of attitudes of low-income parents carried out by IPPR in relation to pre-school provision:

“when asked about access, location was the most important factor for the majority of parents. Services had to be provided close to home, preferably within walking distance”.⁸⁰

A strong focus on initiatives in deprived areas (in keeping with the government’s emphasis on refocusing Sure Start) would therefore be important. Similarly, attention should be paid to the time of day that would be most conducive to attracting low-income parents, taking into consideration important factors such as work and caring for and feeding the children themselves. Would early evening classes, again focused in deprived areas and potentially combined with childcare and even free child meal provision during the time-slot, potentially work to attract low-income parents?

However, it is argued here that, while necessary and desirable, such generalised marketing or broad behavioural targeting strategies will not be sufficient. In a context where the evidence is very clear that improving the Home Learning Environment of children from lower-income backgrounds *would be the single most positive step that could be taken to begin to reduce the opportunity-deficit* that many currently face from birth, more must be done. More direct action must also be considered.

In relation to pre-school education, the government has taken the positive and highly commendable step of targeting the most disadvantaged 20 per cent of 2-year-olds and providing them with the offer of 15 hours of free pre-school education a week (and thus also counteracting the social gradient in the take-up of the universal offer for 3 and 4 year olds). It is argued here that a mechanism should also be explored to target this same group of disadvantaged children – to establish the commitment to raising their life-opportunities from birth all the way through the Foundation Years – that works actively to encourage and possibly even incentivise their parents to participate in the proposed parenting education schemes.

Potential provider level targeting strategies

One such potential mechanism would be to seek to incorporate a specifically designed form of ‘payment by results’ that ensures

80 IPPR, ‘Parents at the centre’, 2011.

an additional level of payment for providers of parenting education and advice that are able to attract a target number of lower-income parents. Such a strategy would again fit with the government's recognition that:

"Payment by results can provide a way of rewarding local authorities and children's centres for their contribution to improving outcomes for children and families, particularly those in greatest need".⁸¹

Under such a scheme, providers of parenting initiatives would be paid additional amounts tied to the number of lower-income parents that participate in their schemes (although the mechanism may need to be specifically adjusted to take into account the social make-up of the local areas in question).

Within any such scheme, given the benefits of ensuring that as many families as possible can benefit from the proposed parenting initiatives and to reinforce the desired message that parenting is something about which all can learn, it would be (initially at least) desirable for such initiatives to remain available freely to all. However, if necessitated by limited resources or if, after an initial period of universal free provision, an undesirable social gradient in take-up does exist despite other attempts to prevent it, another possible mechanism would be the introduction of staggered charges for participation related to income.

The government has already indicated a willingness in relation to Sure Start to "increase its focus on the neediest families"⁸². One aspect of this is the possibility of maintaining universal access to certain services but to provide them as free to families from particular income brackets and to provide them at a reasonable and affordable cost to families from higher income brackets. As Sarah Teather has indicated, children's centres would keep their "universal front door" but, within this, look to target the "neediest":

"I'm not saying that Sure Start children's services will be closed to some families in the area... We want it to be a non-stigmatising service. But within that service, we want it to be much better at targeting the resources".⁸³

81 DfE / DoH, 'Supporting families in the foundation years', 2011.

82 HM Government, 'The coalition: our programme for government', May 2010.

83 A Ashthana, 'Sure start children's centres told to charge for some services', The Observer, 14 November 2010.

Such a mechanism could operate in the context of the proposed parenting initiatives through some form of voucher system. For example, all those now entitled to child benefit could, as part of that benefit, receive the free entitlement to participate in one of the proposed parenting schemes (in relation to children up to the age of, say, 2 or 5). Alternatively, if even greater targeting was deemed necessary, the free entitlement could be reserved for the same 20 per cent most disadvantaged families that would be entitled to the free 2-year-old pre-school places, with a staggered set of charges implemented for those from ascending income brackets.

However, any departure from a universal free offer should only be considered if the money saved / recouped through charges is designed to allow for and be reinvested in efforts at targeting *increased participation among families most in need from a social mobility perspective*. This could perhaps best be achieved by providing independent providers with the additional funds (either through a form of payment by results or an alternative mechanism) to be utilised as a means of attracting increased participation among families from lower income backgrounds.

: 7 Incentivising targeted participation? : parenting education and social mobility

“Our research has shown that some parents will not simply turn up to a children’s centre to claim their free entitlement...[and this is the case for] the group of families at which the two-year-old provision is targeted...in particular”⁸⁴

It is argued here that full consideration of the ‘nudge’ based strategies outlined above should be undertaken. However, as identified previously by both the Frank Field report and the IPPR study, even the fact that child development initiatives are free to lower-income families may not be sufficient to have a serious impact in a social mobility context. As such, it may in fact also be necessary to be prepared to consider seriously more inventive and pro-active strategies if the government is to follow through fully on its progressive commitment.

In his report on the Foundation Years, Frank Field emphasises the distinction between two routes to tackling poverty: on the one hand, through benefits based on income transfers aimed at financial inequality and on the other hand, investment in initiatives designed to improve the life-chances for those from lower-income backgrounds. This paper proposes that the government take the opportunity in this context to explore seriously the possibility of a mechanism that potentially does *both simultaneously*.

Incentivising targeted participation

One possibility would be that, by creating an additional child benefit supplement available to the 20 per cent most

84 IPPR, ‘Parents at the centre’, 2011.

disadvantaged families (with children of a certain age) but contingent in some way on participation in one of the proposed parenting initiatives, a mechanism could be considered that would operate as a two pronged attack on both poverty itself and on the causes of poverty. It is important to stress that this would *not* be part of a move towards contingency of child benefit *generally* (which would continue to operate in exactly the same way) – merely an entitlement (based on income bracket) to a *supplementary amount* that is, in effect, collectable in a very specific way.

Such a supplement would move away from being a ‘passive’ benefit to being ‘active’ money directly tied to and dependent on taking strides to benefit the child itself. Such a supplement could, at the same time, operate to reduce inequality and relative poverty (in terms of 60 per cent median income) and *also* poverty of life-chances by incentivising participation in schemes specifically designed to facilitate the crucial early childhood development that is so central to current discrepancies in outcomes in later life.

Conditional cash transfers

Such a proposed child benefit supplement would operate in a manner similar to the established concept of conditional cash transfers (‘CCTs’). CCTs are essentially programmes that transfer cash to lower-income families as part of an investment in child development by making the payments conditional on some form of participation or engagement in particular programmes or activities, generally in relation to the areas of child education and health.

Such schemes are now virtually ubiquitous in some form in Latin America and have produced significant results, lowering poverty rates and narrowing inequality gaps.⁸⁵ Under these schemes, payments are most frequently conditional on particular investments in human capital including, for example, mothers attending pre- and post-natal care, children receiving a full set of vaccinations and children achieving stipulated attendance rates at school through to the age of 17. The most famous such scheme – *Oportunidades* in Mexico – covers 5 million households,

85 A Fiszbein and N Schady, ‘Conditional cash transfers: reducing present and future poverty’, 2009.

with the primary objective of supporting families living in severe poverty.⁸⁶

However, CCT programmes are not exclusively for the developing world – for example, an innovative CCT called ‘Opportunity NYC: Family Rewards’ is being piloted across six boroughs of New York (having begun in 2007). Its aim is to challenge the inevitability of intergenerational poverty and to consider how policy interventions may offer the next generation a better inheritance through a simultaneous combination of immediate poverty relief and development of human capital for the future.

Under the scheme, financial payments for lower-income families are tied to certain activities and outcomes in children’s education, families’ preventative healthcare, and parents’ employment. Early evaluation of the project indicates that the scheme has successfully:

“reduced current poverty (its main short term goal) and produced a range of positive effects on a variety of outcomes across all three human capital domains (children’s education, family health, and parents’ work and training)”.⁸⁷

Importantly, the effects of the programme on poverty have not lead to major unintended consequences, such as substantial reductions in work effort. As such, although at an early stage of the evaluative process:

“Overall, the initial results from the New York City project show that *the CCT concept is feasible to implement and can make a difference in the lives of poor families in a developed country*”.⁸⁸ [emphasis added]

Although highly tentative at this stage, such evidence would support the argument that similar mechanisms that seek simultaneously to target poverty in both financial and life-opportunity terms are worthy of consideration as part of a wider attempt to devise innovative methods of ensuring that early years interventions operate as a real weapon in a social mobility context.

36 IPPR, ‘Parents at the centre’, 2011.

87 J Riccio, ‘Early findings from New York City’s conditional cash transfer program’, Fast Focus No.5, 2010.

88 Ibid

Any such child benefit supplement mechanism in this context could operate, for example, by being made available to first-time parents – both mothers and fathers – from the later months of pregnancy (and thus tied to attendance at antenatal classes) through until the child reaches the age of two (contingent at all times in some way upon participation in a recognised parenting initiative) and the point at which the free pre-school offer begins. Interestingly, in their paper ‘Parents at the Centre’, IPPR argue that:

“To provide an additional incentive for parents to take-up early years services, the roll-out of the programme for two-year-olds could be complemented by a system of conditional cash transfers...From covering transport costs to the Working Tax Credit, incentives are already an important component of tackling child poverty, and a CCT would offer an additional booster for low-income families”.⁸⁹

This could potentially create an interesting option to be explored: utilising such a form of benefit supplement mechanism in a joined up scheme from pre-birth right through the crucial early years. Such a mechanism could potentially – if fully piloted, considered and evaluated – provide a powerful tool against disadvantage and would mark a very significant statement of intent in relation to social mobility.

By providing a degree of direct income transfers to the bottom 20 per cent, such a scheme would operate to reduce child poverty (which the government is still committed to eradicating by 2020) and inequality in the traditional sense. This could, in and of itself, have a significant social benefit. However, such a scheme could also simultaneously attack the root causes of poverty by seeking to incentivise participation in programmes with the potential to combat the developmental discrepancies that are fundamental to creating the unacceptable degree of stratification in British society and that fuel the seemingly perpetual cycle of intergenerational immobility.

The actual detailed mechanics of how such a potential benefit supplement scheme in relation to the proposed parenting initiatives might operate (such as the attendance monitoring

89 IPPR, ‘Parents at the centre’, 2011.

process and the payment mechanism) would of course need considerable thought.

One obvious point that would need to be addressed would be to ensure that the availability of the supplement did not operate as a disincentive to work (i.e. by taking a family above a relevant income threshold). A potential solution would be – in a similar vein to the solution proposed to the potential benefit trap inherent in relation to the pupil premium – that families at an income level whereby they would be entitled to receive the benefit supplement at the point at which it would begin (i.e. at the determined point in later pregnancy) would remain eligible for it for the duration of the scheme (i.e. until the child reaches 2) regardless of changes in their financial status.

The crucial link between participation in the proposed parenting schemes and payment of the supplement could potentially operate in a number of ways which would need to be explored in detail. The following are possibilities:

- ⌚ attendance at a relevant, recognised parenting initiative on a weekly / monthly basis could simply be monitored with attendance triggering the additional child-benefit top-up to be paid. Such a system would potentially have the benefit of simplicity but could also carry some risk of attendance without sufficient engagement with the information being conveyed.
- ⌚ The payment of the benefit supplement could be made contingent upon completion of the full duration of a recognised course (say over a set period of weeks / months). Payment could be made contingent on attendance at a requisite number of classes over the set period (and even potentially also on completion of some form of simple multiple choice, online quiz undertaken as part of the final session) to encourage active engagement with the information being conveyed. Such a structure could introduce the possibility of different levels of benefit supplement potentially tied to completion of different levels of parenting initiatives which could fit with and work to reinforce the general message that learned parenting is something to be embraced and

even celebrated.

- ⌚ Rather than a weekly / monthly benefit supplement, the conditional payment could potentially take the form of an annual or semi-annual bonus based on the degree of participation in the relevant initiatives during that period.

One further interesting possibility would be, if sufficient interest was generated in a national campaign similar to that outlined in Chapter 5 such that numerous relevant private companies became 'National Partners' of the campaign, an element of the benefit supplement could even take the form almost akin to loyalty points on a card which could be recouped at the stores of the participating private partners (thus again potentially ensuring that a degree of the supplement itself is reinvested for the benefit of the child).

Inevitably, the viability and the detailed mechanics of any such potential incentivisation mechanism would need significant consideration and rigorous testing. However, the key point being made here relates to the importance of the central concept itself. The government appears willing to take hugely positive strides to make a difference in the crucial arena of the Home Learning Environment, but a further leap is required if such an effort is to pay dividends from a social mobility perspective.

What is crucial is that the importance of this further leap is recognised in a context where the evidence clearly indicates that:

- ⌚ already existing behavioural discrepancies across social groups in the Home Learning Environment are a *crucial factor* perpetuating intergenerational immobility; and
- ⌚ improving the Home Learning Environment for lower-income children would be the *single most positive step* that could be taken to begin to reduce the opportunity-deficit that many currently face from birth.

As outlined above, there are numerous mechanisms which could be considered both individually and in combination in an effort to achieve this transformation. The government should now take the opportunity to explore these and other inventive possibilities in the context of the proposed move towards

normalising parenting advice and education if it wishes to hold true to its unequivocal commitment to improving social mobility. As part of this process, although perhaps the most controversial option, the government should not shy away from considering the possibility of creating an income bracket based entitlement to a child benefit supplement which is paid on the basis of doing something active and positive for the direct benefit of the child in question.

■ Conclusion

Summary of specific recommendations

This paper recommends that the government should:

- explore, as part of its effort to ensure that “high quality parenting classes becom[e] widely available”¹, the particular merits of (a suitably modified form of) the Leksand model detailed in Chapter 3. Under this model, groups are formed ante-natally and *continue* for the initial years of the child’s life as a platform for both antenatal and subsequent parenting initiatives;
- implement a national parenting campaign, drawing on the science of child-development, structured around and building on the success of the established ‘5-a-day’ concept: ‘5-a-day for child development’; and
- extensively explore mechanisms designed specifically to attract parents from lower-income backgrounds to the proposed parenting initiatives to ensure that such initiatives operate in the context of the commitment to improving social mobility.

This paper has argued strongly that the government is correct to emphasise the importance and efficacy of providing support at the earliest stages in a child’s life. In particular, it has commended the coalition’s willingness to embrace the firm evidence on the central importance of the Home Learning Environment for child development by advocating a strategy that urges “a much wider culture shift towards recognising the importance of parenting” and looks to enable “parenting advice and support to be considered the norm”.⁹⁰

90 HM Government, ‘Opening doors, breaking barriers: a strategy for social mobility’, 2011.

As an examination of the science behind early brain and skill development makes clear, *what parents do* with their children in these vital early years is of fundamental importance to all that follows. This evidence in turn creates the imperative for greater efforts at intervention directed at the family sphere to prevent the squandering of so much individual potential (particularly among children from lower-income backgrounds), however counter-intuitive this may feel from a traditional liberal perspective. Indeed, if a core element of liberalism is to allow each individual to realise their full potential, such a squandering is in fact itself deeply and fundamentally *illiberal*.

In a context where parenting remains generally viewed as an intensely private matter, this paper has argued that what is required is a significant attitudinal shift (akin to those involving seat belt wearing and drink driving) towards recognising that parenting is something that has a societal aspect and importance and about which it is socially acceptable for people to seek advice, learn and improve.

As part of the effort to engender such a culture shift, the paper has taken up the proposed concept of a national parenting campaign and, drawing on international experience, has proposed a basis by which such a campaign might successfully operate by building on the established '5-a-day' concept in relation to fruit and vegetables. Drawing directly on the science of early child development, such a '*5-a-day for child development*' campaign could successfully identify a series of small, manageable steps based on easily graspable, tangible and readily packageable 'hooks' that would enable the key messages to take hold in parents' minds. It would also maximise the potential for private sector engagement.

Any such campaign would be designed to supplement the direct parenting initiatives that the government is seeking to ensure are available to all. Such a universal offer is entirely correct and in keeping with the desired culture shift towards viewing parenting as something about which *all* can learn and improve. However, keeping always in mind the guiding touchstone of improving social mobility, such universality also carries the seed of potential problems if there is a social gradient in the take-up of the initiatives. This is particularly true in a context where the evidence clearly indicates that:

- ⌘ already existing behavioural discrepancies across social groups in the Home Learning Environment are a *crucial factor* perpetuating intergenerational immobility; and
- ⌘ improving the Home Learning Environment for lower-income children would be the *single most positive step* that could be taken to begin to reduce the opportunity-deficit that many currently face from birth.

The coalition has aligned itself firmly to the commitment to improving social mobility such that its claims to be a socially progressive government cannot help but live and die by this sword. This paper has argued that it is therefore crucial that the government investigate how to take the vital *further step* to address these asymmetries and to actively encourage participation among those from lower-income backgrounds in the proposed parenting initiatives. It has also proposed a series of possible mechanisms (designed to encourage further exploration and debate) by which this crucial further step of targeted participation within a universal scheme could be achieved.

A core mantra repeated consistently by leading politicians in the coalition to explain the policies being implemented to restore financial stability is that “it is unfair to burden future generations with debt”⁹¹. By the same rationale, it is equally *unfair* to future generations (both morally and, in terms of wasted potential, economically) to burden them with an ossified society in which, more so than in almost any other developed nation, where a child will *get to* is in such large part dictated by where they have *come from*. It is in this context that the government must be willing to explore inventive and even potentially controversial mechanisms by which its laudable willingness to focus on the crucial area of the Home Learning Environment and parenting can go beyond being a general tool for child development and become an *active weapon to counteract disadvantage*.

91 G Osborne, Andrew Marr Show, news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/programmes/andrew_marr_show/8006757.stm, 19 April 2009; see also N Clegg, ‘New Year message’, 30 December 2010.