



Improved Early Years Interventions Debate on 27 February 2020

On 27 February 2020, the House of Lords is due to debate a motion moved by the Lord Bishop of Gloucester that “this House takes note of the case for improved early years interventions to support children and families”.

Summary

Early intervention is a [loosely-defined term](#) that refers to trying to resolve problems as soon as possible, before they become more difficult to reverse. In an [early years context](#), widely but not exclusively considered to be from conception until a child reaches the age of 5, there is a strong body of evidence that early interventions can be used to identify children who may be showing atypical development. Such interventions can help develop their skills and competencies in a range of areas. These include in relation to health, cognitive development, and social and emotional skills.

As well as improving lives and life chances in the short, medium, and long term, several reports in recent years, including those from parliamentary committees, have argued that early years interventions are also cost effective. In 2016, the Early Intervention Foundation (EIF), a government-supported research charity, [estimated](#) that £16.6 billion was spent on ‘late interventions’ by the public sector each year in England and Wales—equivalent to almost £290 per person. It was noted that this sum “does not capture longer-term cumulative costs which will be considerably larger; it also does not capture wider cost to individuals and society”.

Recent parliamentary committee reports have argued for a [national strategy](#) for England. This strategy would coordinate early intervention programmes implemented by both central and local government. The chief executive of the EIF, Dr Jo Casebourne, has also [recently called for](#) an increase in the financial support given to local authorities in England by central government. She also argued for a longer-term, evidence-based plan on early intervention across government.

In respect of recent developments in the new parliament, the Conservative Party general election [manifesto stated](#) that a “strong society needs strong families”. It added: “We will improve the troubled families programme and champion family hubs to serve vulnerable families with the intensive, integrated support they need to care for children—from the early years and throughout their lives”. In early February 2020, the [Government announced](#) that the EIF had been commissioned to investigate the family hub model and effective local practices. It is expected to report in spring 2020. The Government has also given the troubled families programme up to an extra £165 million.

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I. What are Early Years Interventions?

'Early intervention' is a flexible term, which can be interpreted in several ways across social policy areas. In an early years context, there is also flexibility around where age group boundaries fall. However, a common theme between these definitions is a focus on the importance of early support for young children and their families to improve health, educational and social outcomes.¹

The Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) is a research charity focused on identifying how effective early intervention can improve the lives of children and young people at risk of experiencing poor outcomes. It has explained the essential aim of early intervention as follows:

Effective early intervention works to prevent problems occurring, or to tackle them head-on when they do before problems get worse. It also helps to foster a whole set of personal strengths and skills that prepare a child for adult life.

Early intervention focuses on supporting children's physical, cognitive, behavioural, and social and emotional development. This is where it can make the biggest difference and has the potential to provide benefits throughout a person's life.²

The EIF has also commented on the importance of early intervention in a child's early years:

The early years—from pre-birth until starting school—is a critical period in terms of a child's development, as they form bonds with their parents, develop language skills and other cognitive functions and establish behavioural patterns. Gaps that emerge in the early years can persist into the school years and beyond. Early intervention has a vital role to play in identifying children who may be showing atypical development, and in helping to develop the skills and competencies that set a child up for life.³

Early intervention programmes can take a variety of forms. Examples include home visiting schemes to support vulnerable parents and activities to support language development. Other forms include class-based programmes to improve children's social and emotional skills, and family therapy to improve children's behavioural development.⁴ Such interventions can be either targeted at specific groups, such as vulnerable or troubled families, or universal in scope, such as the five mandated health visits for young children.⁵

¹ House of Lords Library, [Early Intervention in Children's Lives](#), 25 October 2018, p 1; and House of Commons Library, [Early Intervention](#), 11 July 2019, pp 3–4. In respect of age boundaries for the early years, some bodies, for example the 'Conception to Age Two: First 1001 Days' All-Party Parliamentary Group, focus on the period up to a child's second birthday. Other groups focus on the period up to a child's fifth birthday, after which schooling is compulsory (GOV.UK, [School Admissions: School Starting Age](#), accessed 11 February 2020).

² Early Intervention Foundation, ['Who We Are and What We Do'](#), accessed 11 February 2020. The EIF was established in 2013. It is a member of the Government's 'What Works Network' of groups focused on how high-quality evidence can be used to improve decision-making (ibid; and Cabinet Office, ['What Works Network'](#), 22 October 2019). See also: Early Intervention Foundation, [Realising the Potential of Early Intervention](#), 30 October 2018.

³ Early Intervention Foundation, ['What Early Intervention is About: Early Years'](#), accessed 11 February 2020.

⁴ Early Intervention Foundation, [Realising the Potential of Early Intervention](#), 30 October 2018, p 5.

⁵ House of Commons Library, [Early Intervention](#), 11 July 2019, p 4.

2. Why do Early Years Interventions Matter?

The EIF has found an “extensive body of evidence, built around rigorous testing of specific programmes, [which] shows that early intervention can improve outcomes for children and families by targeting the circumstances that make supporting children’s development difficult”.⁶ It has found not all early intervention programmes prove to be effective. But of those that have, benefits have been seen in a number of areas. These include in relation to children’s:

- home lives and family relationships;
- physical and mental health, including emotional wellbeing and self-esteem;
- cognitive development and educational attainment; and
- social and behavioural skills.⁷

In addition, effective early intervention does not only affect individuals and families. It has been seen to have benefits for society and the economy as well. These can manifest in a variety of ways, from reducing the demand for support services throughout a child’s lifetime to benefiting an individual’s future earning potential.⁸

The Government has published or commissioned several reports on early interventions over the past decade. These reports have shown how effective interventions in a child’s early years can be to deliver a range of benefits for children, families and wider society.⁹ For example:

- In February 2010, a review of health inequalities in England by Professor Sir Michael Marmot found that “giving every child the best start in life is crucial to reducing health inequalities across the life course”.¹⁰ The Marmot review contended that disadvantage could start before birth and accumulate throughout life, and that action to reduce health inequalities must reflect this reality. As a result, the review’s “highest priority” recommendation was that children be given the best start in life.
- In November 2010, a Department of Health report found “encouraging and enabling the good health of mothers, both before and during pregnancy and after birth” and “maximising early child development” as key factors in “giving children a healthy start in life and laying the groundwork for good health and wellbeing later on”.¹¹
- In December 2010, the Independent Review on Poverty and Life Chances, led by Frank Field, then a Labour MP, found “overwhelming evidence that children’s life chances are most heavily predicated on their development in the first five years of life”.¹² It added: “The things that matter most are a healthy pregnancy; good maternal mental health;

⁶ Early Intervention Foundation, ‘[How do we Know it Works?](#)’, accessed 11 February 2020.

⁷ Early Intervention Foundation, ‘[Why is it Good for Children and Families?](#)’, accessed 11 February 2020.

⁸ Early Intervention Foundation, ‘[Why is it Good for Society and the Economy?](#)’, accessed 11 February 2020. See also, for example: Lesley Owen et al, ‘[The Cost-effectiveness of Public Health Interventions](#)’, *Journal of Public Health*, vol 34 no 1, March 2012, pp 37–45. The EIF has previously estimated the cost of late intervention at £17 billion annually across England and Wales—nearly £290 per person (Early Intervention Foundation, [The Cost of Late Intervention: EIF Analysis](#), 2016, p 4).

⁹ These have often echoed the findings of earlier academic studies. For more information, see: House of Lords Library, [Early Intervention in Children’s Lives](#), 25 October 2018, p 4.

¹⁰ Professor Sir Michael Marmot, [Fair Society, Healthy Lives: The Marmot Review](#), February 2010, pp 14–16.

¹¹ Department of Health, [Our Health and Wellbeing Today](#), 30 November 2010, p 24.

¹² HM Government, [The Foundation Years: Preventing Poor Children Becoming Poor Adults](#), December 2010, p 5.

secure bonding with the child; love and responsiveness of parents; along with clear boundaries, as well as opportunities for a child's cognitive, language and social and emotional development”.

- In 2011, the Coalition Government published two independent reports on early intervention by Graham Allen, then a Labour MP. The first, *Early Intervention: The Next Steps*, set out the central aim for early intervention. This was to create the “essential social and emotional bedrock for all children to reap social, individual and economic rewards”.¹³ It added that “many of the costly and damaging social problems in society are created because we are not giving children the right type of support in their earliest years, when they should achieve their most rapid development”.¹⁴ The second report, *Early Intervention: Smart Investment, Massive Savings*, called for a “culture change from late intervention to early intervention”. This, it thought, would help individuals and achieve “massive savings” for the public purse by “avoiding expensive provision when things go wrong”.¹⁵
- In March 2011, Dame Clare Tickell's report into the early years argued that the “earliest years in a child's life are absolutely critical”. Dame Clare stated: “There is overwhelming international evidence that foundations are laid in the first years of life which, if weak, can have a permanent and detrimental impact on children's longer-term development. A child's future choices, attainment, wellbeing, happiness and resilience are profoundly affected by the quality of the guidance, love and care they receive during these first years”.¹⁶
- In May 2011, Professor Eileen Munro produced a report for the Department for Education. This found a “growing body of evidence of the effectiveness of early intervention with children and families”.¹⁷ It argued that “preventative services can do more to reduce abuse and neglect than reactive services”. It recommended that the Government “place a duty on local authorities and their statutory partners to secure the sufficient provision of local early help services for children, young and people and families”.
- In October 2013, the *Annual Report of the Chief Medical Officer 2012*, subtitled *Our Children Deserve Better: Prevention Pays*, contended: “The evidence base clearly identifies that events that occur in early life (indeed in fetal life) affect health and wellbeing in later life [...] Therefore, to try to impact on the diseases of adult life that make up the greatest burden of disease, it makes sense to intervene early”.¹⁸

More recent government policy papers, including *Improving Lives: Helping Workless Families* (2017), *Unlocking Talent, Fulfilling Potential* (2017) and *Prevention is Better than Cure* (2018), all published under Theresa May's premiership, set out the Government's approach to improving children's life chances through social programmes, education, and health policy, respectively.¹⁹

¹³ HM Government, [Early Intervention: The Next Steps](#), January 2011, pp v and x.

¹⁴ *ibid*, p xiii.

¹⁵ HM Government, [Early Intervention: Smart Investment, Massive Savings](#), July 2011, pp vii and xix.

¹⁶ Dame Clare Tickell, [The Early Years: Foundations for Life, Health and Learning](#), 30 March 2011, p 2.

¹⁷ Professor Eileen Munro, [The Munro Review of Child Protection: Final Report—A Child-centred System](#), 10 May 2011, Cm 8062, p 7.

¹⁸ Department of Health, [Annual Report of the Chief Medical Officer 2012: Our Children Deserve Better—Prevention Pays](#), October 2013, p 3.

¹⁹ Department for Work and Pensions, [Improving Lives: Helping Workless Families](#), April 2017; Department for Education, [Unlocking Talent, Fulfilling Potential](#), December 2017, Cm 9541; and Department of Health and Social Care, [Prevention is Better than Cure](#), November 2018. See also: House of Commons Library, [Early Intervention](#), 11 July 2019, pp 4–8.

3. UK Government Policy

A wide range of central and local government programmes can be categorised as including early intervention elements. Key central government programmes across the areas of health, education and social development include:

- **Healthy Child Programme and Health Visitors:** a universal NHS initiative that aims to bring together health, education, and other main partners to deliver an effective programme for prevention and support for children and young people aged 0–19.²⁰ Health visiting teams lead and deliver the healthy child programme for all children aged 0–5.²¹
- **Family Nurse Partnership:** a voluntary home visiting programme for first-time young mothers and families.²²
- **Healthy Start:** a means-tested scheme providing vouchers for pregnant women and families with young children for milk; fresh or frozen fruit and vegetables; and vitamins.²³
- **Start4Life:** a Public Health England programme delivering advice and practical guidance to expectant parents and families with children under 5 years of age.²⁴
- **Maternity Services and Perinatal Mental Health:** a range of NHS services aimed at women and families, including mental health services for mothers.²⁵
- **Early Education Entitlement:** free childcare for qualifying 2, 3 and 4-year olds (a 15-hour entitlement for the most disadvantaged 2-year olds; a 15-hour entitlement for parents of 3 and 4-year olds; and a 30-hour entitlement for working parents of 3 and 4-year olds).²⁶
- **Early Years Foundation Stage:** a statutory framework for children up to the age of 5 that sets out the areas of learning around which educational activities should be based.²⁷
- **Early Years Pupil Premium:** funding for early years settings to improve the education for disadvantaged 3 and 4-year olds. This is worth up to £302 per year.²⁸
- **Early Intervention Grant:** funding provided to local authorities that they can spend on early intervention.²⁹
- **Sure Start Children’s Centres:** a network of local authority-run children’s centres providing activities for young children and helping to ensure the integration of early childhood services.³⁰

²⁰ Public Health England, '[Healthy Child Programme 0 to 19: Health Visitor and School Nurse Commissioning](#)', 9 March 2018.

²¹ Institute of Health Visiting, '[What is a Health Visitor](#)', accessed 11 February 2020.

²² Family Nurse Partnership, '[How FNP Works](#)', accessed 11 February 2020.

²³ Healthy Start, '[About Healthy Start](#)', accessed 11 February 2020.

²⁴ Start4Life, '[Homepage](#)', accessed 11 February 2020.

²⁵ See: House of Commons Library, '[Early Intervention](#)', 11 July 2019, pp 23–6; and NHS England, '[Perinatal Mental Health](#)', accessed 11 February 2020.

²⁶ Department for Education, '[Early Education and Childcare: Statutory Guidance for Local Authorities](#)', June 2018, p 6.

²⁷ GOV.UK, '[Early Years Foundation Stage](#)', accessed 11 February 2020.

²⁸ GOV.UK, '[Get Extra Funding for Your Early Years Provider](#)', accessed 11 February 2020.

²⁹ House of Commons Library, '[Early Intervention](#)', 11 July 2019, pp 32–4.

³⁰ GOV.UK, '[Find a Sure Start Children’s Centre](#)', accessed 11 February 2020.

- **Sure Start Maternity Grant:** a one-off payment of £500 to help towards the costs of having a child for mothers in receipt of certain benefits.³¹
- **Troubled Families Programme:** a Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government-administered programme of targeted intervention for families with multiple, complex problems.³²

4. Scrutiny of Government Policy: Recent Committee Reports

As outlined above, there is consensus that early intervention can be effective at improving the life chances of young children and families. However, there have been disagreements on how interventions should be coordinated and delivered. Three parliamentary committee reports have made recommendations in this area since November 2018.

House of Commons Science and Technology Committee

In November 2018, the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee published a report entitled *Evidence-based Early Years Intervention*. During its enquiry, the committee examined the strength of the evidence linking adverse childhood experiences with long-term negative outcomes; the evidence base for related interventions; whether evidence was being used effectively in policy making; and the support and oversight for research into this area.³³

It found that the provision of early intervention programmes was “fragmented and highly variable across England, with inadequate effective oversight mechanisms for the Government and others to monitor what local authorities are delivering”.³⁴ In response, it called on the Government to prioritise early intervention and tackling childhood adversity and to set out a national strategy to “empower and encourage local authorities to deliver effective, sustainable and evidence-based early intervention”. This would help save public funds, as well as improve lives. The committee added:

The Government should also ensure that it has better oversight of the provision of early intervention around the country, so that it can identify approaches that are working well, detect local authorities in need of support and hold local authorities to account.³⁵

Government Response

The Government rejected the committee’s central recommendation for a new national strategy for early intervention addressing child adversity and trauma. It argued that “local areas are best placed to understand the needs of their local communities, to commission early intervention services to meet

³¹ GOV.UK, ‘[Sure Start Maternity Grant](#)’, accessed 11 February 2020.

³² Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, ‘[Troubled Families Programme](#)’, accessed 11 February 2020; and House of Commons Library, [Troubled Families Programme \(England\)](#), 28 January 2020.

³³ House of Commons Science and Technology Committee, ‘[Evidence-based Early Years Intervention Inquiry](#)’, accessed 11 February 2020.

³⁴ House of Commons Science and Technology Committee, [Evidence-based Early Years Intervention](#), 14 November 2018, HC 506 of session 2017–19, p 3.

³⁵ *ibid*, pp 3–4.

those needs and to deliver interventions as part of a whole-system approach to produce the best outcomes for families”. However, the committee contended that a national strategy would “not have to run contrary to this locally-led approach”. Instead, it could have “raised awareness and ambition among local authorities with regards to adversity-focused early intervention, provided guidance and described best practice”.³⁶

House of Commons Education Committee

In early February 2019, the House of Commons Education Committee published a report entitled *Tackling Disadvantage in the Early Years*. It concluded that there seemed to be “little strategic direction to government policy on early years”, adding:

[...] the life chances strategy was never published, the Government’s social mobility action plan did not fully address the role played by the early years, and the Government’s flagship 30 hours childcare policy appears to be entrenching disadvantage.³⁷

The report went on to make a series of recommendations in respect of two main themes: “quality early years education” and “supporting a strong home learning environment”. These included: ensuring pre-schools have low staffing ratios and well-trained professionals; reducing the earnings cap for the 30 hours of free childcare for the children of working parents; implementing more regular assessments of children aged 0–5, including for speech and language development; and exploring the promotion of family hubs as a model for the provision of integrated services.³⁸

Government Response

In response, the Government acknowledged that the “evidence is clear that the early years influence how well children do at school, their ongoing health and wellbeing, and their achievements later in life”.³⁹ It said that its overall approach to the early years “follows the evidence” and can be summarised as follows:

- enable all children to benefit from high quality early education and childcare, with additional support for disadvantaged children;
- support children and families through effective and coherent local early years services; and
- focus all of our actions on achieving our ambition to ensure disadvantaged children enter school with the skills and language development they need to thrive, with a particular focus on improving children’s home learning environment.⁴⁰

³⁶ House of Commons Science and Technology Committee, [Evidence-based Early Years Intervention: Government Response](#), 8 February 2019, HC 1898 of session 2017–19, p 3.

³⁷ House of Commons Education Committee, [Tackling Disadvantage in the Early Years](#), 7 February 2019, HC 1006 of session 2017–19, p 3.

³⁸ *ibid*, pp 3–4.

³⁹ Department for Education, [Government Response to the Education Select Committee Report on Tackling Disadvantage in the Early Years](#), April 2019, CP 68, p 1.

⁴⁰ *ibid*, p 2.

House of Commons Health and Social Care Committee

In late February 2019, the House of Commons Health and Social Care Committee published a report following an inquiry into the first 1,000 days of life.⁴¹ It concluded that the period from conception to age 2 is a “critical phase during which the foundations of a child’s development are laid”. It made several recommendations, including repeating the Science and Technology Committee’s earlier call for a reduction in the variation of approaches around the country and for a cross-government strategy to coordinate activity in this area. In respect of the latter recommendation, the committee said:

Improving support for children, parents and families during this vulnerable period requires a long-term and coordinated response nationally and locally. The Government should lead by developing a long-term, cross-government strategy for the first 1,000 days of life, setting demanding goals to reduce adverse childhood experiences, improve school readiness and reduce infant mortality and child poverty. The Minister for the Cabinet Office should be given responsibility to lead the strategy’s development and implementation across government, with the support of a small centralised delivery team.⁴²

Government Response

In its response, the Government reiterated its view that local authorities were “best placed to understand the needs of their local communities, and therefore to commission the early intervention services that best meet those local needs as part of a whole-system model”.⁴³ The Government added that the Cabinet Office supported the ‘What Works Network’, which included the Early Intervention Foundation, to support local commissioners to make evidence-based decisions.

In addition, the response stated that a cross-government ministerial group looking at support for families with infants aged 0–2 had been established in July 2018.⁴⁴ This group, led by Andrea Leadsom, then Leader of the House of Commons, later made recommendations about early years support to relevant secretaries of state across a number of departments, including the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, the Department for Education, the Department for Health and Social Care and the Department for Work and Pensions.⁴⁵ The Government has not published the group’s recommendations in full, but Ms Leadsom set out a selection during a debate in the House of Commons in July 2019. These included calling for a “clear and cohesive” government vision for the first 1,001 days of a child’s life and for a minister to hold responsibility for this “critical” period. The Government has also said that they informed the *Advancing Our Health: Prevention in the 2020s* consultation launched in the same month.⁴⁶ The group has now disbanded.

⁴¹ House of Commons Health and Social Care Committee, [First 1,000 Days of Life](#), 26 February 2019, HC 1496 of session 2017–19.

⁴² *ibid*, p 3.

⁴³ Department of Health and Social Care, [First 1,000 Days of Life: Government Response](#), June 2019, CP 112, p 14.

⁴⁴ *ibid*, p 9. See also: Cabinet Office, [‘Leader of the Commons to Chair Ministerial Group on Family Support from Conception to the Age of Two’](#), 27 July 2018; and House of Commons, [‘Written Question: Early Years Ministerial Group on Family Support’](#), 15 November 2018, 189802.

⁴⁵ House of Commons, [‘Written Question: Early Years Ministerial Group On Family Support’](#), 11 July 2019, 274531; and [‘Written Question: Early Years Ministerial Group on Family Support’](#), 31 October 2019, 6263.

⁴⁶ [HC Hansard, 16 July 2019, cols 759–98](#); House of Commons, [‘Written Question: Early Years Ministerial Group On Family Support’](#), 7 January 2020, 26; and Cabinet Office and Department of Health and Social Care, [‘Advancing Our Health: Prevention in the 2020s’](#), 22 July 2019.

5. Further Information

- House of Commons Science and Technology Committee, [Evidence-based Early Years Intervention](#), 14 November 2018, HC 506 of session 2017–19; and [Government Response](#), 8 February 2019, HC 1898 of session 2017–19
- House of Commons Education Committee, [Tackling Disadvantage in the Early Years](#), 7 February 2019, HC 1006 of session 2017–19; and [Government Response](#), April 2019, CP 68
- House of Commons Health and Social Care Committee, [First 1,000 Days of Life](#), 26 February 2019, HC 1496 of session 2017–19; and [Government Response](#), June 2019, CP 112
- House of Commons Library, [Early Intervention](#), 11 July 2019