



What About The Children?

'Raising awareness of the never-changing emotional needs of children in our ever-changing society'



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28th March 2019

For the attention of The Rt. Hon. Norman Lamb MP

What About The Children? is writing to support your work as Chair of the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee, the inquiry and report into early years intervention and your work in Parliament to press for a national strategy to reduce childhood adversity. What About The Children? shares your frustration that, despite the findings and recommendations of this excellent report, government continues to be reluctant to shift its approach and prioritise an integrated, long term strategy to prevent adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). It is well documented that the fall-out cost of ACEs absorbs 40% of public service spending. Caspi and colleagues, working on the Dunedin Longitudinal Study in New Zealand, showed that 20% of their population was responsible for 80% of their health and welfare budget: this 20% was able to be identified by the age of 3 from what was termed the child's 'brain health'. As your report clearly states, there is a raft of scientific evidence on the long term impact of adverse childhood experiences and increasing, although less well-known, evidence on the impact of maternal adverse experiences on children's future health, emotional wellbeing and life chances. It is vital that an integrated strategy to prevent early life stress should be given serious consideration by government if it is to reduce harm and improve the economy.

What About The Children? agrees with you that important research questions remain. However there is already a substantial body of research evidence, (much of which is available on our website www.whataboutthechildren.org.uk) to inform policy on the causes of harm and intervention strategies that are effective in preventing and reducing harm.

Family and the home environment are where the social and emotional development of children begins. Therefore policy must ensure greater investment and support for families during the period of early childhood and throughout life to reduce persistent intergenerational social problems and underachievement. Investing in children at the earliest opportunity – and that includes providing extra emotional support for women, when they are pregnant, and their partners - would reduce some of the huge long term financial and social cost of ACEs. Anxiety and distress in pregnancy are so common that the adverse effect on even a small fraction of the babies and children involved represents an immense cost to society. A recent report from the London School of Economics put the cost of perinatal mental illness at £8 billion a year, 72% of which arises from problems in childhood and beyond. We are now also aware, from the research of Bowers & Yehuda, that severe problems with infant stress can affect, and block, the 'reading' of certain DNA codes related to stress, and can even in some cases, pass these alterations down the generations.

What About Children? believes that government policy must reflect the views and meet the real needs of all families with young children, not just those that policy makers and professionals have identified as in need. To reduce ACEs, it is essential that services are readily available to all, irrespective of their circumstances, not a one-size-fits-all approach or one determined by a set of 'risk' criteria.

Parenting is complex and important work, for which all parents need support and encouragement in order to provide the best early start for children. At our national conference *'What Price Infant Mental Health? what are the costs of ignoring the emotional wellbeing of our youngest children'*, held on 20th March at the Royal Overseas League, delegates identified common themes from feedback data collected from parents with young children. There was overwhelming recognition that, to be effective, government strategy must be long term and integrated across government departments, - Health and Social Care, Education, Housing, Tax and Benefits, Work and Pensions - with a focus on enabling all parents to meet the emotional and health needs of children. Government strategy should incorporate



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- Access to high quality universal services supporting all mothers and fathers pre and post-natally
- Universal Support for all families provided by the public, private and voluntary sector, easily accessible local Children's Centres. Support to include for example Mellow Parenting, Mellow Bumps, Mellow Dads. Homestart, Stay and Play sessions, Baby Massage, Breast Feeding peer support, Ante-natal and Post-Natal Health Visitor services
- High quality maternity services available in hospitals, midwife-led units and home birth choices, all providing continuity of care for all mothers
- Additional specialist services for example, Parent Infant Partnership, Video Interaction Guidance
- Age appropriate high quality information on infant brain development and parenting in advance of becoming a parent to include, for example, the Roots of Empathy programme in primary schools and Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) in secondary school, including preparing young people for the responsibilities of parenthood and family life.
- Tax and benefit system that prioritises the care of young children supporting parents to care for their own children and to be emotionally available to them during the critical first three years.

We hope that this additional evidence supports your call to government for a new national strategy on early intervention to transform lives and ultimately save long term costs to the economy.

What About The Children? is a national charity established in 1993 as a voice for the emotional needs of children under-three who are too young to speak for themselves. By raising awareness and improving public knowledge about early brain development from conception, What About The Children? aims to prevent the emotional neglect of babies and improve long term physical and mental health.

cc Dr Paul Williams MP, House of Commons Health and Social Care Committee
The Earl of Listowel,
Tim Loughton MP

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