

What About The Children?



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Rt. Hon. Damian Hinds MP
Secretary of State for Education
House of Commons
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Rt. Hon. Jeremy Hunt MP
Secretary of State for Health and Social Care
Department of Health
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Dear Sirs

What About The Children?, a charity which has been working for 25 years to prevent the emotional neglect of babies, welcomes the publication of the joint Green Paper 'Transforming Children and Young People's Mental Health Provision' published in December 2017. We are encouraged by the collaboration between the Department of Health and Department of Education to address the growing number of children and young people with mental health problems which, as the Green Paper confirms, has a significant long term impact on children's life chances and ultimately the economic success of the country.

We support many of the suggestions in the Green Paper to benefit children and young people already experiencing poor mental health, however we believe that more will be achieved with greater emphasis on preventing the causes of mental health problems with earlier interventions to address the intergenerational cycle of disadvantage and mental health difficulties. Based on the findings of neuroscience, psychology, biology and medical science research, What About The Children? believes there should be a clear emphasis on the critical period of development from conception to age three. We recommend that the evidence underpinning the Green Paper should include the 0 to 3 age group: at present it only references children from 2 to 18. Research confirms that early life experiences shape a human's mental, emotional and physical health for life - quite out of proportion to the later years of childhood. Ensuring consistent, responsive and attuned care and positive attachment relationships during the period of most rapid development, from conception to age three, is key to preventing many of the adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) that impact on future mental health.

What About The Children? supports the collaboration between the Department of Health and Social Care and the Department of Education as a key element of a long term preventative strategy to transform children and young people's mental health. We recommend a more robust, integrated investment across all government departments to prevent the causes of harm as this has been shown to be more cost effective and have greater success. (Heckman 2006, Caspi et al 2016). There is a growing body of research which confirms that external factors or foetal programming can have a long term effect on children's health. The negative effect of parental misuse of alcohol and drugs and exposure to cigarette smoke during pregnancy are well documented, less well known but extremely relevant to children's mental health is the effect of even mild and transient maternal stress or anxiety

on the rapidly developing foetal brain. (Doom & Gunnar 2013). Evidence shows an increased risk of adverse childhood outcomes including ADHD and cognitive, behavioural problems, autism and schizophrenia. (Glover, V. 2015 Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children ASLPAC, Shore, A. 2017)

Infants born to parents who suffer from depression or anxiety, or who are in a dysfunctional or violent relationship or who engage in substance or alcohol misuse, are more likely to experience emotional or behavioural disturbance and subsequent mental health problems. Babies who are anxious or tense are likely to exhibit symptoms such as poor sleep patterns, difficulties with feeding, restlessness and gastric disturbance There is intergenerational transmission of very serious stress and persistent childhood stress is a contributory factor towards later depression (Young Minds 2006, Frodl 2010; Luby 2012, Bowers & Yehuda 2016)).

Training

What About The Children? welcomes the requirement for teacher training to include in-depth study of child development and brain development. All teachers should have a firm understanding of the importance of secure attachment relationship and the impact of early childhood experiences. This is of particular relevance to schools supporting pupils who are Looked After Children as they are likely to have poor early experiences and poor attachment which has significant implications for their behaviour and approach to school learning.

However the training of other professionals, notably Health Visitors, School Nurses, Social Workers, GPs, Educational Psychologists, Early Years Professionals, Midwives and CAMHS staff should include similar in-depth study of child development and mental health issues. This is key to the success of multi-professional collaboration and the mental health teams recommended in the Green Paper.

Personal, Social, Health and Relationships Education (PSHE), Relationships and Sex Education (RSE) in schools

What About The Children? welcomes greater emphasis on Personal, Social, and Health Education (PSHE) for all children. PSHE should of course be age appropriate but it is important that the focus is not simply on mechanics but on issues of respect, sensitivity and responsiveness which form the basis of healthy relationships. The emotional and mental wellbeing of infants is strongly influenced by the relationship with parents and their emotional and mental wellbeing. Family relationships can have a profound impact on the infant. Family and the home environment are where the social and emotional development of children begins. What About The Children? would like to see the Green Paper include reference to ways in which services work with and alongside families. We would like to see a recommendation for a multi-professional approach to teaching PSHE & SRE in schools accessing the knowledge and expertise of health and social services professionals. It is not reasonable for teachers and schools to take on more responsibility when there is evidence that an increasing number of teachers themselves are suffering from stress and anxiety, with work load being cited as a causal factor.

It is important that young people have the opportunity to consider the responsibilities and demands of family life as part of their understanding of the 'adult world of work'. The emotional needs and care of babies and children and how, as parents, they will meet these needs should be a fundamental aspect of PSHE, SRE and other subjects across the school curriculum. For example the damaging effect of alcohol, drugs, smoking and maternal stress on the developing foetus, the development of secure attachment during the critical period of development 0 to 3, and the process of language development should form part of the science curriculum. An example of how a cross-curricular approach can be achieved is the 'Rights Respecting School' kite mark which puts the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child at the heart of the school's Curriculum and Ethos.

Consideration should be given to how school systems, timetables and organisation work to provide opportunity for parents, children and young people to develop and sustain positive relationships. Children with chaotic early experiences will benefit from a school environment which provides responsive, consistent, secure relationships with a flexible but aspirational approach to teaching and learning.

Designated Senior Lead for Mental Health and Mental Health Support

What About The Children? supports the suggested designated mental health lead in schools, but considering the raft of research evidence on the period of development from conception to age three and the importance of family on mental health, we believe that there should be a designated local authority lead and primary healthcare lead liaising closely with schools and local maternity services.

Mental Health Support Teams, if they are to genuinely benefit children, will require professionals from all disciplines where continuous professional development is prioritised. Access to the findings of the latest research, with opportunity for reflective practice and time to develop positive and supportive professional relationships is fundamental. To achieve this, funding across health, education and social services will need to be ring fenced and include an allocation to the cost of time for professionals to meet to facilitate positive working relationships and share information and put in place appropriate support for children and their families.

Further Research

What About The Children? supports the Green Paper's commitment to further research, 'convening a special interest group bringing together academics, practitioners and professionals to identify key prevention evidence, its relevance to practice, identifying gaps in knowledge for further research.' There is already a wealth of compelling evidence about the prerequisites for optimum brain development, which in simple terms shows the critical importance of 'consistent, responsive attuned loving care' from conception to age 3. However more research is needed into epigenetic, the science of interaction between genes and the 'home' environment. The current view is that further research of epigenetics is likely to explain why some babies and children seem to be much more sensitive to prenatal stress and adverse childhood experiences than others. More information and better understanding of epigenetics are key factors for effective prevention and are likely to provide answers to why boys have a higher incidence of mental health and behavioural problems than girls. (All our sons: the development of neurobiology and neuroendocrinology of boys at risk, Shore A 2017)

Based on the overwhelming evidence on adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) a strategy to transform children's mental health, reverse the current trend of increasing numbers of children and young people with mental health problems, reduce inequalities and improve life chances must be rooted in the critical period of development, conception to age 3, with more and sustained investment to support the development of secure infant attachment, positive relationships and stable family life.

Yours faithfully

Chair, What About The Children?

cc Prime Minister, Theresa May MP
Tim Loughton MP

Appendix

What About The Children? Goodman Lectures, 2009 Zeedyk S, 2013 Pereira Gray D.
What About The Children? submission to APPG for Conception to Age 2, The First 1001 Days
Infant Mental Health Enquiry: factors affecting optimal development
What About The Children? Research Summary 'All our sons: the development of neurobiology and neuroendocrinology of boys at risk' Shore A 2017