

A need for balanced evidence

The way 'stories' about a child's early experiences are presented in the media has the potential to influence both political and public opinion, yet just how accurately are research findings reported?



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IN SEPTEMBER 2014, EPPSE research was published that gave an update on the progress of 3,000+ children since 1997 from the age of three to 16-years-old. A core focus of EPPSE has been the extent to which pre-school, compulsory education and home learning experiences can reduce inequality. The study confirmed earlier conclusions that 'what parents did' with their children was important in terms of outcomes, not simply 'who they were' in terms of social class and income.

In other words: Love and nurture could counter economic disadvantage; self-regulation skills had the strongest effect on academic resilience at both five and 10-years-old; for the most disadvantaged children, high quality pre-school had a particularly beneficial effect and attending pre-school had a positive impact on how well children did at school, which then impacted on their predicted lifetime earnings. The final remarks state that: 'It is never just the one factor of child, family or school, or broader social context that brings about success or failure in an academic trajectory. Rather, it appears to be the particular ecological niches that arise through the active reciprocal interactions between these factors that determine the parameters for children's pathways to academic success.'

A spate of articles followed, with headlines such as, 'Pre-school leads to higher GCSE grades' and 'The Nursery Kids are alright', with Sian Griffiths, education editor for *The Sunday Times*, stating that parents should be 'slapping themselves on the back for choosing daycare for their children over a childminder, or even over staying at home and looking after them themselves'. Meanwhile, the Institute of Fiscal Studies estimates that children attending pre-school could be £26,800 better off over their working lives.

The government declared that it was determined to provide high quality, affordable childcare, but there was little or no mention of the vital importance of parenting and nurture – or the fact that, if given the choice, many parents would prefer to stay home with their children. The updated Marmot review report, *Fair Society, Healthy Lives*, originally published in 2010 to report on the government's progress in reducing inequalities in health, made six recommendations: Give every child the best start in life; Enable all children, young people and adults to maximise their capabilities and have control over their lives; Create fair employment and good work for all; Ensure healthy standard of living for all; Create and develop healthy and sustainable places and communities; Strengthen the role and impact of ill health prevention.

The report stated that too many children were not reaching a high enough level of intellectual, social, emotional and physical development to prepare them for school and clarified that action was needed to 'improve the lives of families, support good parenting and improve access to good quality affordable early years services... We have to get it right at the start... In looking at children's development, you've got to look at the parenting, you've got to look at the circumstances in which parenting takes, the conditions of parents' life and the general social context.' The results were picked up by the nationals: 'Half of all five-year-olds not ready for school', with articles stressing the need to access childcare to improve development.

The DfE responded by talking about its plan to raise quality: 'We are raising the status and quality of the early years workforce by introducing rigorous new qualifications so practitioners are highly skilled and can help all children reach the expected level of development...'

What both of these reports made clear was that children live in culturally complex worlds, that parenting and nurture are vital to healthy development and that high quality childcare is massively important, but is only one element in what provides children with the best start in life. Of course, academic attainment matters, but only as one factor in how we support children growing up to be confident, fully rounded, emotionally stable and happy individuals who feel good about themselves and connected to their local communities. A number of reports have clarified that disadvantage is not just about levels of family income, but is about nutrition, health, the quality of relationships that children have, and whether children feel loved, valued and supported by others.

There is a considerable body of evidence that suggests young children should be spending longer in creative, emotionally rich, play-based environments that allow them to mature all their developmental capacities before being exposed to the pressures of the formal school environment. In other words, they are 'not ready' for a very good reason! This tendency to highlight only those aspects of research that support political or personal agendas, or that prioritise limited outcomes, is misleading and dangerous if we want to be able to make fully informed decisions about children's lives.



Useful resources

- Marmot Review: www.instituteofhealthequity.org