Briefing paper for
Northern Ireland Assembly Health Committee’s
Evidence-review on Health Inequalities

2 October 2012

Health inequalities – the role of early years

The Institute of Public Health in Ireland

5th Floor  Forestview
Bishop’s Square  Purdy’s Lane
Redmond’s Hill  Belfast
Dublin 2  BT8 7ZX

Tel: 00353 1 478 6300  Tel: 0044 28 90648494
Fax: 00353 1 478 6319  Fax: 0044 28 9064 6604

Email: info@publichealth.ie
Website: www.publichealth.ie
1. **Institute of Public Health in Ireland (IPH)**

IPH was established in 1998 to support cooperation for public health on the island of Ireland. Tackling health inequalities is a priority theme in all our work. The IPH work programme is built on three strands:

- Health information and health intelligence to inform better decision-making.
- Evidence-based policy development to support government departments and agencies, their strategies and plans.
- Capacity-building to train and upskill health and allied members of the public health workforce.

2. **Early years – the foundation for health**

Giving every child the best start in life has become a priority theme for governments seeking to reduce health inequalities. The foundations of all aspects of human development – physical, psychological, cognitive and social and emotional – are laid down in early childhood. Babies and infants thrive where there is good early nutrition, a warm loving family and frequent exposure to environments conducive to physical play, learning and social interaction. It is also in this critical and sensitive period of early human development that the trajectories of inequality are established. Left unaddressed, inequalities in early years development become embedded and amplified as children grow, ultimately contributing to significant health inequalities across the life course. Life expectancy in Northern Ireland is increasing but males living in the 10% least deprived areas can expect to live on average almost 12 years longer than their counterparts living in the 10% most deprived areas.

In line with the vision set out in Northern Ireland’s Draft Early Years Strategy, ‘early years’ is considered as age 0-6 years and encompasses the antenatal period. There is now considerable international evidence to support the case for prioritising optimal development and fair opportunities in the early years. This evidence hinges on two critical factors:

- It works – the experimental evidence on the effectiveness of a range of early years interventions is relatively consistent in showing that positive outcomes can be achieved in both the short and the long term.
- It represents good value for money – later inventions, although important, are considerably less effective and many early years interventions are estimated to have high benefit-cost ratios and rates of return.

If society intervenes early enough, it can raise the cognitive, social and emotional abilities of disadvantaged children, equipping them better to thrive, not just in school and the workplace, but in many other aspects of their adult lives. Some of the outcomes now known to be positively associated with early years interventions include educational attainment and reduced risk of teenage pregnancy, antisocial behaviour and criminality as well as better mental health. A financial modelling analysis recently undertaken for the Scottish Government estimated that the total potential annual saving accruing from investment in improving early years outcomes in Scotland could be as much as £5.4million.
3. Early years in Northern Ireland – a snapshot

- At age 5 children in Northern Ireland fared on average better than those in Great Britain in terms of cognitive scores, educational assessments, behavioural assessments and general health.  

- *When parents thrive, children thrive.* Parent’s long-standing illness and mental distress were linked to worse cognitive educational and behavioural assessments and general health in the child.  

- *Positive home learning environments in the early years enhance early years development.* Northern Ireland households scored lower than GB households in terms of home-learning environment, but children in NI watched less television and partners of the child’s primary caregiver in NI were more involved in parenting that those in GB.  

- *Child poverty threatens optimal early years development in direct and indirect ways.* 21% of children in Northern Ireland are considered to live in poverty (relative income poverty). Children living in lone parent families, those living in large families and those living with unemployed parents were at greatest risk. However, around 4 in 10 poor children live in a ‘working poor’ household where at least one adult was in paid employment.  

- *Young children in poor communities have not benefitted to the same extent from gains in population health.* Infant mortality rates have reduced dramatically in the last twenty years. However, small increases in infant mortality rates in the most deprived areas have been observed over the period 1997-2001 to 2006-2010.  

- *A healthy environment in the womb is critical to infants having a good starting point in their early developmental years.* In 2011, the proportion of mothers that smoked during pregnancy in the most deprived areas was three and a half times that of the least deprived areas. However, overall smoking in pregnancy is declining over time. Women from disadvantaged circumstances are more likely to have a low birthweight baby in Northern Ireland and low birthweights predicted worse educational, cognitive, behavioural and general health outcomes at age 5.  

- *Breastfeeding provides superior nutrition and is associated with optimal physical and intellectual development of young children.* Breastfeeding rates in Northern Ireland lag behind the UK but have been improving over time. Significant inequalities in breastfeeding remain –comparing babies born in the least and most deprived areas, babies in the least deprived areas were twice as likely to receive the benefits of breastmilk.  

- *Overweight and obesity remain an ongoing concern in the early years, increasing obesity risk in later life.* Obesity among Primary 1 children from the most deprived areas grew between 2008/09 and 2010/11 and the obesity rate was double that of the least deprived areas.
• **Teenage mothers face particular challenges in meeting their own and their babies needs and development.** The teenage birth rate reduced by just over one tenth over the period 2001 to 2010 and reduced by 15% in the most deprived areas. The teenage birth rate in the most deprived areas was around twice that of Northern Ireland as a whole.\(^8,9\).

• **Adverse early years experiences (such as abuse or neglect) place young people and adults at significant risk of mental ill-health and suicide.**\(^10\) Some of the most sizeable inequality gaps between deprived areas and NI overall were in admissions for self-harm.\(^8,9\).

4. **Policy landscape – Northern Ireland and internationally**

An ‘early years’ focus in government policy requires a commitment to enhancing the quality of disadvantaged family, early education and community environments. Outcomes from improved early years services and environments can be enhanced when the needs of families with young children are effectively addressed in government policies on family incomes, housing, education, employment and social protection and in particular in the domain of child poverty.

A Draft Early Years Strategy is under consideration by the Department of Education at present. The final strategy is expected to set out a roadmap for securing better outcomes for young children through service development and linking of early years services with the new Foundation Stage in the first years of primary school. It is also envisaged that the early years strategy will mark out synergies with existing strategies focusing on early years including the Families Matter Strategy (DHSSPS, 2009), the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy: Count, Read: Succeed (Department of Education, 2011), the Ten Year Strategy for Children and Young People: Our Children and Young People - our pledge and Improving Children’s Life Chances – The Child Poverty Strategy (Northern Ireland Executive, 2011). The child poverty strategy has set out two strands of work (i) reducing poorly paid work and unemployment amongst adults with children and (ii) improving long-term prospects through child based interventions which are designed to tackle the intergenerational nature of child poverty.

There are a wide range of long-established as well as recently developed programmes which all play different roles in supporting child development in the early years. For example, SureStart caters for 34,000 children aged 0-4 in disadvantaged areas in Northern Ireland. The Public Health Agency has introduced two early years programmes, Roots of Empathy and Family Nurse Partnership. Roots of Empathy is currently being delivered in a pilot phase across 27 primary schools in NI.

Of critical importance will be the implementation of Fit and Well, the 10 Year Public Health Strategic Framework for Northern Ireland which is currently open for consultation. This is proposing to adopt a life course approach and has set out the early years as a strategic priority for reducing health inequalities, including a focus on pregnancy and pre-birth determinants of child health. It is critical that as well as supporting the growth of new and innovative locally-based early years services that those established public health programmes supporting good health in the early years
are maintained and enhanced. These would include programmes such as childhood vaccination, child health screening, developmental assessments and postnatal visits. Improving outcomes in the early years will also be enhanced by adequate resourcing to support the implementation of public health strategies in the domains of maternity care, breastfeeding, childhood obesity, physical activity and play. Success in tackling inequalities in child development is most important feature of real success in the early years domain. In keeping with this, giving every child the best start in life also features in the recently published Public Health Agency Business Plan 2012-2013 An Early Years Strategy is also being developed by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs in the Republic of Ireland at present. Internationally, The Early Years Framework for Scotland was published in 2008 and Australia published its National Early Childhood Development Strategy in 2009. This prioritised seven areas for action including support for children, parents, carers and communities, responsive early childhood development services, workforce and leadership development, quality and regulation, infrastructure, governance and funding and knowledge management and innovation.

**Implications for policy**

- Commitment to achieve more equitable child development in the early years should form a priority at a whole of Government level. Endorsement and support by the Northern Ireland Executive, Department of Health, Social Services & Public Safety, Department of Education, Department for Employment & Learning and Department of Justice all have a role and accountability is critical.

- Investment in evidence-based programmes and services which optimise child development in the early years in the domains of parenting programmes, children’s centres and key workers is needed.

- Despite the challenges posed by economic recession, a clear focus must be maintained on tackling child poverty.

- The economic and social circumstances of families with young children must be carefully considered within decisions on social protection and allocation of resources.

- Consideration should be given to increasing the proportion of overall expenditure allocated to the early years and ensure expenditure on early years is focussed progressively across the social gradient.

- Continuous development of the quality of early years education and childcare with a focus on socially disadvantaged families is also required.

- Data on early years is important to the development of evidence-based policies particularly longitudinal studies of childhood such as the Millenium Cohort Study in Northern Ireland.
References


3 Schools, skills and synapses – James J Heckman, University of Chicago.


6 The consequences of childhood disadvantage in Northern Ireland at age 5. OFMDFM 2010


