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Introducing the series

The changing face of early childhood in the UK



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1 Introducing the series

In this introduction, we provide the context for our *Changing face of early childhood in the UK* series and a summary of the research projects funded by the Foundation that underpin it. We also set out what we hope the series will achieve.

Early childhood is a period of transformation – from a baby’s first babbles, their tentative first footsteps, to mastering the key physical, cognitive, social and emotional skills to embark upon school. Early childhood, from birth to the age of five, matters in itself – a time of joy and discovery for many – and a time when the building blocks for later development are laid. These early years are a period of change and adjustment for most parents¹ in terms of their relationships, the division of tasks at home and paid work. It can also be a time of anxiety and uncertainty.²

Being a small child now is a strikingly different experience from being a child a generation ago; in the same period family structures and contexts have changed just as significantly. New and disruptive forces – social, demographic, economic, scientific, and technological – are changing

the context and the nature of young children’s experiences and life-chances. Young children today are much more likely to be in formal childcare and to start school earlier. Most are communicating and playing using the latest digital technology. Their families are changing, with mothers having children at a later age and being much more likely to be in paid work. They are likely to have fewer siblings and a greater chance of experiencing a variety of family relationships if parents separate and re-partner. They are more likely to be living in precarious financial and housing situations and particularly so for the younger generation of parents. The demographic profile of the UK’s children has also changed, with greater migration bringing with it cultural and societal changes.

Note to the reader:
Inline references that are underlined are those funded by the Nuffield Foundation.

1 We use ‘parents’ as a shorthand definition for parents and guardians.
2 Weale, S. (2020). Fifth of primary children afraid to leave house over Covid-19, survey finds. *The Guardian* [online]. 10 April. Available from: www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/10/fifth-of-primary-children-afraid-to-leave-house-because-of-covid-19-survey-finds [Accessed 24 August 2020].

Family policy has become an explicit and pronounced goal of public policy. Over the last two decades we have witnessed an unprecedented shift in the role played by successive governments to influence early childhood outcomes through increased policy interventions into family and child well-being. This has been accompanied by very substantial investment in early childhood policies and provision between 2000 and 2010. Since 2010, we have seen continuing and rising investment in childcare provision and support for highly vulnerable families, but very substantial reductions in other areas, such as financial support for families and Sure Start children's centres. There has also been a great deal of research and evaluation of these policies and initiatives. Understanding how and why young children's lives are changing, and how to respond effectively, is vital if we want the youngest in our society to thrive and flourish.

In our *Changing face of early childhood in the UK* series, we will bring together the research evidence on early childhood in the UK and present recommendations for policy and practice, as well as priorities for research. We will publish robust and accessible reviews and provide a forum for discussion between researchers, policy makers and practitioners working with young children. We aim to help address the following questions:

- What does research tell us about how effective key early childhood policies have been?
- What are the implications of current changes, including the impact of COVID-19, on young children's lives now and for the future?
- Are young children's lives improving? Are they better prepared for school? Are they happier and healthier?

- What developments have been positive and should be built upon?
- What don't we know and where are the gaps in data and research?
- What needs to change in order to improve the lives of young children?

In producing the series, we draw upon an extensive body of research on early childhood funded by the Nuffield Foundation – some 80 studies across three domains: Education, Family Justice and Welfare. This reflects the Foundation's long-standing interest in early childhood, with a particular focus in the Education domain on the quality of early years education and childcare and its impact on social disadvantage ([Hillman and Williams 2015](#)), and the importance of communication, language and numeracy for child development. In Family Justice, we have funded a growing body of work on vulnerable babies and infants and how they fare in the wider family justice system. Within our Welfare domain, we have funded a range of research on poverty and inequalities that emerge early during childhood and their implications for later life, as well as assessments of policy responses over the last two decades.

This research, undertaken by a wide range of academics and researchers from different disciplines, in combination with other key studies, underpins the series. By drawing these different disciplinary perspectives together, we illuminate the issues that need to be addressed if early years well-being is to be improved. A summary of the relevant research funded by the Foundation is included in Section 2.

Changing childhoods

Today, there are nearly four million children aged under five living in the UK. The context

in which parents are raising young children has undergone rapid and radical change as family dynamics interact with a changing economy, creating opportunities as well as new stresses and divisions. Two themes underpin our *Changing face of early childhood in the UK* series. The first is the changing nature of ‘family’ and family circumstances and the implications for the economic security, development and wider well-being of young children. The second is the inequality and asymmetries in experience and life-chances, with

In 2018/19 rates of child poverty were highest for families where the youngest child is under five, standing at 37%

a gradient between advantaged and disadvantaged families. Place and immediate local context also play a key role in shaping the lives of young children.

Looking back over the last two decades prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, we see that some aspects of young children’s lives have improved. Today, for example, the vast

majority of three- and four-year olds have experience of early education, whereas two decades ago provision was much more limited and patchy. In other areas there is a fluctuating picture: child poverty in 2018/19 affects the lives of a third of all children, broadly the same as it was twenty years ago, but with ups and downs in the intervening years reflecting changing policies and economic circumstances. In 2018/19 rates of child poverty were highest for families where the youngest child is under five, standing at 37% (Social Metrics Commission 2020).

In some areas, like infant mental health, our knowledge is partial. In 2017, 5.5% of children aged between two and

four were experiencing a diagnosable mental disorder; however, we do not know whether there has been an improvement or deterioration because trend data is not available (NHS Digital 2018). In many dimensions there are inequalities by socio-economic group, gender, ethnicity, disability and place. These trends are explored in greater depth in our forthcoming reviews. There are also medical, scientific and technological trends, such as the increased survival rates of pre-term births and the growth of digital technology, which is rapidly changing how parents interact with their children and how they in turn communicate, learn and play. These changes have important implications for young children’s lives now and in the future, but the evidence base is still limited.

The need for robust, evidence-led policy recommendations is perhaps greater than ever. The COVID-19 pandemic and its many consequences make it even more imperative that we understand fully what the research evidence tells us and how recommendations can be used to guide policy – and, importantly, that we identify gaps in that evidence. Without this, many children risk being left further behind without the support needed to improve their lives.

Changing evidence

In this series we explore the nature of the evidence on early childhood, how it is evolving and how it is used by policy makers and advocates. There is a large and long-standing body of research on the early years across different disciplines including developmental psychology, paediatrics and public health, neuroscience, genetics, epidemiology, economics, sociology and social policy. This research has reshaped our

understanding of the range of factors that influence child outcomes, which include family income, educational and occupational background, the relationship between parent and child and between parents themselves, as well as the mental health of parents, particularly mothers. The quality and accessibility of appropriate services such as family, relationship and parenting support, mental health services for parents and children, early years, childcare and play provision, nutrition and adequate financial support are also vital. This is why we take a holistic approach to looking at the evidence on early childhood and the policies that have the best chance of improving children's life-chances.

This research has also illuminated our understanding of the distinct phases of early childhood, from birth to infancy to toddlerhood to the pre-school period, with different capabilities expected to develop at specific stages. It has identified which capabilities and temperaments are associated with children thriving now and into adulthood (Moffitt et al. 2011), in particular, the importance of self-control (being able to manage emotions and behaviour), and mental skills that include working memory, flexible thinking, paying attention; and language and communication skills (Goodman et al. 2015). We also know that inequalities in cognitive, communication, social and emotional skills between disadvantaged and advantaged children are evident very early in life, from the age of two or three (Goodman et al. 2015; Matthews et al. 2017; Asmussen et al. 2018). Research currently underway is exploring the extent to which early inequalities in childhood development can explain later differences in outcomes for adolescents, adults and future generations (Goodman forthcoming). This will help inform our understanding of the

timing, duration and nature of policies and interventions that are needed to address those inequalities.

Neuroscientific research has shown how brain development is shaped both by genes and the physical, social and emotional environment where parents and carers play a critical role (Shonkoff and Phillips 2000). It has brought to light early brain plasticity when key functions of the brain are established (Oates, Karmiloff-Smith, and Johnson 2012), as well as the impact of severe maltreatment on brain structure and function in adolescence and adulthood in some cases (McCrory et al. 2011; Mackes et al. 2020). Bio-scientific research has sometimes been over-stated (Willets 2017) and misused to imply an early childhood determinism – that all is lost after the age of five. However, research suggests that critical periods of brain development are not confined to early childhood, but also occur in adolescence and the transition to young adulthood, though this lies outside the scope of this series (Blakemore 2018).

While there is extensive evidence on the relationship between early childhood development and later child and adult outcomes, the evidence on the effectiveness of policies, interventions and practices to address inequalities and differences in early childhood is more limited and mixed. For example, the gap in school readiness between disadvantaged and advantaged children has been difficult to close substantially, despite major investment. We know relatively little about the trade-offs between investments and what is likely to be effective at different points in early childhood, for example, whether an intervention might be more effective pre-natally or post-natally. There are important questions about how to reach children who are in greater need, how to bridge the gap between the research and its application

to practice and the nature and frequency of interventions necessary to have longer term impacts. We still know relatively little about fathers and their changing roles, especially in single parent and blended families and how that influences young children's lives and futures. We explore these issues in each of our reviews (see page 11).

Changing policies

Over the last two decades there has been a deliberate shift in the role of public policy in family life in contrast to earlier decades (Eisenstadt and Oppenheim 2019). Governments of different political persuasions have recognised the importance of early childhood and have drawn on a growing body of evidence to support their approaches. There have been major public policy initiatives and investment in early years and childcare provision and support, with three primary goals:

- Increasing the labour market participation of women.
- Improving the educational and developmental outcomes of all young children.
- Addressing the disadvantages of the poorest groups.

However, the tensions between these different objectives have led to confusion about the purpose of different initiatives and to the development of a complex system, as new measures have been layered on top of each other. This is compounded by the difficulty in joining up early education and childcare services

with public health services, for example health visitor checks and speech and language therapist appointments. Consequently, it can be difficult both for parents and professionals to navigate their way through these services, with children falling through the gaps. This fragmentation is a major concern and is highlighted in *Best beginnings in the early years* (Children's Commission 2020).

Public policy decisions have reflected ideological differences and priorities between administrations. The economic context in which those policies were developed was starkly different, with a growing economy between the mid-1990s until the financial crash of 2008, followed by a deep recession and sharp tightening of public spending from 2010 onwards. This is reflected in the amount of investment and the priority attached to early childhood. There were major increases in spending under successive Labour governments on both services and benefits/tax credits, especially for the under 11s (Stewart, 2013). The Coalition and Conservative governments continued to increase spending on early years provision/childcare (Kelly et al. 2018; Britton et al. 2019), but reduced spending on benefits/tax credits for children (Stewart and Obolenskaya 2015; Stewart and Reader forthcoming). Total spending on education, benefits and children's services per child is estimated to have increased by 39% in real terms between 2000/01 and 2019/20 with a rise of 57% in the 2000s and a fall of 12% in real terms in the 2010s³ (Kelly et al. 2018).

In some areas, a greater role for state involvement has been broadly sustained over the last 20 years. This is

3 Note this expenditure excludes spending on healthcare because data is not available for the whole period, see Kelly et al. p.50.

particularly the case in three areas of policy: the growth of early years and childcare provision – though with greater emphasis in recent years on growing the volume of places rather than quality; the increasing role of the state in the lives of vulnerable families with young children, illustrated by the rising number of young children on the child protection register, in care and in programmes such as Troubled Families; and the growing emphasis on working with parents to support young children’s development and skills, through initiatives such as Family Nurse Partnerships, which is aimed at helping first time young parents. In other areas, we have seen public policy withdrawing from key aspects of young children’s lives since 2010, notably through the substantial reduction of benefits and tax credits for families with children (Kelly et al. 2018) and the squeeze on preventative and early intervention services, such as Sure Start children’s centres, at local authority level,

One in five children from a low-income household have spent lockdown in an overcrowded home

as well as rolling back of the child maintenance system and removal of legal aid from most private law cases.

The role of the state is expanding rapidly and substantially in the government’s response to COVID-19. There has been huge investment in supporting jobs, businesses and people’s living standards through this crisis. However, the focus has been less on the youngest children as other priorities have taken centre stage. These changes in the state’s role in families and young children’s lives raise important questions for policy, research and practice. Is the state’s role to be welcomed or is it a cause for concern?

Understanding where state intervention is effective and for whom is part of answering this question. But there is a wider question about whether we, as a society, truly value early childhood and what that means for public policy.

Changing contexts – COVID-19

The outbreak of the COVID-19 global pandemic is having a profound impact on our society and our everyday lives. Its public health and economic consequences are entrenching and intensifying inequalities and insecurities that were already prevalent (Blundell et al. 2020). This is particularly the case for the growing number of families where parents have lost their jobs or are in precarious employment. We already know that COVID-19 is disproportionately affecting some ethnic groups, both in terms of health and economic outcomes (Platt and Warwick 2020). During lockdown, mothers were more likely than fathers to be simultaneously working and caring for children or to have left paid work (Andrew et al. 2020), and young workers have been particularly badly affected in the labour market (Gustafsson 2020). One in five children from a low-income household have spent lockdown in an overcrowded home compared to 3% of children in higher-income households. Children under the age of 16 from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds experience poorer quality indoor conditions than White children and have less access to outside space (Judge and Rahman 2020). The health and economic shocks, experienced by families as a result of the pandemic, will likely flow through to the experiences and life-chances of young children where inequalities begin from the earliest age and influence later child, adult and sometimes inter-generational outcomes.

Research into previous crises suggests the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on young children and families across the UK is likely to be significant, particularly for those who are already disadvantaged or vulnerable (Conti 2020). Prior to the pandemic, analysis by the Institute for Fiscal Studies shows that relative child poverty has increased by three percentage points since 2011–12 – the most sustained rise in relative child poverty since the early 1990s (Bourquin et al. 2020). The prolonged period out of nursery and reception classes and in social isolation, in combination with inequalities in the home learning environment and access to digital resources, is likely to widen the gap in young children’s development between those in disadvantaged and advantaged families. For young children growing up in the most vulnerable families, the combination of economic and psychological stress, the lockdown and disrupted services, may have a lasting impact on their welfare.

The impact of the economic crisis on the early years and childcare sector, particularly private, independent and voluntary childcare provision, is likely to be severe. The prolonged closure – and potentially reduced demand – is putting this already fragile sector under great pressure. The long-standing questions about sustainability and quality are critical issues for both children’s welfare and parents wanting to return to work (Pascal et al. 2020).

We do not yet know whether the pandemic will be one element in the early life of the current group of under-fives or the defining factor in those children’s lives and beyond. The economic and social consequences of the pandemic are having,

and will continue to have, an impact on family relationships, the roles played by mothers, fathers, grandparents and the well-being of children. For example, early evidence suggests that while women have taken on the major responsibility for childcare and housework, fathers are taking on a greater share of household responsibilities than they were before the crisis (Andrew et al. 2020).

As in other policy areas, the pandemic, and what it reveals about UK society, may well lead to some fundamental questions about modern family environments and the well-being of young children. The Nuffield Foundation has funded a series of research projects to understand and address the social implications of the COVID-19 pandemic,⁴ some of which focus on families with children and are generating real time data. While it is too early to assess the pandemic’s longer-term impact, these projects will help to shed light on how life is changing for young children and their families in this current crisis and open up an opportunity to re-assess the most promising ways of enabling young children to thrive.

What will this series do?

Our *Changing face of early childhood in the UK* series will help researchers, policy makers and practitioners navigate the extensive body of research funded by the Nuffield Foundation and other key studies, drawing out overarching principles and specific perspectives to help inform the next steps for research, policy and practice. Our approach is designed to be holistic by bringing together perspectives from

4 Nuffield Foundation. (2020). *Working to understand and address the social implications of COVID-19* [online]. Available from: www.nuffieldfoundation.org/research/covid-19 [Accessed 24 August 2020].

different disciplines and vantage points.
Over the course of 2020/21 we will:

- Publish a series of robust and accessible reviews of research on early childhood.
- Explore controversies in the field and draw out policy and practice implications from the research.
- Stimulate debate through convening stakeholders and seeking input in and responses to the series.
- Propose evidence-informed recommendations for policy makers and practitioners.
- Identify gaps in the evidence to help inform research funding priorities.
- Capture and distil what needs to change to improve outcomes for young children.

Ultimately, we want this series to contribute to significant and lasting change for young children and their families. We hope to engage with as wide an audience as possible, including parents and carers and others involved directly in children's lives.

To stay up-to-date with the series, please sign up to our mailing list at www.nuffieldfoundation.org/early-childhood.

We will publish the following evidence reviews as part of the series

1 How are the lives of families with young children changing?

We explore the social, demographic and economic shifts that have influenced the family context in which young children grow and develop. We focus on trends in household formation, fertility, family stability, and parental and early childhood experiences to pinpoint key issues and questions for policy and practice.

2 Changing patterns of poverty and vulnerability in early childhood

Patterns of poverty and vulnerability are changing. These changes reflect shifts in the economy, demography and policy choices that shape the lives and choices of parents and their young children. We take a multi-dimensional view of poverty, looking at issues such as income, housing and food poverty. We also examine the specific issues that the most vulnerable young babies and children face in the social care and family justice systems. We highlight how these changes are having an impact on the youngest children.

3 The role of early education and childcare provision in shaping life chances

Almost all children now experience some combination of formal childcare and early education well before they start school. This review looks at the quality, effectiveness and sustainability of early years and childcare provision and the extent to which it has narrowed

gaps between the most and least advantaged young children. It also explores the implications for future policy.

4 Parents and the home

Parents lie at the heart of children's development and learning. The quality of the home learning environment is strongly associated with the development of children's cognitive, social and emotional skills, especially in early childhood. We explore the science that underpins different stages of development and look at the effectiveness of a range of interventions, including those that use digital technology to support the home learning environment, with a particular focus on communication and language.

5 Are young children's lives improving? Are they happier and healthier?

Young children's health and well-being has changed over the last two decades with improvements in some areas, and stasis or deterioration in others. We look at how patterns of infant mortality, nutrition and obesity, infant and parental mental health have changed and the implications for policy, practice and research.

6 Bringing up the next generation – priorities and next steps

We draw together what we have learnt from each review and the likely longer-term impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on today's generation of young children, setting out priorities for research, policy and practice for the decade ahead.

2 Summary of relevant projects funded by the Nuffield Foundation

The projects listed here have been funded by the Nuffield Foundation, although the series will also draw on other relevant research. Not all of the projects included are solely focused on early childhood, and some do not yet have published outputs. We have grouped the projects according to which of our reviews they are most relevant, but some will be relevant to more than one. The list includes links to our website for more information on each of the projects. For each project, we include the project title, the principal investigator and institution and the date of the final report.

Review 1: How are the lives of families with young children changing?

The IFS Deaton Review: inequalities in the twenty-first century

Sir Richard Blundell, Institute for Fiscal Studies (final report in 2023, but outputs produced throughout)

This ambitious project is developing a holistic picture of what is known about inequality, with a focus on what this tells us about the UK. It will highlight which inequalities are important and draw conclusions about the most effective policy responses to different types of inequality.

Understanding the lives of separating and separated families in the UK: what evidence do we need?

Caroline Bryson, Bryson Purdon Social Research (2017)

This project established the evidence needs relating to family separation in the UK and assessed whether the existing data infrastructure is sufficient to meet them. The findings highlighted significant shortcomings in the evidence base and concluded that the lack of data on the lives of separating and separated families is hindering effective policy-making for children and families.

Fathers in the UK: what do we know? What do we need to know?

Adrienne Burgess, The Fatherhood Institute (2018)

This project explored the role of fathers in the UK, including highlighting gaps in the evidence and opportunities for secondary analysis using major public datasets. Topics included fathers combining work and care, how data about

fathers is collected, and fathers during pregnancy and birth.

Contemporary fathers in the UK **Adrienne Burgess, The Fatherhood Institute (reporting 2022)**

Building on the work above, this project will produce evidence reviews focusing on fathers in the post-natal period and on the links between fathering and child outcomes into young adulthood. Additionally, The Fatherhood Institute is working with BritainThinks to explore fathers' and father figures' experiences during the COVID-19 lockdown.

A comprehensive evaluation of the short- and medium-term impacts of Sure Start

Sarah Cattan, Institute of Fiscal Studies (reporting 2022)

This project builds on previous Nuffield-funded work on the health outcomes of Sure Start. It will evaluate the impact on employment, crime and education.

Caregiving dads, breadwinning mums: transforming gender in work and childcare?

Ruth Gaunt, University of Lincoln (reporting 2022)

This mixed-methods study investigates opposite-sex couples who share childcare equally or reverse roles so that the father is the primary caregiver. Comparing these couples with 'traditional' couples, the project will explore what exactly their work and care arrangements look like and what effects these arrangements have on their well-being and relationship satisfaction.

Understanding Britain's fall in real wages from 2008–2014

Paul Gregg, University of Bath (2019)

Between 2008 and 2014 Britain experienced falls in real wages, with

adjusted weekly earnings falling by over 10%. Using longitudinal data, this project explored how the falls in real wages came about and provided insights for the future prospects of the UK labour market.

Lone parents, mental health and employment

Susan Harkness, University of Bath (2013)

This project examined the changing relationship between work and mental health for lone mothers at two points in time, from 1993 to 1998, and from 2003 to 2008. It found that paid work that allowed lone mothers to achieve a satisfactory balance between work and childcare responsibilities had a much more significant effect on reducing the risk of depression in lone mothers than income provision alone.

Parenting and contact before and after separation

Tina Haux, London School of Economics (2015)

This project used data from the Millennium Cohort Study to examine parenting and contact before and after separation. It found that fathers who are actively involved in bringing up their young children before separation are more likely to keep in regular contact with them after separation.

Review 2: Changing patterns of poverty and vulnerability in early childhood

Addressing the 'care cases' crisis: a sector-led review

Cathy Ashley, Family Rights Group (2018)

This review was a response to the growing number of children who are looked after in the care system. It explored different

drivers of these rising numbers. Findings indicated that professionals were frustrated at working in a sector that is overstretched and in which children and families were not getting the direct help they need to prevent difficulties escalating.

Risk aversion, earnings uncertainty and labour supply

Silvia Avram, University of Essex (reporting 2020)

This project examines the relationship between the growth in insecure and unstable forms of employment and people's behaviour relating to seeking and remaining in work. It uses a combination of quantitative analysis of panel data and laboratory experiments and aims to provide relevant information for employment policy.

Educational attainment of children in need and children in care

David Berridge, University of Bristol (2020)

This project investigated the educational trajectories of children in care, including the perspectives of parents, pupils and professionals on the factors affecting educational progress. The researchers employed a mixed-methods approach, using a prospective longitudinal design to analyse all pupils in England who began school in 2005.

Can in-work benefits improve employment among lone parents?

Mike Brewer, University of Essex and Institute for Fiscal Studies (2017)

Welfare reforms have sought to increase employment among lone parents, but entering work does not always reduce poverty. Time-limited in-work benefits such as 'in work credit' and the 'Employment Retention and Advancement demonstration', piloted in the 2000s,

were found to increase the probability of people moving into paid work and staying there.

Towards a Family Justice Observatory: a scoping study

Karen Broadhurst, Lancaster University (2017)

The Nuffield Foundation commissioned a scoping study to inform the development of the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory. Publications include: a consultation with international stakeholders; the population data sources available for England that concern state-authorized decisions about who cares for children; and a national stakeholder consultation.

Vulnerable birth mothers and recurrent care proceedings

Karen Broadhurst, Lancaster University (2017)

This project examined care proceedings cases in the family courts where mothers have had successive children removed from their care. It found that 40% of mothers who repeatedly appeared before the family courts for child protection concerns had been in care themselves. A further 14% lived in private or informal relationships away from their parents.

Born into care: newborns in care proceedings in England

Karen Broadhurst, Lancaster University and the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory (2018)

This was the first-ever national study of newborn babies (under one week old) in the family justice system in England. The study found that between 2007/8 and 2016/17, a total of 16,849 babies under one week old were subjects of local authority care proceedings in England, with large regional variations. Subsequent outputs

in this series include a study of newborns and infants in the family justice system in Wales (2019), an exploration of the factors that might lie behind regional variations (2020), and a study of the health needs of both mothers and babies who come into care proceedings (2020).

The Nuffield Family Justice Observatory for England and Wales: making it happen

Karen Broadhurst, Lancaster University (2018)

This briefing paper set out the plans for the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory, now established. It includes a summary of findings from the scoping study (see earlier listing).

Inequalities in child welfare intervention rates

Paul Bywaters, University of Huddersfield (2020)

This mixed-methods comparative study found that the chances of children growing up in circumstances which lead to them being looked after by the state or being placed on child protection plans or registers are profoundly unequal both within and between the four UK countries. Children in the most deprived areas in the UK are over 10 times more likely to be in foster or residential care or on protection plans than children in the least deprived areas.

Earnings risk, government policy and household welfare

Mariacristina De Nardi, Institutional Research Information Service, UCL (reporting 2020)

This project uses a new, non-parametric research method to uncover new facts on earnings dynamics in the UK and to study their implications for consumption, wealth inequality and welfare under the current

UK tax and transfer systems. It also assesses whether the insurance implied by the current UK tax and transfer structure can be modified to improve household welfare.

Supervision orders and special guardianship

Judith Harwin, Lancaster University (2019)

This project produced the first comprehensive national picture of the contribution of supervision orders to family justice, children's services, and child and parental outcomes. It found 20% of all children in England who return home after care proceedings and are placed on a supervision order are back in the family court within five years.

An intergenerational audit for the UK

Laura Gardiner, Resolution Foundation (2019, with a further report due in 2020)

Drawing on a wide range of data, this audit focused on key living standards and labour market metrics to describe the profiles and trajectories of different generations in terms of jobs, pay, wealth and assets, housing costs, taxes and benefits. Publishing a second report in 2020, this project aims to keep intergenerational concerns a salient issue in public debate.

The health needs of mothers and children in family court cases

Ruth Gilbert, UCL Institute of Child Health (reporting 2021)

Linking several national datasets, this study identifies mothers involved in care proceedings and examines the extent to which past healthcare characteristics are associated with different patterns of subsequent involvement in care proceedings. The aim of the study is to identify whether additional inputs from healthcare services could reduce the chance of a mother or child becoming

involved in care proceedings and improve their health and welfare outcomes.

A study of in-work poverty and policy in the UK

Rod Hick, University of Cardiff (2017)

This project provides a robust, up-to-date analysis of in-work poverty in the UK. It found that between 2004/05 and 2014/15, the number of adults in the UK faced with in-work poverty had risen by 26%. In-work poverty is concentrated amongst families occupying private rental and social housing sectors, with a key determinant being a lone working individual.

System conditions and welfare inequalities in children's services

Rick Hood, Kingston University (2020)

This project examined patterns of demand for children's social care services in England to explore the link between welfare inequalities and 'system conditions' – underlying factors that shape the way services are organised and delivered. It found children's social care is undergoing a shift to late intervention, with more money spent on child protection and public care while preventive services are cut or closed down.

IFS Green Budget 2018–2021

Paul Johnson, Institute for Fiscal Studies (published annually)

Each year, the IFS Green Budget includes a comprehensive and independent assessment of the state of the public finances, the key economic questions facing the government and various policy options in the run-up to the Chancellor's Budget.

Social policy in a cold climate

Ruth Lupton, London School of Economics (2015)

This project examined the effects of the major economic and political changes in the UK since 2007, particularly their

impact on the distribution of wealth, poverty, inequality and social mobility. Amongst more detailed findings, it found that economic recovery remained unevenly distributed, with individuals in their twenties being most severely hit despite increased levels of higher education.

The intergenerational transmission of family wealth

Brian Nolan, University of Oxford (2020)

This project investigated the direct transmission of wealth across generations and the role of institutions, policy and legislation in the intergenerational transmission of wealth. It found that over one-third of British households receive a wealth transfer in the form of an inheritance or substantial gift from their parents at some point. Those with a university-level education receive substantially more in transfers than those with lower levels of education.

COVID realities: families on low incomes during the pandemic

Ruth Patrick, University of York (reporting 2021)

This project is investigating how families on a low income navigate the COVID-19 pandemic, while also tracking how the social security system responds. It aims to improve understanding of how families on a low income experience the pandemic and the responses of the institutions supporting them.

How UK welfare reform affects larger families

Ruth Patrick, University of York (reporting 2022)

This project examines how the risk of poverty for larger families has changed as a result of recent benefit reforms and the effect of these changes on family decision-making and well-

being. Several longitudinal studies are used to describe the risk and depth of poverty among larger families, as well as their geographic, social and ethnic characteristics and how this has changed over time. The researchers are also working with members of larger families living in poverty to discuss policy recommendations.

Impact of the universal infant free school meal policy

Birgitta Rabe, University of Essex (reporting 2020)

This study is assessing the impact of the Universal Infant Free School Meals policy on: educational performance; personal, social and emotional development; rates of obesity; school absence due to illness; and take-up of school lunches. To date, the study has found that the policy has reduced Reception children's obesity rates by 7%, with further outputs to come.

Looked after children grown up

Amanda Sacker, University College London (reporting 2020)

Systematic evidence on outcomes for looked-after children beyond the early adult years is currently very limited. This study begins to fill that gap by exploring the long-term consequences of being cared for in institutional or family settings by comparing health and social outcomes in adulthood of sequential cohorts of children using ONS longitudinal data.

The implementation of new rules and guidance for permanent foster care

Gillian Schofield, University of East Anglia (reporting 2020)

This study investigates whether and how the Department for Education's Long-term Foster Care Regulations and Guidance, introduced in 2015, have been implemented

by different local authorities across England. Using both administrative data and interviews it also seeks to identify examples of good practice and any areas for concern.

Well-being of children: early influences

Ingrid Schoon, Institute of Education (2013)

This study used data collected for the UK Millennium Cohort Study to assess the independent role of income in shaping young children's outcomes. It found that income matters for young children's outcomes over and above other interlinked risks. The study highlighted the risks that children and families living in poverty are facing, including problems in maternal mental health, parenting, access to childcare and supportive neighbourhoods.

Social work contact in four UK cohort studies

Jonathan Scourfield, Cardiff University (2016)

This project used four major UK cohort studies, spanning two decades and children of different ages, to study patterns, outcomes and changes associated with social work contact. The researchers compared children, young people and families who have social work contact both with the general population and with others who have similar (or worse) difficulties but without social work contact, to see what makes the social work group and their outcomes distinctive.

Children living with domestic violence: effects on children's well-being

Valeria Skafida, University of Edinburgh (reporting 2023)

This project will investigate how living with different types of domestic violence in early childhood affects children over

time. It will explore how exposure to domestic violence correlates with or affects children's chances of being victims of violence themselves, their emotional well-being and mental health and their subsequent behaviour towards others.

Child maintenance and single parents on benefit

Amy Skipp, then at Gingerbread (2012)

This study provided the first evidence on the maintenance situations of single parents on benefit since the requirement to use the Child Support Agency (CSA) was removed and the policy of reducing benefits in line with the level of maintenance received was abolished (in 2008 and 2010 respectively). It found two thirds of single parents on out-of-work benefits did not receive any child maintenance from their child's other parent. For one in five parents on benefit who receive maintenance, this income lifted them and their children out of poverty.

Children's Future Food Inquiry

Anna Taylor, Food Foundation (2019)

The Food Foundation's Children's Future Food Inquiry examined the programmes and policies intended to support children's healthy eating across the UK, focusing specifically on children in poverty. Key early years findings included a lack of support for breastfeeding, narrow free meal eligibility causing nutritional shortfalls and households in poverty missing out on key provisions.

Multidimensional child poverty and disadvantage

Polly Vizard, London School of Economics (2018)

This project aimed to broaden understanding of multidimensional poverty and disadvantage experienced by young people in Britain. Focused on tackling 'data exclusion' through secondary data

analysis methods, the report focuses on child poverty and disadvantage for different groups of children, specifically young carers, children from the Gypsy, Traveller or Roma ethnic minority group, children in recent migrant families and children at risk of abuse and neglect.

Social policies and distributional outcomes in a changing Britain

Polly Vizard, London School of Economics (reporting 2020)

Building on the *Social policy in a cold climate* project, the research team is analysing public expenditure, social policies and distributional outcomes to identify what progress has been made in addressing social inequalities through social policies. Areas of analysis include child poverty and the early years. The project will also identify the key challenges for social policy in the 2020s.

Mental health service provision for children in state care in England

Dinithi Wijedasa, University of Bristol (reporting 2021)

This project will provide evidence for the prevalence of mental health concerns among children in care, the characteristics of children in care referred to mental health services and the mental health provision they receive.

Review 3: The role of early education and childcare provision in shaping life chances

The impact of nursery attendance on children's outcomes

Jo Blanden, University of Surrey (2018)

This project investigated the benefits of nursery education on children's cognitive and social development. It found that early

childhood education has had only a limited impact on outcomes since the inception of the free entitlement to part-time nursery care for three-year-olds. The researchers argued that politicians must now focus efforts on improving the quality of early years education.

Follow-up work (co-funded by the ESRC) compared the effects of an additional term of pre-school education on children's educational achievement by staff qualifications and nursery Ofsted inspection ratings. It found no beneficial effects between increased time spent in nurseries with high-quality staff on children's outcomes but did identify increased educational outcomes for time spent in settings with higher inspection ratings.

Analysis of the early years workforce and its impact on children's outcomes

Sarah Bonnetti, Education Policy Institute (2019 and 2020)

This mixed methods study aims to identify the most effective features of the early years workforce to ensure that investment in the early years is best geared towards improvement of outcomes for children.

To date it has developed a comprehensive picture of the early years workforce, examined the supply and demand side factors influencing the provision of a qualified workforce, and identified the incentives and barriers to the recruitment, retention and development of early years staff. A final forthcoming output will explore the relationship between the qualifications of early years staff and children's outcomes.

A systematic review of early years degrees and employment pathways

Verity Campbell-Barr, University of Plymouth (reporting 2020)

This project identifies and systematically examines early years degrees and employment pathways for early

years degree graduates. It aims to fill an important evidence gap and improve understanding of what early years degrees entail and the extent to which they can equip graduates to provide high-quality early years education.

The health effects of Sure Start Gabriella Conti, Institute for Fiscal Studies (2019)

This project investigated whether and to what extent Sure Start has been a cost-effective means to promote health. Key findings include reductions of hospitalisation among children of primary school age, increased benefits for children living in disadvantaged areas and a limited impact on childhood obesity and maternal mental health.

When you are born matters: evidence for England

Claire Crawford, Institute for Fiscal Studies (2013)

Using longitudinal survey data, this study sought to identify the impact of month of birth on the development of a range of skills and behaviours as well as identify the best school admissions policy for children born towards the end of the academic year. It found that compared to children born in September, those born in August were on average less likely to perform as well academically, suggesting national achievement test scores be age-adjusted for variation.

Oral language intervention for children with English as an additional language

Silke Fricke, University of Sheffield (2015)

This study evaluated the 'Get Ready for Learning' programme, an oral language intervention designed for children with English as an additional language

(EAL) and monolingual children with language weaknesses. The programme was successful in teaching children new vocabulary but did not result in improvements to more general language skills.

Using manipulatives in the foundations of arithmetic

Rose Griffiths, University of Leicester (2017)

This study explored the learning and teaching of basic arithmetic for children aged three to nine, focusing on the effective use of manipulatives. The culmination of this work is a handbook for teachers, *Making Numbers*.

Teaching fractions and decimals to children aged three to 11

Rose Griffiths, University of Leicester (Reporting 2021)

This project builds on the one above, using similar principles to extend primary teachers' understanding of fractions and decimals.

Pupil special educational needs and disabilities: identification, access and patterns of mental health support

Jo Hutchinson, Education Policy Institute (preliminary report published in 2017, with a final report due in 2020)

This project assesses how fairly and effectively special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) are identified and addressed for different groups of children. A preliminary report noted great variation between cohort years as well as between academic years. Researchers found that 39% of children were recorded with SEND at some point between Reception and Year 11. This makes SEND directly relevant to four in 10 children, or 12 per class of 30 on average.

Deprivation and quality of preschool provision

Sandra Mathers, University of Oxford (2014)

Research tells us that attending pre-school can improve later life chances and that long-term gains are more likely if provision is of high-quality. This project found that there is a 'quality gap' in private nurseries between disadvantaged and more advantaged areas, but that this gap is much smaller in nurseries employing a graduate.

Looked after children and early education

Sandra Mathers, University of Oxford (2016)

This exploratory study addressed an urgent need for information on looked after children's access to, and experiences of, early years provision. It found that while 89% of local authorities hold local data for looked after children on take-up, quality of settings, or educational attainment prior to statutory school age, there is no published national dataset. Using local data, the researchers found that 71% of looked after children between two and four are in early education, compared to a national average of 85%.

Growing up digital: what do we really need to know about educating the digital generation?

Angela McFarlane, University of Bristol (2019)

This report, commissioned by the Foundation, examines how digital technologies are used in schools to enhance learning and identifies research questions to inform better practice and policy. The report concludes that while personal ownership of digital devices

by pupils continues to grow and starts at an increasingly earlier age, there is relatively little use of digital technologies in schools beyond the study of computing itself as a subject.

Professional learning in early years education: reviewing the evidence

Sue Rogers, University College London (2017)

This project was the first systematic review of international research evidence on professional learning in early years education. It aimed to guide policy-makers, school, nursery leaders and other practitioners to make informed decisions about the types of professional learning opportunities that are most effective in the early years sector.

Education spending pressures and challenges

Luke Sibieta, Institute for Fiscal Studies (reports annually)

A series of three annual reports (2018–2020) that deliver clear, up-to-date and impartial analyses of spending across each phase of education, from preschool through primary and secondary to further and higher education. In doing so, key issues and challenges are discussed.

Private sector childcare in England

Antonia Simon, University College London (reporting 2020)

This project uses publicly available information about private nurseries to explore issues of finance, location, continuity, transparency, accountability and governance. A key aim of the project is to consider how regulation used elsewhere in the education sector or in other countries might be used to support, shape and improve private provision in England.

Nuffield Early Language Intervention (NELI)

Margaret Snowling, University of Oxford

NELI is a targeted programme designed to improve the oral language skills of children aged four to five. It can be delivered by a trained teaching assistant or early years educator, through small group and one-to-one sessions. An independent effectiveness trial by the Education Endowment Foundation found that NELI boosts children's language skills by an additional three months and the Department for Education is now funding a large-scale rollout as part of the National Tutoring Programme.

The childcare puzzle: improving both quality AND affordability?

Kitty Stewart, London School of Economics (2014)

Using international comparisons, this study found England has been more successful than many other countries in using early years education and childcare provision to counteract disadvantage. A key contributory factor is the increased likelihood that children in deprived, predominantly urban, areas will access state provision, where quality is shown to be higher.

Segregation of early years settings: patterns, drivers and outcomes

Kitty Stewart, London School of Economics (2019)

This study provided the first national quantitative evidence that some schools are actively discouraging the admission of children with special needs. Researchers found that 26% of children with a statement move on to other schools compared to 18% of children with no recorded SEND. The report recommends that local authorities are given the power and resources to address higher levels of transitions between schools for children with statements.

Public funding of early years education in England

Anne West, London School of Economics (2016)

This project examined government expenditure, policy and local implementation of funding policy. It also looked closely at government proposals to introduce a new national early years funding formula, concluding that if the proposed reforms were implemented, some early years education providers will see increases in rates paid, while others will face cuts.

The impact of premature births on maths achievement and schooling

Dieter Wolke, University of Warwick (2018)

Analysing data from six large-scale longitudinal studies, this study sought to quantify the type and severity of learning difficulties experienced by children born prematurely. The study found that children born before 34 weeks of gestation, are more likely to have cognitive deficits and learning difficulties than children born at term. In later life, these challenges can translate into lower economic wealth.

Review 4: Parents and the home

Trialling an executive function training intervention for pre-schoolers

Daniel Carroll, University of Sheffield (2019)

This study focused on pre-school children from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. It tested whether a short executive function training programme gives lasting benefits on a range of academic outcomes. It found that executive functions may help support children's maths skills and that cognitive

interventions targeting executive functions are unlikely to narrow attainment gaps. The research also suggests that these differences may explain socioeconomic attainment gaps in maths.

Developing a sustainable intervention for disadvantaged children

Sarah Cattan, Institute for Fiscal Studies (2019)

This feasibility study evaluated the need for a new early childhood intervention in England by examining existing services and local priorities. Focusing on a single local authority, Peterborough, to assess the programme, the research team found a gap in services that a home-visiting programme might help to fill.

The effects of COVID-19 on families' time-use and child development

Sarah Cattan, Institute for Fiscal Studies (reporting 2022, but outputs published throughout)

This project aims to measure and analyse how families adjust to the COVID-19 pandemic in order to understand the impacts recent isolation measures have on children's outcomes and the outcome gaps that may form between children from different socioeconomic backgrounds. The researchers will survey a sample of families with children aged 16 or under at least twice during the pandemic, comparing findings with pre-crisis data.

Family Nurse Partnership: what works in England and Germany

Gabriella Conti, University College London (reporting 2021)

A comparative analysis project investigating the mechanisms by which two home-visiting programmes for disadvantaged, first-time teenage mothers

impact the cognitive development of young children. The project employs sophisticated econometric techniques to explore the extent to which different factors, alone or in combination, mediated the effects of the programmes.

The SWAN game-based approach to learning foundational number language

Chris Donlan, University College London (reporting 2022)

This project will develop a digital game called SWAN (Sequences in Words and Numbers) to help people with language difficulties to improve their basic numeracy skills.

COVID-19 social study

Daisy Fancourt, University College London (reporting 2022, but outputs published throughout)

This project explores the psychological and social experiences of adults in the UK during the COVID-19 pandemic. Findings from the project are published regularly to inform our understanding of the ways in which the pandemic is affecting people's everyday lives, identify activities that could mitigate adverse effects of isolation and support policy responses both during and after the pandemic.

Randomised controlled trial of parent-based models of speech and language therapy

Deborah Gibbard, Solent NHS Trust (reporting 2021)

Throughout England, clinically diagnosed early language delay among two- to three-year-old children is supported by parent-based intervention. However, in areas of social disadvantage, recruitment and retention of parents can be a challenge. This randomised controlled trial will evaluate an enhanced

parent-based intervention aimed at increasing parental engagement in disadvantaged areas.

Anxiety disorders and personality dysfunction in pregnancy

Louise Howard, King's College London (2019)

This study examined the association between both antenatal anxiety disorders and personality dysfunction measured during pregnancy to subsequent mother-infant interactions during the postnatal period. The researchers found that anxiety disorders can cause women to have a distorted perception of their relationship with their child, despite their interactions being of similar quality to women without anxiety.

Evaluating a parent-delivered oral language enrichment programme for pre-school children

Charles Hulme, University of Oxford (2018)

Children with poor language skills in the early years are at risk of poorer educational outcomes. The results of this study showed that Parents and Children Together (PACT), a parent-delivered language teaching programme, can lead to gains in children's early language and emergent literacy skills.

A systematic review of the impact of parent-child reading

James Law, Newcastle University (2019)

This project surveyed the available literature on parent-child reading intervention studies with specific criteria including randomised, parent/carer led design. Researchers identified 22 studies, with a majority showing positive effects, including findings for receptive vocabulary skills that tend

to be predictive of later educational and social difficulties.

Does promoting parent's contingent talk with their infants benefit language development

Danielle Matthews, University of Sheffield (2017)

Children from disadvantaged families tend to have limited language skills compared to their advantaged peers when they start school. This study found that increasing parental use of contingent talk – where a caregiver notices what their baby is attending to and talks to them about it – improves babies' language in the short term.

Dialogic book sharing and cognitive and socio-emotional development

Lynne Murray, University of Reading (reporting 2020)

Research has shown that socio-economically disadvantaged parents are less likely to share books with their children and, when they do, tend not to use dialogic book-sharing techniques. This project will evaluate a programme designed to train parents in good book-sharing practices using a relatively brief intervention, which has potential for scale up.

Cognitive and educational foundations of pre-school mathematics

Gaia Scerif, University of Oxford (2019)

This project examined the interplay between symbolic and non-symbolic numeracy skills with executive functions and attention in relation to the development of early numeracy skills. It found that while executive skills are a strong predictor of numeracy skills prior to school entry, the relationship is bidirectional

with good early numeracy skills also predicting good executive functioning.

Which type of parenting programme best improves child behaviour and reading? Follow-up of the Helping Children Achieve trial

Stephen Scott, King's College London (2013)

Helping Children Achieve (HCA) is a randomised controlled trial designed to test the effects of two parenting interventions; one to improve behaviour and relationships, and the other to improve literacy. It found that both interventions were effective in reducing disruptive behaviour but only those who received the behaviour intervention saw an improvement in their reading. This follow-up study measured outcomes of children in the HCA trial two years after the intervention began, when they were aged seven- to nine-years-old and found the effects were sustained.

Do infants learn new words from educational picture books?

Jeanne Shinskey, Royal Holloway (reporting 2022)

This project investigates how babies learn words from commercial 'first words' picture books. The findings of this study should yield substantial theoretical advances in our understanding of babies' symbolic insight and clarify which picture-book features promote learning.

Understanding the influence of cognition and the home learning environment on early number skills

Fiona Simmons, Liverpool John Moores University (2019)

Assessing children on three separate occasions and focusing on the home learning environment, this study explored preschool predictors of specific

early number skills. The study found that children's preschool language skills were related to early numbers skills and could predict growth in these skills between preschool and the end of Reception. A further publication on longer-term outcomes is due at the end of 2020.

The impact of family literacy programmes on children's literacy skills and the home literacy environment

John Vorhaus, University College London (2015)

This mixed-methods study explored the impact of school-based family literacy programmes and how parents implemented this information into the home literacy environment. The researchers found family literacy programmes had a positive effect on children's reading scores and, following participation in programmes, extensive changes in home learning environments were self-reported by families.

We have not listed projects relevant to Review 5 on whether children are happier and healthier, as most of the evidence drawn upon is not funded by the Nuffield Foundation.

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The content and conclusions of the series are not necessarily endorsed by members of the advisory group.

About the Nuffield Foundation

The Nuffield Foundation is an independent charitable trust with a mission to advance educational opportunity and social well-being.

We fund research that informs social policy, primarily in Education, Welfare and Justice. We also provide opportunities for young people to develop skills and confidence in science and research.

We are the founder and co-funder of the Nuffield Council on Bioethics, the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory and the Ada Lovelace Institute.

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