

With elections looming in many parts of the world. Investment in children, themselves non-voters, competes with other priorities and a search for a winning ticket. But where do big ideas come from? A key driver of policy interest in the early years was a 1960s experiment¹ in Ypsilini, Michigan designed to see whether access to high-quality education would have a positive impact on preschool children and their communities. In the UK, it came to the attention of the Home Office in the 1990s, perhaps because years on, lower adolescent crime rates were reported in the intervention group. A healthy return on investment of around 7 to 12 dollars for every dollar spent was claimed² - a metric with a powerful message. Coming at much the same time as the Campbell Collaboration, sister to Cochrane, was gathering steam in the social care and education fields, it hit the sweet spot for policy makers in the UK. Launched in 1998 in the UK Sure Start³ was the 'big idea' intervention designed to improve outcomes in the early years. Since then, it has had a rocky road.

At the very time that 'evidence-based' was finding its way into policy-speak, it made sense for a programme targeted at pre-school children and their families in disadvantaged areas to draw on the best available evidence. Sure Start was designed to work with children and parents on social and emotional, physical and intellectual development with those already providing services encouraged to build on home visits, support, good quality play learning and childcare, primary and community health. Where needed, services including language and literacy skills, debt counselling and practical advice and support were added - a combination of research evidence and local professional know-how and local expertise.

A problem with services which cross boundaries and government departments was – and remains – a rhetorical commitment to working together alongside fierce turf wars on who takes the credit if things go well, the blame if they don't. Sure Start's Treasury control at the start was a master stroke, particularly so as the economist leading the scheme, Norman Glass⁴ brought considerable social skills to the role. Under his influence, children's charities, academics, and civil servants sat round the table in the grand Treasury building in London. Evaluations were set up, but despite some promising findings, the initiative wasn't able to demonstrate the same results as early data. Most randomised controlled trials of early childhood interventions were from the USA, and highly prescriptive, so local engagement, and a bit of flexibility in the UK counterpart was a significant shift. Critiques and counter-critiques of the original studies and successors followed. Had tests improved over time? Were there statistical errors or potential for bias in the earliest studies? Were those involved in the original centre better qualified than those where interventions were rolled out at scale?

Come 2010, a new Government in the UK took a new approach. Early years became more closely tied to parental employment and Sure Start made the headlines in a popular newspaper with *Labour's childcare failure: Despite £10bn in funding, Sure Start scheme has had no effect on toddlers' development.*⁵

Despite the shift in policy priorities since then, including the growth of austerity, and new names and organisational structures for Sure Start Centres, some of the early collaborations remained in place, and capital expenditure on buildings, even if re-named, served as a reminder that some things do endure.

It had always been risky to leave context to one side when adopting highly manualised interventions from countries whose health and welfare services for the poorest citizens were different from the country of destination, and whose outcomes for less well-off children are not always to be emulated. Perhaps we should have been looking more closely at Scandinavia where outcomes were better than

ours? Investment in housing, good shared parental leave, and greater freedom to play and active travel are the contenders behind the better outcomes. Investment in childcare and teaching with sound 5 year training are demands we could all be making in our countries. Of course, these are underpinned by appropriate taxation providing a safety net for all ⁶.

But meanwhile, it turns out that things may have been better than they looked in the early days for Sure Start alumni and Sure Start areas. Later evaluations have been more positive, and in 2024, with austerity biting hard in the UK, and childcare places hard to come by, a report from the Institute for Fiscal Studies ⁷ found-

- An association between proximity (easy pram-pushing distance) of a Sure Start centre, whether or not they used it, and higher educational achievement of children at least until aged 16
- By public exam time, effects were 6 times higher for those eligible for free school meals
- For those not eligible for free school meals, the higher attainment was only significantly improved for children from ethnic minorities
- Sure Start increased reporting of children with special needs or a disability at age 5

So all was not lost. And everything is evidence but evidence isn't everything.

Childhood isn't simply a training ground for later life. Children lucky enough to be born into a wealthy country have a right to good services from well trained, well supported and well rewarded parents and childcare professionals. Although, as researchers are inclined to say: 'More research is needed' there is already more than enough to get cracking. That will mean fighting tooth and nail for investment in children, and especially those often excluded from services because they have special needs. Once again, the inverse care law is an apt metaphor.

Given current tensions worldwide, we also need to work on how to ensure that children in countries struggling with famine, war and poverty can best be supported. And we must also learn from those who despite terrible conditions, know a lot about caring for children in sickness and in health.

The author declares no conflict of interest (though naturally has an interest in good early years provision. This viewpoint was unfunded. Helen Roberts is the sole author.

¹ [Perry Preschool Project - HighScope](#) (accessed 1 May 2024)

² Heckman J.J, Moon S.H, Pinto R, Savelyev P.A, and Yavitz Y. The Rate of Return to the HighScope Perry Preschool Program, *Journal of Public Economics* 94, nos. 1–2 (2010): 114–128

³ Department for Education and Employment, *Sure start, making a difference for children and families*, London DFEE 1999

⁴ Glass, N. (2006), 'Sure Start: where did it come from, where is it going?', *Journal of Children's Services*, 1: 1, 51–7

⁵ <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1338417/Labours-childcare-failure--10bn-Sure-Start-scheme-effect.html> (accessed 14 June 2024)

⁶ [Childcare Infrastructure in the Nordic Countries \(nordics.info\)](#) (accessed June 12 2024)

⁷ [The short- and medium-term impacts of Sure Start on educational outcomes | Institute for Fiscal Studies \(ifs.org.uk\)](https://www.ifs.org.uk) (accessed 4 May 2024)