



NEWS RELEASE

'TWIN-TRACK CHILDHOOD' WILL DERAIL POST-PANDEMIC RECOVERY AS UK SLIPS BELOW MINIMUM STANDARDS FOR CHILD HEALTH AND WELLBEING, CLAIMS NEW REPORT

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Covid-19 has uncovered entrenched health inequalities; hobbling UK children even prior to birth and creating a 'twin-track childhood' on course to derail a post-pandemic recovery unless children are placed at the heart of it. This is the view of 'The Early Years': a Report developed by 31 academics, voluntary sector and childcare professionals and published today by The Children's Alliance.

Honorary President, Baroness (Frances) De Souza said:

*'I'm delighted to welcome 'The Early Years' – the first in a quartet of 'Children's Alliance' Reports. This is where we **must** start if the Government's aim of 'levelling up' post-pandemic is to be realised.*

The inequalities besetting our very youngest children do not owe their origin to Covid-19 – but the pandemic has opened our eyes to them. This Report and its successors on Physical Health, Mental Health and Family and Community will prove that need for a Cabinet Minister for Children is irrefutable if 'the right to thrive' is to be enjoyed by all UK citizens.'

Using the most up-to-date references, the Report presents the current picture of family life post-Covid across a range of child wellbeing indicators and shows that:

- The impact of poor nutrition and access to a healthy diet is one of the primary elements to sabotage children's paths to lifelong health and wellbeing. Mandatory food and drink standards for Early Years settings should be recognised in the Ofsted Common Inspection Framework together with a national strategy to improve preconception, pregnancy and postnatal diets and the feeding of infants and young children

- Poor diet is a major factor influencing children's oral health with 23.5% of 5 year olds in England experiencing dental decay. Those from the most deprived areas are affected to the greatest extent. Dental care and oral health should be included in all prenatal, perinatal and postnatal programmes with a national strategy to prioritise early identification of children at high risk of caries and population-based public health measures including reduction in rates of smoking during pregnancy and promotion of infant feeding guidelines
- All babies should be screened for hearing loss no later than one month of age and a reformed '2-year check' criteria introduced with clear speech and language assessment to enable early identification of children needing support. Support training in speech and language development should be embedded across all early years and primary initial teacher training (ITT) routes
- Policies should enable a positive mental health culture in the early years. A mental health and wellbeing policy should be mandatory for each early years setting and a mental health worker or play therapist employed to implement a strong wellbeing and resilience culture and assist individual children
- SEND children were disproportionately affected by the pandemic and specific training for early years practitioners is needed to support inclusive practice and to help children with SEND recover from gaps in their learning or support; in particular focusing on speech and language and physical development. Urgent investment must be made in reducing the backlog of health assessments for early years children enabling settings to offer the right support at the right time
- Early years settings can offer stability in the lives of children who have suffered from trauma, adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) or who are from migrant and asylum-seeking families. The Government should revise and update information available to local authorities, schools and early years settings concerning education provision and entitlement of children from refugee and migrant families; providing additional support to navigate the admissions process and offering a free school meal to all children regardless of the state of their family's application to remain. All early years settings should have an Equality Policy specifying relationship-building with refugee parents; the presence of interpreters and the employment (where possible) of at least one assistant fluent in the refugees' language. A comprehensive play strategy should be a core requirement for all early years settings
- Early years settings such as family hubs and children's centres must be able to receive accreditation and recommendation by national and local government as childhood immunisation centres. The Government should organise a immunisation campaign with the responsibilities of the Vaccine Minister extended to encompass setting a strategy for widespread childhood disease immunisation take-up

- The Government should reaffirm the 2004 Government's recognition that a 'first class workforce is fundamental to excellent early years provision'; publishing a comprehensive plan to raise the entry qualification level, providing a training fund and ensuring access to continuing professional development in all settings with published remuneration scales to benefit a professional workforce. Existing Children's Centres and new provision such as Family Hubs should be evaluated; thereby guaranteeing that their services provide for the needs of all children with the decline in their number and service range reversed; especially in areas of disadvantage.

Edwina Revel who helped to co-ordinate the Report said:

'Working in the early years I have made a commitment to put children at the heart of everything that I do. This Report showcases the range of evidence based initiatives and a workforce who channels this ethos in practice on a daily basis. The early years provide us with a unique opportunity to shape the future health and wellbeing outcomes for our younger generation, particularly during those first 1,001 critical days. The recent global pandemic has put a spotlight on the challenges we now face to ensure policies are in place to enable our future generation to thrive.'

Lead author of 'The Early Years', Helen Clark thanked all the contributors and added:

'Right now in the UK, the 'good childhood' that is a launch pad for some of our children is not available for all, especially those living with disadvantage. Until the current 'twin track' experience is replaced by a broad highway of opportunity that every child can travel, the UK post-Covid will itself be moored for the foreseeable future in the slow lane; overtaken by other nations rather than blazing a trail for others to emulate.'

Other Reports have focused on singular concerns, but this one stands alone in bringing together a whole range of childhood wellbeing issues.

Giving every child the best start in life is the only sure-fire way to address society's deep-rooted inequalities and to ensure that the long-term health and prosperity of the UK is safe in the hands of the generations that will succeed us.'

Note: The Children's Alliance is a Water Babies outreach not-for-profit Community Interest Company: <https://childrensalliance.org.uk/>

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