

Right from the Start: implementing the *Early Years Framework*

**Children in Scotland Policy Briefing
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Context

In December 2008, the Scottish Government and the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities (CoSLA) published the *Early Years Framework*. Developed in consultation with a variety of stakeholders, this *Framework* provides a 10-year vision for achieving a coherent and community-based approach to supporting families with young children throughout Scotland.

The intention of the *Framework* is to serve as the catalyst for 'transformational change' in early years services and the wellbeing of young children over the next decade. It offers a direction of travel and a set of aspirations that could, and should, be achieved through short, medium and long-term action. In light of the Concordat, the *Framework* does not depend upon major new *national* resources, legislation or central control for its goals to be met.

This Children in Scotland policy briefing: summarises the main points of the two-volume *Early Years Framework*; notes the policy issues at stake; and, offers our analysis and recommendations.

What are the *Early Years Framework's* main points?

The *Framework* recognises that the early years – from before birth through the initial stage of primary school - are an absolutely crucial period in every child's life. There is an ever-growing body of research and experience that demonstrates the *enduring* benefits (or harm) of what happens (or fails to happen) to a young child's brain, health and wellbeing during the first several years of life. Getting it right truly matters.

The *Early Years Framework* sets out a strategic direction for more effective use of existing resources. It also establishes goals for what families, communities, early years service providers and public agencies can do to better support and assist young children and their mothers/fathers/carers. There is a complex and wide-ranging agenda within this *Framework*, but the following are the major elements:

- focus on engagement with, and empowerment of, children, families and communities
- strengthen universal services that will successfully carry out prevention and early intervention activities
- renew societal and governmental emphasis on 0-3 years as the period in a child's life that shapes future outcomes
- break down barriers between 'education' and 'childcare' through a move towards more integrated, flexible early years services
- improve play opportunities and overcome barriers to healthy play
- enhance informal support networks and provide more consistent access to family support services
- encourage and assist nurseries, schools and childcare centres to further develop their role in family and community learning
- develop common values and knowledge across the early years workforce (and enhance their skills) through improved training
- build on *Getting it right for every child* and *Curriculum for Excellence* to provide a coherent set of child-centred, outcome-focused services
- plan adult services (e.g. housing and transport) with a greater focus on the needs of young children and families.

Policy issues raised by the *Early Years Framework*

- It is widely acknowledged that the early years of a child's life are crucial for individual, community and economic success. Stress, poverty, neglect and abuse at this age lead to poor outcomes as teenagers and adults in terms of health, education, employment, and criminal behaviour. The financial costs of harm during the early years are also substantial. Quite simply, 'damaged' children require more expensive support later – and often throughout their lives.

The idea of *preventing* harm whenever possible – for example, by avoiding alcohol and drugs during pregnancy – enjoys widespread support, but not widespread priority in the actual allocation of resources. Not all problems can be prevented. Young children will have additional support needs – for instance, those with speech and hearing difficulties -- need *early intervention*. However, as with prevention, the support for early identification and early intervention often is more rhetorical than real.

- As increasing numbers of women enter the workplace, more young children are being cared for outside the home. Policy-makers have struggled to respond effectively to this change. As a consequence, parents/carers continue to struggle with the realities of services that are both fragmented and increasingly costly.

Early years provision sometimes has been neglected and planned ineffectively. 'Childcare' has often been seen largely as a side issue in the push for increased labour market participation. Early years 'education' has been seen as expanding schooling to younger children through a formal curriculum that supports later learning.

In policy terms, 'education' and 'childcare' historically have fallen within the domains of different government departments (locally and nationally). This division and disconnection is unhelpful to families and to society. Policy *and* practice should look at the whole child and the whole situation of the child's family. OECD's *Starting Strong II* report both reiterates and reinforces this message.

- High quality, integrated early years services have proven to bring extensive benefits. Not only is children's wellbeing enhanced, but also substantial savings to the public purse are achieved.
 - Sweden began a long-term study in the 1990s, which has concluded that children who enter good quality day care at an early stage show improved academic performance at age 13. This is a reminder that Scotland needs to not only meet the European 'Barcelona Targets' for more childcare, but also ensure the availability of high quality early years services.
 - In Scotland, many examples of good and effective practice with vulnerable young children and their families were developed under the Sure Start programme. Outreach support, parenting programmes and healthy eating initiatives were among these positive developments.
 - The Abecedarian Project in the USA found significantly improved educational achievement and health outcomes for disadvantaged children who had participated in a day care programme. The programme was estimated to save \$4 of public money in the long-term for every \$1 invested.
 - Bookstart programmes exist in many parts of the UK to introduce babies and young children to books. They also encourage and support parents in sharing books with their children from an early age. Studies have found that children who have experienced a Bookstart programme have consistently higher scores in language and literacy in school.
- As *UNICEF Report Card 8* (December 2008) acknowledges, providing targeted interventions alone is not the answer.

Strong, inclusive services, available to all children, are essential. Of course, some young children and their families will still need extra support. The *Framework* offers constructive approaches to ensuring they receive the additional help necessary to have a good start.

Children in Scotland's key messages about the Early Years Framework

- The Scottish Government and CoSLA have produced an ambitious and positive 10-year vision for early years. It is a vision that requires real action across Scotland to create lasting improvement.
- The *Framework* commendably recognises that early years provision in Scotland has been both insufficient and fragmented for too long. It highlights the need to finally overcome the artificial and counterproductive division between 'education' and 'childcare'.
- Providing high quality, integrated services during the early years is a sensible (indeed, long overdue) investment in the current wellbeing and future success of Scotland's children.
- Services should be configured to achieve the best outcomes for the 'whole child', irrespective of parental employment status.
- A community-wide approach is needed to improve the physical environment in ways that support positive experiences for young children. Provision of adequate, healthy play space and child-friendly design for housing developments is essential.
- There is already some excellent practice in early years around Scotland, but coverage is patchy and needs to become widespread. Innovative ideas like nature kindergartens and use of the arts in early learning have proved feasible, popular and successful.
- The Scottish Government and CoSLA must encourage, inspire and support local authorities and their community planning partners to ensure that the *Framework* is fully and properly implemented.
- A strong, skilled, joined-up workforce is needed to deliver the aspirations of the *Framework*. The Scottish Government has laudably recognised this and encouraged debate on how this can be achieved. Developing the Scottish 'social pedagogue' qualification (similar to those already used widely in other European countries) would be a positive move for those working with the youngest and most vulnerable children throughout Scotland.
- There is much that can be learned from the experience of other countries. *Children in Scotland* highlights valuable examples both in its 'Building Better Childhoods' series of publications and through *Children in Europe* magazine. For instance, the Nordic countries' early years entitlement policies – and Norway's integrated 'upbringing plans' – reveal lessons that could benefit Scotland, too.

Children in Scotland's recommended next steps

- The next round of local authority Single Outcome Agreements should contain commitments to begin implementing the *Early Years Framework*, with meaningful targets and measurable indicators. This should lead to year-on-year improvements in the delivery of first-rate, integrated early years services for children and their parents.
- The Scottish Government and CoSLA should assist local authorities and their community planning partners – with the direct involvement of the voluntary sector – to ensure that the *Framework's* aspiration for 'transformational' change can, and will be, achieved over its 10-year time frame.
- The widespread belief in the value of prevention and early intervention should be translated into higher political priority, more resources and (most important) *increased action* at the local, regional and national levels across Scotland.
- The Scottish Government should progress the national infrastructure needed to underpin effective implementation of the *Early Years Framework*. Improved statistical and demographic data, workforce reform, review of funding approaches, improving affordability and proactive sharing of evidence-based good practice are key components of an effective infrastructure. It can be done. Norway, for example, has developed innovative and effective early years approaches (like nature kindergartens) *and* brought down the direct cost to parents.
- The UK Treasury should give significant direct, ring-fenced, financial support to the Scottish Government for implementation of the *Early Years Framework*. This is appropriate and necessary for the success of such reserved policies as welfare reform. A major UK investment in this *Scottish Framework* also would help accomplish its economic goals – both as an immediate offset to the current recession and as a crucial step toward overcoming child poverty and unemployment across Scotland. This UK investment would create skilled jobs in early years provision, as well as making it possible (and affordable) for parents to return to work. This would also generate substantial savings to the public purse over the longer term.

Scotland's *Early Years Framework* is not guaranteed to succeed or to fail. That will depend on the degree to which it is embraced, and acted upon, by all concerned. This *Framework* offers all of us a welcome opportunity to move together as a nation in a direction that is necessary and right – for young children, for their families and for our nation. Doing nothing to strongly advance the early years agenda would be a serious mistake.

Further information

The *Early Years Framework* can be downloaded from <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/People/Young-People/Early-years-framework>

OECD (2006) *Starting Strong II*

UNICEF (2008) *The Child Care Transition*

UNICEF (2008) *Early childhood services in the OECD countries.*

Children in Scotland magazine (January 2009) 'A Framework for Change'

Children in Scotland (2008) *Working it out: developing the children's sector workforce*

Children in Scotland (2007/8) 'Building Better Childhoods' publications

Children in Scotland (December 2008) *Welfare reform and child welfare*

Children in Europe magazine (*Children in Scotland* is the UK publisher)

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