Senedd Cymru
Y Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg

Ymchwiliad i effaith argyfwng Covid-19 ar blant a phobl ifanc yng Nghymru

COV 81
Ymateb gan: Achub y Plant yng Nghymru

Welsh Parliament
Children, Young People and Education Committee

Inquiry into the impact of the Covid-19 outbreak on children and young people in Wales

COV 81
Response from: Save the Children in Wales

Introduction

Founded in 1919, Save the Children is a global organisation helping children to survive and thrive in 120 countries, including here in Wales. In response to the COVID-19 outbreak, we have launched an Emergency Grants Programme and educational support for children in poverty (Appendix 1), as well as responding at a global scale.

This crisis is having a huge impact on all children in Wales and is particularly affecting the most disadvantaged. Families already struggling on low incomes before the crisis are hardest hit, and many do not have the tools, resources and skills to adequately support their child's learning and development at home. This is particularly important in the early years, when children's experiences form the foundation for their later learning.

Parents play a crucial role in supporting their children's learning, and this crisis highlights the importance of supporting parents to enable them to help their children whilst at home. Parents in poverty face additional stresses and pressures that make it harder for them to provide the resources and activities that children need, and as a result, children in poverty are less likely to access high quality learning at home. A recent study has found that children in lower-income families are spending less time on home learning than children in better-off families and have access to fewer resources both from their schools and at home.[1]

The early years are a crucial time in a child's life. Before this crisis, there was a significant gap in attainment between children in poverty and their peers in the early years. Without clear interventions, we anticipate this gap to widen as a result of the pandemic, threatening the life chances of a generation. It is vital that children do not miss out on the opportunities they need to learn and develop during this crisis – we must ensure that children, parents and early years services have the support they need throughout this time and during the months of recovery to follow.

Background

We acknowledge the huge pressures Welsh Government face to tackle the current crisis. We welcome the urgent steps taken to provide for children and young people, through announcements in respect of free school meals continuing until schools reopen and the pledge to address digital exclusion by providing each child with a device. However, families in poverty need immediate and long-term support to protect children from the harsh reality of the crisis.

Government policy and practice responses must both take account of

- Children in the here and now, and
- Children when current restrictions are relaxed and lifted.

[1] Institute for Fiscal Studies (2020) *Learning during the lockdown: real-time data on children's experiences during home learning.* London: IFS

The importance of the early years

Save the Children is particularly concerned about the impact of this crisis on the youngest children, especially those growing up in poverty. There is long-standing, consistent evidence that shows a significant relationship between poverty and young children's early learning outcomes.

Children growing up in poverty are less likely to benefit from key elements of quality parental support in their early learning. Studies show that poverty can make it harder for families to consistently create and provide stimulating, enriching interactions, experiences and materials. Children are less likely to benefit from rich exposure to language, words and interactions. This can have significant impact on children's cognitive competencies, such as communication, language and literacy skills which are reliable predictors of later achievement.

However, the discussion and debate around education during this crisis has largely focused on schools, with little discussion around the importance of parents and the home learning environment and the impact on children of pre-school age.

Most children attend some form of early years setting before they start school. High-quality early years education is known to have a significant impact on children's learning and development, particularly for the most disadvantaged
children. Those children will now be missing out on this crucial support, and many will not be accessing a sufficient quality of learning at home to make up for this lost support.

The importance of the home learning environment

This crisis highlights the crucial role that parents play in supporting their children's learning and development. Parents have always been the most important educators for young children, but this period has emphasised the inequalities between children in poverty and their peers.

Although we know many schools and early years settings are continuing to support children through remote learning and parental engagement support, children in poverty are less likely to be able to access the same quality of learning at home as their peers. Poverty puts tremendous pressure on families which makes it harder for parents to create the conditions or provide the resources and/or activities needed to support children's learning.

Poverty increases family stress and reduces the opportunities for parenting that supports children's early learning. It reduces access to material resources and activities which support learning, and to services and information. The level of formal education, particularly for mothers, is one of the biggest influences on the quality of the home learning environment and of children's educational attainment.[2]

The circumstances for families on low incomes during this crisis are heightened, as all learning is taking place at home. This is because:

- Many families do not have the devices or access to data to access a lot of the learning tools and services that are online – even for parents with the youngest children, this support can be crucial.
- Children growing up in poverty are less likely to have access to age appropriate books and toys than their better off peers.
- The stress and financial difficulties caused by this crisis will make it more difficult for families in poverty or going into poverty to provide a positive home learning environment.

[2] Gregg at al 2010; de Sylva et al, 2012; Dickson et al 2013

- Many parents lack the knowledge, skills and confidence to support their child's early learning at home.

Although the debate is starting to shift towards schools and early years settings starting to reopen, it is still vital that action is taken to support parents to help their children learn at home during this crisis and beyond. Many parents may be reluctant to send their children to settings due to concerns about children's safety. Attendance at early years settings is not compulsory, meaning that there is a greater likelihood that parents will not send their children back immediately, and those not eligible for the free entitlement may be less able or willing to pay for provision. There may also be differences in attendance between children in poverty and their peers, as higher-income parents report being more willing to send their child back to school than low-income parents.[3] This risks further widening the gap in learning, as those children who struggle most with learning at home are also the least likely to be returning to school or early years settings once they reopen.

This makes it all the more important to focus on the role that parents can play during this time and beyond. It is crucial that this time at home is not written off – Welsh Government working alongside local authorities and early years settings must do everything possible to support parents and their children to continue their crucial early learning at home now.

Access to internet and devices

Access to the internet and devices is a key issue for struggling families during this crisis. We have heard from families and partners that digital access is a lifeline, but many low-income households lack the devices and connectivity they need.

There is a high risk of widening educational inequalities during lockdown – and a big part of this is that some families are digitally connected, and others are not. School and nursery closures mean that children and young people will now be undertaking all learning within the home. Teachers and practitioners are doing a heroic job to teach and set work virtually, whilst online resources and activities are being made available so parents and carers can provide continuity in play and learning at home.

We feel it is important to monitor and evaluate the additional support now being offered by the Welsh Government, to ensure that digital devices are reaching, and aiding children as intended. There is a need to ensure that ongoing technical support is available as part of this new digital offer for children. And while increased access to the internet presents many opportunities for children and young people it also presents risks and dangers so parents must be supported to ensure children are safe online.

Support for children returning to early years settings

Once schools and early years settings reopen, all children, but particularly the most disadvantaged, will need extra support to help them settle back in and catch up on the learning and experiences they have missed.

Settings will need to spend extra time and resources helping and supporting children so that there is equal weighting of managing COVID-19 risks and a focus on supporting children's wellbeing during transition and the importance of parental engagement in children's learning at this time. We want to make sure access to provision is optimised, by giving parents the support and information they need to alleviate fears and build strong relationships with providers. This means supporting settings

[3] IFS 2020

to work closely with parents of children preparing to return or start nursery or reception, supporting parents and children as they attend and supporting children's wellbeing as they adjust to their new environment.

We recommend that additional funding is provided to all settings to enable them to support children and engage with parents – for example providing children with language recovery programmes, providing higher staff ratios to enable one to one and small group work to take place, supporting social and emotional development and wellbeing, ensuring that a family engagement officer is appointed in each school setting to support engagement. This funding could take the form of a standalone fund, or through existing mechanisms such as through increases to the free entitlement funding, for example non-working parents must be able to access the Government's Childcare Offer, and an increase in the Early Years Pupil Development Grant.

We also support the submissions from the UNCRC Monitoring Group and the National Children's Charities Policy Group

Save the Children
Achub y Plant

Appendix 1

Save the Children Wales – COVID 19 Response

Crisis Grants
As an immediate response to the crisis we have developed a **Poverty and Early Learning Grant.** The grant provides essential items that reduce financial pressure on vulnerable families and inequalities in the home learning environment.

We are currently delivering around 500 grants across Cardiff, Newport, and Neath Port Talbot with the aim to extend the scheme as more funding becomes available. Grants are applied for in partnership with community practitioners who know families, can assess the need in the home, and support families to engage with early learning resources. Families receiving the emergency grant are telling us that they are making a difference to their home environment and learning opportunities. We will continue to gather the voices of families who receive the grants to inform our response as the crisis continues.

Local Systems Change
We are working intensively in the Bettws Early Learning Community (ELC) to provide a comprehensive package of support to families experiencing multiple effects of deprivation. Working with on-the-ground practitioners we have identified the issues affecting families, and then coordinated with service leads to develop a single, cross-organisation response. Coordinating a response using data, we can make sure that no family is left behind. The packages that families are receiving includes food, gas and electric, phone credit, learning resources, baby bundles and hygiene packs. In the medium term the ELC is considering a coordinated response to families' ongoing needs as the community adapts to a very different way of life and learning.

In Cardiff, Neath Port Talbot and Rhondda Cynon Taff we are convening regular Communities of Practice to share information and identify gaps or duplication of provision. Working closely with partner organisations, we make sure there is a consistent understanding of the different support available to families across Wales. This includes information about national grants, learning opportunities and vulnerable family support schemes. The Communities of Practice provide a window into the lives of the most vulnerable families in South Wales, which we use to inform our programmes and influence decision makers in the local authorities and Government.

Resources
Building on our experience of delivering programmes that support children's learning in the home, we have developed a series of **resource packs** that parents can use to engage their children. The packs are crammed with information, and fun activities that families can do together at home. We know that the crisis is affecting the emotional wellbeing of children and parents, and the packs focus on tips to help parents and children talk about their feelings at this difficult time.

For more information on our programme work including how to access the resource packs etc please contact - WalesInfo@savethechildren.org.uk