

Written evidence submitted by Save the Children

1. Introduction

- 1.1 Founded in the UK in 1919, Save the Children is a global organisation helping children to survive and thrive in 120 countries, including here in the UK. In response to the COVID-19 outbreak, we have launched an Emergency Grants Programme and educational support for children in poverty in the UK, as well as responding at a global scale.
- 1.2 This crisis is having a huge impact on all children in the UK 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.
- 1.3 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
- 1.4 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. In 2019, almost half (43%) of pupils on free school meals in England did not achieve a good level of development, compared with just over a quarter (26%) of other children – an attainment gap of 17 percentage points.² This gap had already widened slightly since the previous year.
- 1.5 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 the recovery months to follow.

2. Summary of recommendations

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

² Department for Education (2019) Early Years Foundation Stage Profile results 2018-19

<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/early-years-foundation-stage-profile-results-2018-to-2019>

- 2.1 The Department for Education (DfE) should support parents with young children, with a focus on those on low incomes, by providing guidance to local authorities and early years settings as to how best they should be supporting and communicating with parents.
- 2.2 Through guidance, DfE should set an expectation that early years settings should provide guidance on how parents can support their children's learning through play-based activities at home.
- 2.3 Working with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DDCMS), DfE should increase provision of internet access and digital devices to families with young children so that all parents can access online resources to support their children's learning at home.
- 2.4 DfE should work with the early years sector, and organisations with a large volunteer base - such as Save the Children – to consider the role volunteers could play working alongside qualified early years practitioners in providing pre-school children with access to play and learning opportunities over the summer.
- 2.5 As discussions continue regarding the reopening of settings, the DfE should provide clear guidance to early years settings when they reopen from June, as to how best they can support children, particularly the most disadvantaged, to prepare, transition and settle in.
- 2.6 Government should provide additional funding to settings, either through a standalone fund or through increases to existing funding mechanisms, to enable them to provide additional support to children struggling with the transition back into a nursery or school and to those falling behind in their learning.

3. The importance of the early years

- 3.1 Save the Children is particularly concerned about the impact of this crisis on the youngest children, particularly 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.
- 3.2 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.
- 3.3 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.
- 3.4 Most children attend some form of early years setting before they start school, with 94% of three- and four-year-olds in England taking up funded early education.³ High-quality early

years education is known to have a significant impact on children's learning and development, particularly for the most disadvantaged children. Attending a high-quality childcare setting increases the likelihood of achieving five or more GCSEs A*-C by almost 20%⁴ and has added benefits 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.

4. The importance of the home learning environment

4.1 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.

4.2 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.

4.3 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.⁵

4.4 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.
- Many parents lack the knowledge, skills and confidence to support their child's early learning at home.

4.5 Although the debate is starting to shift towards schools and early years settings starting to reopen, with early years settings due to start reopening from June, it is still vital that action is taken to support parents to help their children learn at home during this crisis and beyond. It is still unclear whether all early years settings will be open from June or how, and many parents may be reluctant to send their children to settings immediately due to concerns

³ Department for Education (2019) Provision for children under 5, January 2019

<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/education-provision-children-under-5-years-of-age-january-2019>

⁴ Cattan, S., Crawford, C., Dearden, L. *The economic effects of pre-school education and quality*. IFS: London, 2015.

⁵ Gregg et al 2010; de Sylva et al, 2012; Dickson et al 2013

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.

- 4.6 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.⁶ 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.
- 4.7 This makes it all the more important to focus on the role that parents can be playing during this time and beyond. It is crucial that this time at home is not written off – DfE 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.
- 4.8 **It is essential that the DfE, along with local authorities and early years services, support parents as much as possible to help their children learn at home during this time.** The current guidance available focuses largely on how settings should be supporting those children who are attending, with no advice as to how to support those children who are at home, or any expectation that settings should be doing this as much as possible.
- 4.9 To ensure that children at home are not forgotten, **the DfE should provide detailed guidance to early years settings as to how to support parents**, including sharing examples of best practice, and set a clear expectation that early years settings should engage with and communicate with families and children as much as possible. Although revised guidance of the 15 May encourages settings to continue to work with parents to support children's learning at home, this should be strengthened further to emphasise the importance of parental engagement in children's learning, along with examples of best practice which do not solely rely on digital access, such as making suggestions on how parents can support children's next steps, using FaceTime to speak with children directly, share activity ideas and provide physical resources.

5. Access to internet and devices

- 5.1 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. In some communities, our partners report that up to 40% of families are experiencing digital exclusion.
- 5.2 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.
- 5.3 Online resources and support are especially vital for those families with young children, who may lack the knowledge and materials on how best to support their child at home. Resources such as the UK Government's Hungry Little Minds and BBC's Tiny Happy People

⁶ IFS 2020

offer tips and support, but for families without access to devices or internet to use these digital resources are not accessible.

5.4 DfE has announced a scheme to provide laptops, tablets and 4G routers to some disadvantaged Year 10 pupils, which is a positive first step. Schools and third sector organisations are also distributing devices and internet access to disadvantaged children on a local level, whilst the DevicesDotNow initiative is calling for further devices to be donated by industry.

5.5 However, **the UK Government must go much further in ensuring that no child is left behind as a result of digital exclusion.** Ultimately, for this scheme to be successful disadvantaged families with younger children must also receive the digital and device access they need.

5.6 Although schools and early years settings are due to open from June, it is unlikely that all children will attend school or childcare from June onwards and there will be an ongoing need to provide families with access to internet and devices to support home learning. **We recommend that the Department extends the scheme and ensures it is equitable by providing digital devices and 4G routers to low-income families with younger children.**

5.7 Existing funding should also be harnessed to ensure access for younger children. Pupil premium funding was established with the explicit purpose to support and improve the attainment of disadvantaged pupils. **Guidance should make clear how schools and childcare settings can use the funding to support home learning.**

5.8 As outlined above, tech companies have already donated digital devices and the business community should continue to play a role, working in partnership with government to make digital inclusion a reality for all children. Telecommunications providers have similarly agreed measures with the government to support vulnerable consumers through the crisis, including removing all data caps on fixed broadband. **We would like to see industry continue working with government to put in place additional measures,** particularly removing caps and reducing costs for mobile broadband and pay-as-you-go data services which are disproportionately used by low-income consumers.

6 Volunteering scheme

6.1 There is an opportunity to explore a volunteering scheme to deliver a programme of summer activities enabling children to play and learn in a safe and welcoming environment. This would have immediate and long-term benefits for them, and for their parents and carers.

6.2 Across the UK, there are already organisations – primary schools, nurseries and charities - which have the infrastructure and expertise of a qualified early years workforce to lead these activities – but only if they can access the right support and co-ordination.

6.3 We believe there would be thousands of people across the UK willing to be part of a volunteer initiative aimed to help its children catch up on learning. It may also be possible to secure significant support in kind from major private sector organisations to help deliver these programmes. Therefore, **investment from government to set up and run these programmes could leverage significant additional resources.**

6.4 DfE should work with the early years sector, and organisations with a large volunteer base – such as Save the Children – to consider the role volunteers could play working alongside qualified early years practitioners in providing pre-school children and their parents or care givers access to play and learning opportunities over the summer.

7 Support for children returning to early years settings

7.1 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.

7.2 Settings will need to spend extra time and resources helping and supporting children and will need strong guidance on how best to do this. **DfE should ensure guidance is strengthened 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. Revision to the guidance needs to be ready for when settings reopen in June as to how best to support disadvantaged children to settle in and catch up.** 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 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.

7.3 Additional funding will also be necessary to support settings. Private, voluntary and independent early years settings are already struggling financially due to the crisis and loss of funding, and will likely need extra resources to be able to provide the extra support needed.

7.4 **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. This funding could take the form of a standalone fund, or through existing mechanisms such as through increases to the free entitlement funding and/or the Early Years Pupil Premium.

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