

# Written evidence submitted by First 1001 Days Movement (GRC0006)

## The First 1001 Days Movement

The First 1001 Days Movement is an alliance of over 120 charities and professional bodies spanning the children, family, mental health, maternity and baby sectors. We work together to drive change together by supporting and challenging national and local decision makers to value and invest in babies' emotional wellbeing and development in the first 1001 days, from pregnancy, as the critical foundation for a healthy and fulfilling life.<sup>i</sup>

## The importance of the first 1001 days

There is clear, compelling evidence that the first 1001 days, beginning in pregnancy, are a significant and influential phase in development. What happens during this period influences children's future health, well-being, learning and earnings potential. It lays the groundwork for children's developing emotional wellbeing, resilience and adaptability; the competencies they need to thrive. During this period, we can lay a foundation of health and wellbeing whose benefits last a lifetime. Conversely, if babies have a difficult start it can have widespread effects on multiple domains of development, leading to an increased risk of a wide range of poor physical and mental health, social, educational and economic outcomes.

Economists have shown that money spent on interventions in early life brings the greatest dividends. It is more cost-effective to act early, rather than pick up the pieces when problems occur. Effective early action leads to accumulated savings by preventing other services being required later in the child's life and improves the child and family's participation in the economy.

*"The period from pregnancy to age 3 is when children are most susceptible to environmental influences. Investing in this period is one of the most efficient and effective ways to help eliminate extreme poverty and inequality, boost shared prosperity, and create the human capital needed for economies to diversify and grow." UNICEF, World Bank and World Health Organisation, Nurturing Care Framework.<sup>ii</sup>*

## Understanding brain development

The first 1001 days is a period of uniquely rapid growth when babies' brains are shaped by their experiences and environments. Babies develop in an environment of relationships: sensitive, responsive care is the most fundamental element of optimal emotional development.

Most often, parents are the best providers of nurturing care. Parents' wellbeing is therefore essential for babies' wellbeing and development. Parents are most likely to be able to provide the care that babies need when they have positive relationships themselves, when they are emotionally, financially and socially secure, when they have family-friendly employment, and when they are in families and communities that nurture them and attend to their needs.

When families use childcare, it is important that care is high quality and also provides babies with the sensitive, responsive, consistent relationships that they need to thrive.

Stress factors, such as – but not limited to - domestic abuse, mental illness, substance misuse, unresolved trauma and poverty can make it harder for parents to protect, support and promote young children’s development.

## **Babies and COVID-19**

Many babies will not have been adversely affected by the COVID-19 crisis as their parents will be providing them with the emotional support and cognitive stimulation they need through this unsettling time.

However, some parents will find it hard to give their babies the care that they need and will not have the emotional and practical resources they need to buffer the impacts of the crisis for their babies. COVID-19 is resulting in enormous pressure on already vulnerable families and, at the same time, a scaling back of vital community services that support them.

Across the UK, there are babies in lockdown in poor quality and overcrowded housing, with shortages of basic supplies, cared for by parents under immense pressure. Lockdown is stressful for everyone, but for babies (born and unborn) this is happening at a critical time in their development where they are particularly vulnerable to family stress and anxiety, therefore the impact on them will be greater. Mothers and fathers who have faced birth and new parenthood under lockdown have also experienced particular stress at a key transitional point in their life.

*"There are, and will continue to be, clear effects of the coronavirus on children’s education, social life and physical and mental health. For children in key development stages, such as the very young and those in adolescence, disruption of many months will have a larger impact on social development."* Professor Paul Ramchandani<sup>iii</sup>

Too many babies were vulnerable in the UK before this crisis. 53% of families in the UK with a young child live in poverty.<sup>iv</sup> 25,000 babies in England live in households where their parent(s) are already struggling with at least two significant issues - parental mental illness, domestic abuse and/or substance misuse.<sup>v</sup> Families’ problems will have escalated during the COVID-19 crisis as a result of a range of stresses such as economic hardship, job insecurity, isolation, anxiety about the virus and the stresses of lockdown. There is evidence of rises in domestic abuse,<sup>vi</sup> and abuse and neglect of children are likely to have escalated behind closed doors. The significant economic impact of the crisis will persist long after lockdown leading to an increase and deepening of child poverty. All of these issues put babies’ wellbeing and development at risk.

There is an urgent need to support babies and their families to prevent immediate and long-term harm. A wealth of evidence shows that exposure to significant stress in the womb or early life can have pervasive and lasting impacts on multiple domains of development.<sup>vii</sup> But importantly, the research also shows us that the risks of early trauma and adversity can be mitigated with the right support. Rapid action is needed so that babies do not become the

“collateral damage” of actions to protect the nations’ physical health, with long-term consequences for our children and our society.

## **Our calls on Government**

To protect babies from the secondary impact of COVID-19, we have called for:

- **Leadership** to protect the interests of babies in decision making.
- A cross-Government **Recovery Strategy for Children** that fully addresses the needs of babies and their families. This should include:

**Workforce:** rebuilding and strengthening community services.

**Identification and Assessment:** a greater focus on the most vulnerable and a concerted effort to identify those who are at risk.

**Intervention:** boosting capacity to deal with both the backlog and significantly increased need.

**Resourcing:** investment now to prevent long-term costs.

**Ways of working:** making careful, informed decisions before any new ways of working are normalised.

**Equity:** ensuring all providers are supported to deliver safe and high-quality services.

We can provide more detail on these wider policy calls if required.

## **Extending maternity, paternity and adoption leave**

Arguments for extending maternity, paternity and adoption leave include:

- **Reducing parental stress.** Increasing leave and pay might reduce the psychological and economic stress on families which can have a knock-on impact on their babies.
- **Accessing support.** Some families may be struggling as a result of issues that have emerged during or been exacerbated by the lockdown. Others may have had support paused or scaled back during the lockdown. Extra time may help them to access the services they need and to build important social networks. This may stop issues becoming entrenched and causing more difficulties later.
- **Ensuring a good transition into childcare.** Entering childcare for the first time can be a difficult and stressful time for children as a result of separation from their parents and unfamiliar places, routines and people.<sup>viii</sup> This is particular true for infants and toddlers who rely so heavily on their primary caregivers. The stress of separation might be exacerbated for babies after lockdown because they have spent an extended period with their parents. Families and providers must have time to support babies and toddlers through the transition into childcare, enabling children to adjust to new people and relationships, and allowing carers to spend time with parents to understand babies and their needs.

- **Ensuring settings have adapted to COVID-19.** The Government has asked nurseries and other early years providers to be open for all children from 1 June.<sup>ix</sup> We worry that planning is focusing on older children (vulnerable 2-year-olds and 3-and 4-year-olds) since these places are Government funded and providers are encouraged to prioritise those children going into reception. Therefore, the unique needs of babies and toddlers may not have been fully taken into account. Enabling babies to spend more time with their parents will also give childcare providers time to establish how to safely provide nurturing care for the youngest children.

We are concerned that public health measures, such as the promotion of sterile environments with a lack of soft furnishing and toys, will be particularly inappropriate for very young children. If providers prevent parents entering to reduce transmission of COVID, this could make settling-in much more difficult and daily drop-offs more stressful for young children.

- **Reducing disruption.** Government guidance encourages consistency of staffing in early years settings to reduce the risk of transmission of COVID-19, which is also helpful in protecting important relationships for young children. However we worry that the reduction in childcare places, and concerns about children being looked after by family members who might be vulnerable or shielding, may result in families coming up with temporary childcare arrangements which will result in more disruption in relationships for very young children. Extending maternity, paternity or adoption leave would enable parents to stay with their babies until they have stable childcare plans.

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**<sup>i</sup> Due to the short timescale for producing this briefing, and the challenges of COVID-19, this document has not been signed-off by our membership. However, it draws heavily on existing pre-agreed material.**

<sup>ii</sup> UNICEF, World Bank and World Health Organisation, Nurturing Care Framework

[https://www.who.int/maternal\\_child\\_adolescent/child/nurturing-care-framework/en/](https://www.who.int/maternal_child_adolescent/child/nurturing-care-framework/en/)

<sup>iii</sup> Ramchandani, P (2020) COVID 19, We can ward off some of the negative impacts on children. *New Scientist* <https://www.newscientist.com/article/mg24532773-000-covid-19-we-can-ward-off-some-of-the-negative-impacts-on-children/>

<sup>iv</sup> Poverty amongst families whose youngest child is 0-4, using a measure of 60% median income after housing costs. Houses below average income 2018/19. <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/households-below-average-income-hbai--2>

<sup>v</sup> Miles, A. (2018). A Crying Shame A report by the Office of the Children's Commissioner into vulnerable babies in England

<sup>vi</sup> <https://blogs.bmj.com/bmj/2020/05/07/domestic-violence-during-the-covid-19-pandemic/>

<sup>vii</sup> For example, Yehuda, R *et al* (2005). Transgenerational Effects of Posttraumatic Stress Disorder in Babies of Mothers Exposed to the World Trade Center Attacks during Pregnancy. *Journal of Clinical Endocrinology & Metabolism*, and Center on the Developing Child (2007). *The Impact of Early Adversity on Child Development* (InBrief). Retrieved from [www.developingchild.harvard.edu](http://www.developingchild.harvard.edu).

<sup>viii</sup> [Ahnert et al., 2004](#), [Griebel and Niesel, 2009](#)

<sup>ix</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-covid-19-implementing-protective-measures-in-education-and-childcare-settings/coronavirus-covid-19-implementing-protective-measures-in-education-and-childcare-settings>

May 2020