

Prioritising early childhood to promote the nation's health, wellbeing & prosperity

To transform the health and prosperity of the nation, current and future Governments need to prioritise improving health and wellbeing and reducing inequalities in early childhood.

What is the issue?

In the UK, our health is getting worse and there is a growing gap between the health and wellbeing of the richest and poorest people. Health in the early years of childhood lays the foundations for mental and physical health throughout life. Healthy children are more likely to grow into healthy, productive adults.

In recent years, the infant survival rate in the UK has stalled and is worse than in 60% of similar countries.¹ We are seeing higher demand for children's mental health services, an increase in the number of children who have obesity and a decrease in children having vaccinations, and tooth decay remains the leading cause of children's hospital admissions. The rate of breastfeeding, which brings multiple health benefits for children and their mothers, is low in the UK compared with similar countries.²

Issues such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the increase in the cost of living and climate change are likely to make early years health in the UK even worse.

Child health issues in numbers



Rise in infant mortality

Between 2014 and 2017, there was a sustained **rise in infant mortality in England**, with this rise disproportionately affecting the poorest areas of the country, widening inequalities in infant mortality.



30th out of 49 OECD countries

The UK ranks **30th out of 49 OECD countries for infant mortality**.



1/5

of children aged 5 are overweight or obese

Over a fifth of children aged 5 are overweight or obese. Children living in the most deprived areas are twice as likely to be obese than those in the least deprived areas.



1/4

of all 5 year olds affected by tooth decay

In 2019, tooth decay, a preventable condition, affected nearly a quarter of all 5 year olds in England. It is the most common reason that children aged between 6 and 10 years old are admitted to hospital.

Why prioritise the early years?

Research shows that efforts to improve the mental and physical health of pregnant women, babies and young children will bring health and economic benefits to the whole of society. Babies in the womb, infants and young children are growing and developing quickly, and help and support given at these stages can have a big impact, bringing better health and wellbeing throughout life.

When young children (and/or their parents or carers) do not have the support they need, children are more likely to face greater risks of physical and mental health problems for the rest of their lives. The inequalities experienced by children from poorer backgrounds begin in the early years and remain through life. Problems with mental and physical health usually become harder to solve later in life and attempts to help can be more expensive and less effective.

One study estimates that the cost of not providing support to children in their earliest years in the UK amounts to at least £16 billion each year. However, in the UK we spend a relatively small amount on child health research, and we spend a smaller proportion of public money on children aged up to five years compared with similar countries.³

Our [policy report](#) brings together research on child health in the early years, from pre-conception through pregnancy and up to age five, with input from researchers, charities, policymakers, health and care professionals, parents and carers to help understand the issue further. It describes some areas where intervening could help to improve health in the early years, for example by reducing obesity, preventing infections and tooth decay, and encouraging healthy brain and lung development. It also recommends urgent actions that should be taken to have the biggest impact on children's health now and the wellbeing of the nation in the future.



£16.13 billion the cost to society of not addressing issues early

Data from the Royal Foundation and the London School of Economics reveal that **the cost to society of addressing the issues that might have been avoided through action in early childhood has been estimated to be £16.13 billion each year (estimates from 2018/19)**. The figure of £16.13 billion is likely to be an underestimate, as it neither includes the later costs of failing to provide the right support early on, nor the losses to the productivity and earnings of individuals over their lifetime.

What can we do?

To improve child health in the early years and reap the long-term health and economic benefits, we recommend that the five following priorities are urgently addressed:



Priority 1: Implement effective interventions and policies to improve the health and wellbeing of children and support future research

UK Governments, the NHS and local authorities should work together to implement proven measures to improve child health and wellbeing, using evidence to guide decisions. They should also work with research funders to gather evidence about cost-effective interventions, and check that new policies to put these in place are effective and good value for money. We still need more research on improving health in the early years of life, particularly to understand how a child's early life experience can lead to health problems later on and what interventions would help.



Priority 2: Establish a clear vision across Government for the early years to overcome policy silos

Child health challenges cannot be tackled in isolation. Children's health and wellbeing is influenced by many factors, including education, housing, family income and the environment. UK Governments should agree a clear vision to prioritise early years health and wellbeing, use evidence to guide the development of policies, and coordinate resources across departments. In England, the Government's Office for Health Improvement and Disparities, supported by the Cabinet Office, and working with the Chief Medical Officer and the networks of Chief Scientific Advisors and Permanent Secretaries across Government, could introduce this joined-up approach.



Priority 3: Deliver effective services for children by improving the child and family health workforce and reducing fragmentation across sectors

Parents and carers are finding it difficult to access the services they need. In all UK nations, Government, the NHS and local authorities should work together to tackle the decline in the child and family health workforce, which includes paediatricians, children's nurses, health visitors and midwives. In England, support for the early years across the NHS, community care and local authorities can be coordinated by integrated care systems – regional NHS partnerships responsible for improving health and wellbeing.



Priority 4: Collect and use a broader range of data to enable research into interventions, policies and their effective implementation to improve child health and wellbeing

The UK is good at collecting data, but by making it more accessible and linking information – for example on health, education, social care and the environment – we can find new ways to improve child health in the early years. Governments, departments of health and public health bodies in all UK nations should review the way they gather, access and link data about the factors that influence child health and wellbeing (known as the wider determinants of health). Governments should evaluate all child health policies to check they are successful and cost-effective.



Priority 5: Involve diverse perspectives of children, parents and carers in developing and implementing new policies and interventions

When policies and initiatives are developed, it is essential to gather input from children and families from diverse backgrounds. This will ensure that new policies and initiatives are successful at meeting people's needs. It could also enhance their impact by raising awareness and increasing uptake.



A healthier, more prosperous society

Every child has the right to a safe and healthy childhood. Health and wellbeing in the early years of life lay a solid foundation for adulthood, bringing health and economic benefits to the whole of society. Current and future UK Governments must prioritise improving health and wellbeing and reducing inequalities in the first five years of life. Taking action now will build a healthier, more prosperous society for all.

You can read the full report and recommendations on our website at www.acmedsci.ac.uk/child-health-report.

The full report has been approved by the Academy of Medical Sciences' Council and was developed by the following Steering Group members, in consultation with stakeholders across the sector:

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1. The UK ranks 30th out of 49 OECD nations for infant mortality. <https://data.oecd.org/healthstat/infant-mortality-rates.htm>
2. The UK ranks 15th out of 19 comparable high-income countries for breastfeeding rates. <https://data.unicef.org/resources/breastfeeding-a-mothers-gift-for-every-child/>
3. The UK ranks 25th out of 35 OECD nations for the percentage of public expenditure spent on family benefits and education for children aged 0–5 years. https://www.oecd.org/els/family/PF1_6_Public_spending_by_age_of_children.pdf

References for child health issues in numbers can be found in the '[Prioritising early childhood to promote the nation's health, wellbeing and prosperity](#)' report available on our website



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