



Babies and the Response to COVID-19

This Briefing from Best Beginnings, Home-Start UK and the Parent-Infant Foundation sets out why the Government must include funding in November's Spending Review to support families with babies and young children who have been affected by the pandemic. The Government has a narrowing window of opportunity now to address the impact of the pandemic on the most vulnerable children. A failure to act could have consequences for years to come.

- The first 1001 days of a child's life – from pregnancy until a child's second birthday – is an incredibly important period in early development, which lays the foundations for future health and wellbeing.
- A body of research shows that exposure to high levels of stress, trauma and adversity during this period can have significant consequences on children's development, although this can be mitigated with high quality support and a focus on parent-infant relationships.
- There is a growing body of evidence to show that, for some babies, the pandemic and policies to contain it have had a significant impact on early wellbeing and development. The lockdown measures created a “perfect storm” where stress increased for many families, at the same time as vital support from family, community and public services was withdrawn.
- The Government has said that next week's spending review will “focus entirely on the response to Covid-19”. Babies, young children and their families must now be part of this response.

The Impact of the Pandemic on Babies

- Ofsted has reported that between April and October, there were 300 serious incidents of harm to children. A significant proportion of these – almost 40% – involved babies, over a fifth more than in the same period last year.ⁱ
- The young children known to have suffered serious harm, abuse and neglect are sadly likely to be the ‘tip of the iceberg’, and many more will have experienced adversity during this period. The pandemic has increased families' stress and hardship, and made it harder for some families to provide their babies with the nurturing care they need.
- Our research with familiesⁱⁱ showed that almost 7 in 10 (68%) parents felt the changes brought about by COVID-19 were affecting their unborn baby, baby or young child.
- 6 in 10 (61%) parents shared significant concerns about their own mental health.
- Many families with lower incomes, from Black, Asian and minority ethnic communities and young parents were hit harder by the pandemic. This is likely to have widened the already deep inequalities in the early experiences and life chances of children across the UK.
- In a recent survey of senior leaders in pregnancy and 0-2 servicesⁱⁱⁱ nearly all respondents (98%) said the babies their organisation works with had been impacted by parental anxiety/stress/depression affecting bonding/responsive care. This was ubiquitous with 73% of respondents reporting that *many* of the babies they work with were impacted.

- The vast majority of respondents to that survey (80%) said that those they work with had experienced increased exposure to domestic conflict, child abuse or neglect, with 29% saying *many* babies they work with had been impacted.
- Nearly all respondents (90%) had observed that the pandemic had led to more sedentary behaviour and less stimulation/play for babies, with half saying this was effecting *many* babies.
- Research from five leading UK Universities^{iv} found that during lockdown babies and toddlers from disadvantaged backgrounds have been missing out on activities known to be important for early development.

The need for a Baby Boost

- There must be action now to fund the services and support that will be so critical to support those families who have been adversely affected by the pandemic and to reduce the impact of this adversity on their babies' development.
- Without such support, some of these children will be affected for years to come. Public services may not see the impact of the pandemic until later when children struggle with behaviour, learning or peer relationships when they start school, or need to access mental health services later in childhood.
- We call for a boost in spending to enable public services and charities to reach out to families with very young babies, to understand their needs, identify risks and issues, and offer support where it is needed.
- Earlier this year Government announced £1bn new funding for schools to close gaps in achievement caused by COVID-19. This equates to around £112 per pupil.^v A Baby Boost could provide the same amount of funding for the babies of 2020. This would equate to £68m.^{vi}
- The Baby Boost would enable local commissioners to fund services and support for the babies of 2020 and other families with children in the first 1001 days. Effective support from health visitors, specialist services and charities could help these families to recover from the harms caused by the pandemic.
- We welcome the Government's commitment, through the Leadsom Review, to look more holistically at the improvements required to support early childhood in this country. Significant system change is required to give all children the best start in life, and this must be supported by investment. But the Babies of 2020 cannot wait for Government to review services and make decisions about long term investment. The Chancellor must invest now to enable our youngest children to recover from the impact of COVID-19. Swift investment will prevent further costs in future. Without action, the pandemic will cast a long shadow into our children's futures.

ⁱ Amanda Spielman's speech at the online National Children and Adult Services (NCAS) Conference.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/amanda-spielman-at-ncasc-2020>

ⁱⁱ Babies in Lockdown: listening to parents to build back better (2020). Best Beginnings, Home-Start UK, and the Parent-Infant Foundation.

ⁱⁱⁱ www.isospartnership.com/blog/babies-and-the-coronavirus-crisis-learning-from-first-national-lockdown

^{iv} <https://www.brookes.ac.uk/about-brookes/news/uk-lockdown-linked-to-widening-disadvantage-gap-for-babies-and-toddlers/>

^v There are 8.89million children at school in England in 2020 <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-pupils-andtheir-characteristics>.

^{vi} Calculated using the 2019 birth rate in England. Although we are proposing an amount that is linked to the total number of babies born this year, the funding could be used in targeted ways to focus on addressing gaps in early development.