

Growing Up in Scotland conference 18 March 2008

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When we look at the results of this year's Key Findings from the Growing Up in Scotland study – and when we look at previous years – I think it's important to recognise that for a large majority of children, growing up in Scotland today is a positive experience.

The findings today show that most parents are satisfied with the area where they live. Most children are growing up with both their mothers and their fathers playing an active part in their life. Participation levels in physical activity are high. The majority of children come together with the rest of their family to eat and spend time together. Childcare arrangements (although complex) seem to be working well for most parents and are generally benefitting their children's development.

It's sometimes all too easy for people from organisations like mine to dwell on the problems that children in Scotland face but, before I do that, I think it's important to recognise that Scotland is for most children, a good place to grow up in.

Certainly, when we compare Scotland to all the other countries where Save the Children works – we are nowhere near facing the huge humanitarian crisis that faces children around the world. We live in a world where over 9 million children a year die from preventable illnesses before their 5th birthday. It's a sobering thought that if the Growing Up in Scotland survey was being carried out in Sierra Leone, more than 2,200 of the 8,000 children in the sample would have died by now.

But we shouldn't be comparing our experiences in Scotland to that of developing countries. Our children are growing up in the 4th richest country in the world. We should be expecting, demanding, that children, *all* children in Scotland should be benefiting from our countries wealth – not just in strictly

economic terms but also in terms of their access to opportunities and support services.

It's also important to state that even if all children had a fair share of the resources in this country – there would be little of lasting value if they are not also living happy lives and growing up in a safe, stable, loving environment.

The 2007 UNICEF report on the wellbeing of children in rich countries was a wake up call for many in the UK. I'm sure some of the researchers in the room will take issue with some of the methodology underpinning that report – but the fact is that overall, Britain was not doing well. The UNICEF report stated that “the true measure of a nation's standing is how well it attends to its children – their health and safety, their material security, their education and socialisation, and their sense of being loved, valued and included in the families and societies into which they are born.” Britain's standing was significantly lowered as a result of that report – and when Barnardo's published their report for Scotland, we found that we fared second from bottom out of a list of 24 OECD countries.

A couple of years have passed since then – but our response to those statistical reports should be one of outrage. It's that moment when we realise that the issues facing the vulnerable children that many of us work with on a daily basis are not isolated – and that there are significant issues that need to be addressed on a national level. That outrage should then force us into doing everything we can to change that situation and not stopping until the point when the experience of children Growing Up in Scotland will be the standard to which other nations aspire.

If we are going to see a long term difference to the lives of children in Scotland, we need to understand what is happening in the earliest stages of childhood and we need to also focus a lot more on parenting in Scotland. In a Child Rights Situation Analysis that we carried out at Save the Children last year, we found that one of the key underlying factors preventing the

realisation of basic children's rights in Scotland was the lack of emphasis within many organisations to support the role of parents.

That's why we very much welcome the Growing Up in Scotland study. It has already made a valuable contribution to our understanding of early childhood and parenting in Scotland and I have no doubts it will make more of a contribution in the future. We shouldn't forget that the opportunity for this type of study, and the valuable data it collects, doesn't come along very often – and I'm really pleased that the Government have committed to this second phase that will take us up to 2013.

I'm sure like most parents here, you always look at these type of findings in 2 lights – the personal and the professional. As well as considering the overall findings and their implications, I couldn't help but read through and consider and reflect on my own experience. Looking at our choice of childcare arrangements, the level of physical activity of our children, the impact of our parenting styles, our neighbourhood, and our children's diets. I'll not go into my own circumstances here, because that's not what I've been asked to talk about. But I think it does flag up another potential use of these findings – that it will hopefully provoke reflection and discussion amongst parents to think about their actions and how that impacts on their children.

So – what are the key things that jumped out to me from the 5 briefings that highlight some of the year 3 results? It highlights the complex nature of parenting and the many considerations that parents must balance to further the best interests of their children. The role of parenting is probably one of the most challenging roles that many of us will ever face – and far too many parents are taking on this role with minimal levels of support. But even from the 5 briefings that are being discussed today, we can see pressures on parents such as managing arrangements following relationship breakdown, balancing childcare needs with work, knowing what food to cook and considering what activities their children should be involved in.

But by far, the overarching message that I take from these findings is the impact of poverty on the experiences of children in their early years. I think the research shows that there is a complex interrelationship between low income and the issues – but to summarise it I think it tells us very clearly that the seemingly endless cycle of poverty is having a damaging effect on children right from the earliest point in their lives.

Each of the briefings points us to issues that demand our attention:

- children from more disadvantaged backgrounds are demonstrating lower ability scores at a very early age.
- the fragmented nature of childcare arrangements in Scotland will make it more difficult for unemployed parents to move into work as a route out of poverty.
- almost half of children living in a household where the father has left (and had previously had at least one parent in full time employment), now live in a household with *no* parent in employment
- those with no-one in the household in employment had higher conflict scores where there was a non-resident parent
- areas of higher deprivation suffer from a lack of childcare, health and leisure facilities
- more deprived areas were perceived to be significantly less child-friendly
- children in lowest income groups are much less likely to eat fruit and veg and more likely to eat sugary snacks and drinks
- a considerable socio-economic divide between highly active and inactive children.

The cumulative effect of these impacts is potentially overwhelming. What do we do? Is it just about money? is it about work? Is it about social capital? Is it about education? Is it about adequate support? Is it about poverty of aspiration? It probably is about tackling all of these – and a bit more – but rather than being overwhelmed by the task, I think the appropriate response is to focus our energies and our resources to provide support during pregnancy and the earliest stages of childhood. Because we also know what the longer term consequences of growing up in poverty are.

The impact of growing up in poverty is extreme – not just on your experience of growing up but also for your future life chances.

Poverty has an impact on your health. Children growing up in poverty are:

- twice as likely to die in childhood compare to children in the most affluent areas
- teenage girls are 3 times more likely to become pregnant and 10 times more likely to become teenage mothers
- 5 year olds in deprived areas are 4 times more likely to have severe tooth decay.

A girl born in poverty in Scotland today can expect to die 11 years earlier than a girl born in a better off family. A boy can expect to die 17 years earlier.

Its not just physical health that is affected – 30% of children growing up in poverty end up with some sort of emotional disorder compared to 5% from better off households.

If you go to school in a deprived area you are 4 times more likely to leave school without any qualifications. 30% of 16-19 year olds from deprived areas are leaving school and not in any form of education, employment or training. That compares to 11% for the whole of Scotland.

Does that seem fair? Is there not something we can do about that?

Today's findings prove that we know that the seeds of these future problems are being sown at an early stage of childhood, and needs to be tackled if we are to have any chance of breaking the long term cycle of poverty. The good news is that this has been recognised in the Scottish Government / COSLA Early Years Framework. My concern is that I'm still to be convinced that the resources required will be made available to make this work. We need to make sure these resources are targeted at those that need it most. And in the context of the Concordat, Single Outcome Agreements and removal of ring fencing – I'm not sure how this allocation will be made - our children deserve some guarantees that this will happen. In the times of increased pressure on

public spending that lie ahead – will we see the political will at Holyrood and in Council Chambers to make this happen? If we don't, then I am fairly confident in predicting that we will be seeing similar statistics in the years to come.

It makes it all the more important to ensure that our number one priority must be ending child poverty. Ten years ago today, Tony Blair made the historic promise to eradicate child poverty by 2020. Some progress has been made but we know that, at the moment, the government is going to miss their 2010 target of halving child poverty by a long way. That half way target could still be met if the Chancellor decides to invest at least £3billion in April's budget in additional money for the poorest families. Save the Children, as part of the End Child Poverty coalition, is doing everything we can to maintain the pressure on the Chancellor to keep the promise – and please add your voice to our campaign by visiting our website – because time is running out.

But the problems outlined in the findings referred to earlier are not just going to be solved by extra money in benefits and tax credits provided by the UK Government. Scottish Government and local authorities have a clear role to play here – particularly in the areas of childcare, early years, education and support for families.

Today's research findings are a timely reminder that if we want to see an end to child poverty in this country - we need to pick up the pace – because at the moment, progress is too slow and our children can't wait.