

CHILDRENS TRUST BOARD

13 SEPTEMBER 2012

Item 9: Home learning environment research project: preliminary report

Report of; Joint Director for Public Health

1 Summary/Purpose of Report

This paper and its appendix summarise the preliminary findings of a PCT-sponsored research project in Barnet into parental attitudes to the 'home learning environment' of pre-school children as a major factor in determining subsequent educational attainment and thus health status.

The purpose of this research is to identify ways in which Barnet Council and its partner organisations can better enable parents of pre-school children to be able to take the fullest advantage of their school education through improvements in their home learning environments.

The Children's Trust are asked to note the progress to date described in this report and to suggest ways of identifying more, suitable subjects for this project.

2 Details

2.1 There is good evidence that a child's ability to take advantage of their school education is highly dependent upon the learning environment that they are exposed to at home before they start pre-school or school activities. This includes, but is not limited to, parents reading to and with their children, stretching their experiences in the language they use with them, and providing them with educationally stimulating toys and activities. On average, even those children who have a high cognitive ability at a very young age, if they are part of a family living in poverty, are likely to have a relatively lower cognitive ability by the age of ten years. Conversely, even those children with a low cognitive ability at a young age, if they are part of a family living in less deprived circumstances, are likely to have a relatively high cognitive ability by the age of ten years. Importantly, there is good evidence that various interventions can ameliorate this disadvantage in cognitive ability for children living in poverty.

2.2 Using formal PCT research funding, the Barnet public health team has commissioned research by the Institute for Child Health, University College London, to explore the attitudes of Barnet parents towards their children and their development focusing particularly on those living in poverty. This research is at an early stage and the paper attached at Appendix 'A' provides a preliminary report based on the first nine interviews with families.

2.3 There is an issue in recruitment of families for this project and advice and support from the Children's Trust Board is sought. The researchers need, especially, to be able to contact families with young children living in the most deprived parts of the borough. There are Data Protection Act implications to

this. For example, whilst families in receipt of free school meals (as a proxy for poverty) could be identified from council sources, and these data matched with GP records to identify which families had children of pre-school age, such use of data would probably breach the Data Protection Act. To do this would probably require us to write to all school parents and GP practice patients and seek their consent to use the data held on them in this way. Almost certainly, the people we would most wish to interview would consciously or unconsciously exclude themselves and we would risk obtaining a biased sample. We therefore need to identify ways, within the Data Protection Act and within the bounds of the ethical approval obtained for this research, to identify more potential subjects on an individual basis and to seek their informed consent to participate.

2.4 The early findings of this research, based on a very small sample so far, seem to suggest that:

- regardless of background and education, parents generally want 'the best' for their children, although what this 'best' might be can differ (for example, attitudes to 'confidence', 'education' and 'happiness' are not all the same);
- most see a need to provide support at home to enable young children to develop although, again, how this is done differs, and beliefs differ in, for example, what the most appropriate balance is between more formal 'learning' and less formal 'playing' (noting that playing can have a strong educational aspect to it);
- some see a great importance of religious instruction in shaping their children's future attitudes and behaviours; and
- there are differences in parental opinions about what should be provided at home in terms of enabling learning, and different abilities in terms of time availability. (Research elsewhere has also shown that parental ability and confidence, for example in reading, can also play a key role in this).

2.5 A lack of parental knowledge of how to help their children achieve their full potential, and/or a lack of access to social resources can lead to isolation. Indeed, the most important early finding in this research – albeit limited to interviews with just nine families so far – indicates that it is social exclusion rather than poverty of itself that is a key feature in a child experiencing a sub-optimal home learning environment.

3 Decision sought:

Board members are asked to note progress to date and to identify ways of identifying more, suitable subjects for this research project

Contact for further information:

Dr Andrew Burnett: andrew.burnett@nclondon.nhs.uk; tel 07917 190 330