

Parents, Poverty and the State: Lessons from Sure Start

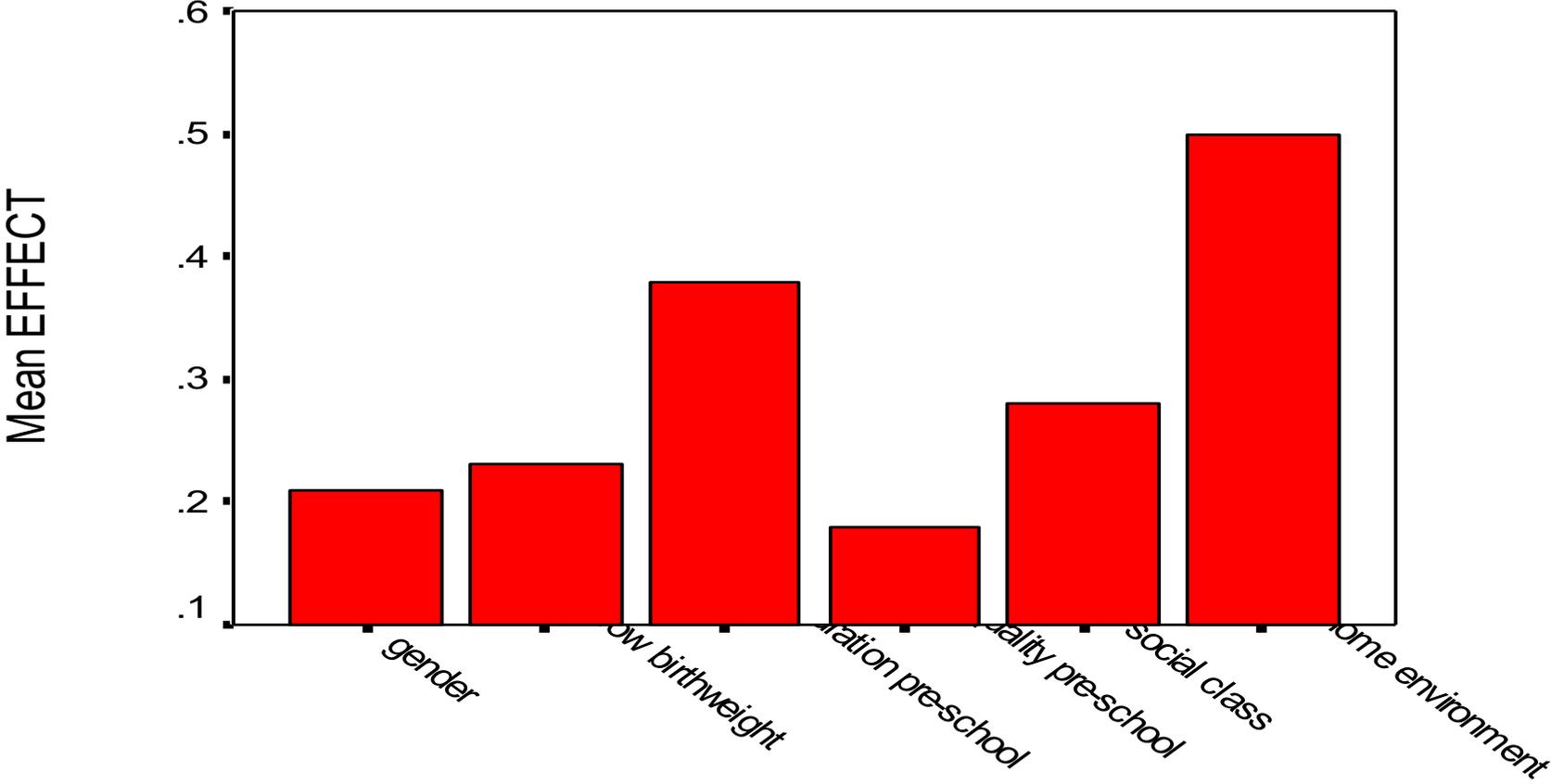
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Early years: What matters most?

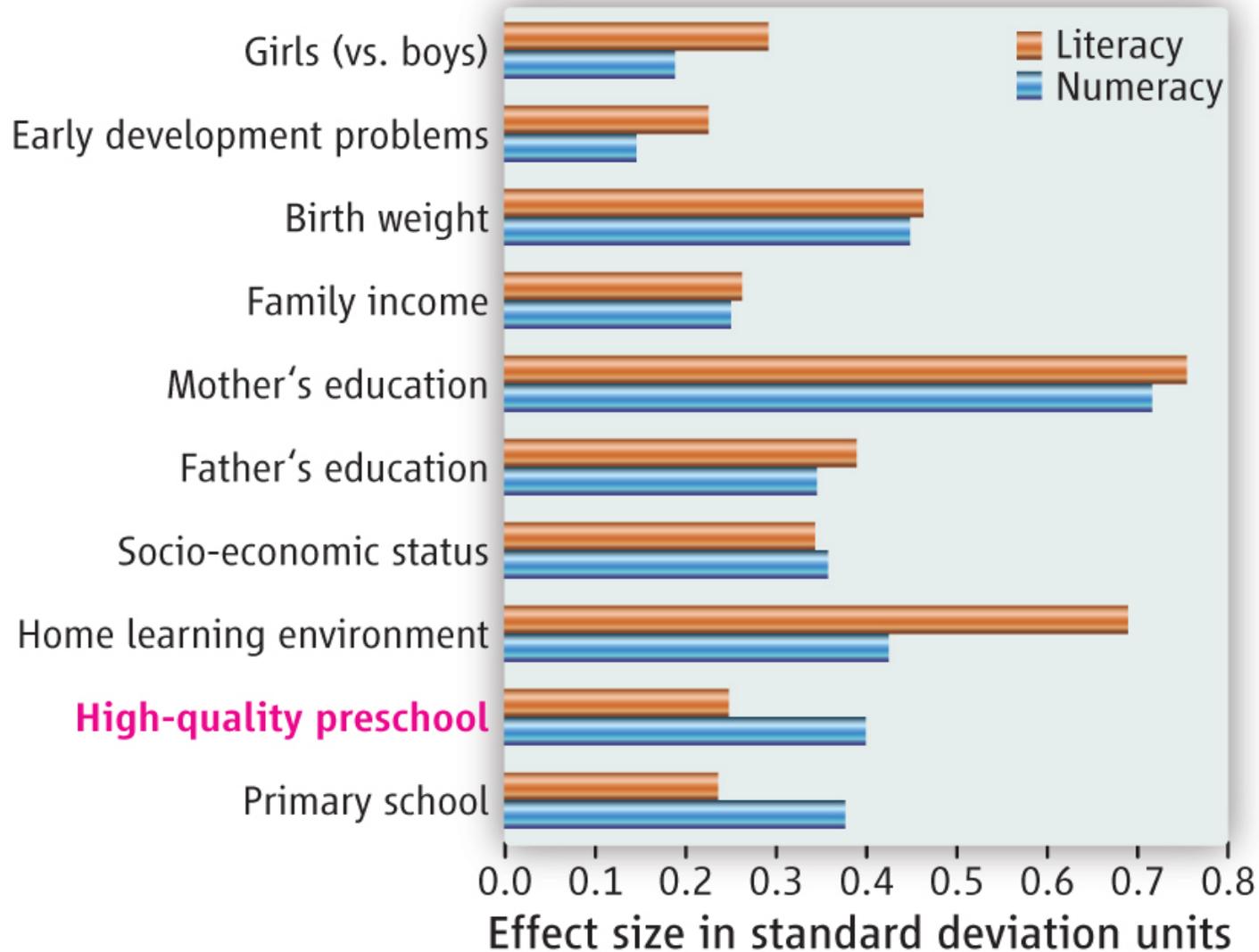
- **Learning from research:** Effective Provision of Preschool Education (EPPE) and Sound Foundations
- **Impact studies:** Sure Start and Evaluation of Children's Centres in England (ECCE)

EPPE: Home learning environment matters most

EFFECTS UPON LITERACY



Impact still evident at age 11



Sound Foundations tells us

- **Babies need:**
 - Constant human attention sensitive to needs (attunement)
 - Physical and emotional care
 - Interactive play
 - Especially in group care, attention to hygiene
- **Two year olds need:**
 - Stable relationships
 - Opportunities to play and interact with others
 - Predictable routines
 - Opportunities to be physically active

From birth, exposure to language, communication and conversation absolutely essential

In group settings three and four year olds need....

- A good balance of staff led and child led activities
- Open ended questions, sustained shared thinking
- Behaviour policies that encourage children to talk through areas of conflict
- Parental interest and involvement in centre activities
- Centres with strong leaders and long serving staff with a strong knowledge of child development

1997: New Labour, New ways of making policy

Modernizing Govt: No 10

- Evidence based
- Innovative
- User, not provider led
- Outcome not input measures
- inclusive

Comprehensive Spending Review Process: HMT

- 3 year budget settlement
- PSAs articulating dept targets to be reached
- Review of targets and funding every two years

*Governance through cross Dept Ministerial Group, and cross Dept Officials Group
Stakeholder Advisory Group, and Academic Advisory Group on evaluation*

Sure Start Local Programme (SSLP) in England

Started in 1997

- Targeted areas of deprivation
- Each area aimed to ensure all families have access to:
 - Outreach services and home visiting
 - Support for parents, including information, befriending and social support
 - Good quality play, learning, and childcare for children
 - Health advice
 - Support for children with special needs
 - Crucially important for all the above to be coordinated and integrated with current provision

Did Sure Start local programmes work?

Four impact studies

Impact evidence, 2005: Sub-group findings

Among non-teenage mothers (86% of total):

- greater child social competence in Sure Start areas
- fewer child behaviour problems in SSLP areas
- less negative parenting in SSLP areas

Effects on children appeared to be mediated by effects on mother:

- SSLP → less negative parenting
→ better child social functioning

Among teenage mothers (14% of total):

- less child social competence in SSLP areas
- more child behaviour problems in SSLP areas
- poorer child verbal ability in SSLP areas

Among lone parent families (40%):

- poorer child verbal ability in SSLP areas

Among workless households (33%):

- poorer child verbal ability in SSLP areas

A possible explanation: user satisfaction and reach

<p>Wants yes Needs yes</p> <p><i>Ideal users, grateful and compliant</i></p>	<p>Wants yes Needs no</p> <p><i>Benign neglect; probably providing good voluntary effort, good for child mix</i></p>
<p>Wants no Needs no</p> <p><i>Ignore, probably using other local services, children fine</i></p>	<p>Wants no Needs yes</p> <p><i>Requires real resource to engage, probably unpopular with other users</i></p>

Reasons for differing results

Amount of exposure

It took 3 years for a programme to be fully functional. Therefore

- in the first phase children / families were not exposed to fully functional programmes for much of the child's life
- in the second phase children / families are exposed to fully functional programmes for all child's life

Quality of services

- SSLPs have been reorganised as SS Children's Centres with clearer focus to services following lessons from earlier years, and the National Evaluation of Sure Start (NESS), 2005
- Early on staff had a lot to learn. As knowledge and experience have been acquired over 7 years, SSLPs have matured in functioning, hence it is likely that children / families are currently exposed to more effective services than in the early years of Sure Start.

Impact 2007, good news!

Improved child positive behaviour

Improved child independence and self regulation

Less harsh discipline from parents

Less home chaos, improved home learning environment

Parents making more use of local services

Higher rates of child immunisations

Fewer child accidents (last two could be timing)

Most important finding: no differences in subgroups

Despite this, there has been a steady closure of Sure Start Children's Centres in England since 2010...

Final two impact studies

Results 2010

Significant difference between SSLP area children and MCS children

- Mothers reporting greater life satisfaction
- Less chaotic homes
- Better home learning environments
- Children better physical health, less likely to be overweight
- Greater reduction in worklessness in Sure Start families

Results 2012

Significant difference between SSLP area children and MCS children

- Mothers engaged in less harsh discipline
- Better home learning environments
- Less chaotic home environment (boys only)
- Lone parents and workless parents better life satisfaction
- But....no differences in children's cognitive or social outcomes

Forthcoming research on health outcomes: reduction of hospitalizations, Accidents, and infections in SS children aged 5-11. (Catton et al, 2019)

What have we learned about Children's Centres: evidence from ECCE*

- The main driver of child, mother & family outcomes is family background: financial disadvantage, mother's educational qualifications, and the home learning environment
- Use of Children's centres(CCs) helps to **ameliorate** but does not **eliminate** influence of disadvantage.
- CCs help to improve outcomes for all, but especially important for poorer children
- Like Sure Start evaluation, challenges to the analysis included:
 - variations in the offer and families' uptake of services,
 - policy/contextual changes,
 - and the short term nature of the analysis of change

Sure Start - wider learning

- Was Sure Start evidence based? Yes on the needs of under fours, no on the structure of the programme
- Tensions between community led and evidenced based approaches
- Takes time to embed new institutions, to test, learn & adapt – but politics is impatient
- Implementation of integrated services and evidenced based programmes can be challenging
- Not just under 5 - core elements of effective family support that straddle phases of childhood
- Importance of policies to reduce pressures on families at the same time

The role Government can have in supporting parents and parenting:

Reduce pressures

- Rights and legal protection
- Financial support
- Support in kind

For example:

- Access to maternity and paternity leave
- Flexible working and flexible childcare
- Targeted benefits

Enhance capabilities

- Information and guidance
- Skills and training
- Intervention

For example

- Before and after birth, midwife and health visitor support
- Troubled Families programme
- Family Nurse Partnerships

Parents, Poverty and the State: what have we learned in the last 2 decades about family policy?

- Money matters: not only for provision of basics, but because lack of income increases family stress and instability
- Parents matter more than money
- Relationships matter: mother/child, father/child, mother/father
- Mother's educational background and mental health have impact on outcomes for better or worse
- Most difficult task for politicians: the balance between income transfers and service provision

Lessons for policy makers

Critical to be clear on aims of services:

- Is early years provision primarily for child development goals or workforce participation?
- Are services about the most complex families, or about families on the cusp (a few who need lots of help, many that need a little help)?
- What should be the mix of service offers: children's centres, childcare, parent support, early education, safeguarding? How to design what for whom and where?

Lessons for managers and practitioners

- Engagement and parent satisfaction needs to be matched with quality of activity
- Data systems essential to know:
 - Who is **not** coming
 - Are those who **are** coming engaged in activities that will make a difference
- Cross agency working requires *systems leadership* at local level
- It is hard because it is hard. Biggest failure in Sure Start was not to recognise training needs for managers and in England this is still an issue for Children's Centre leadership.

The wider political agenda

- Government always trying to do more with less
- Public not trustful of Government to spend tax payers money wisely, so reluctant to fund public services through higher taxes
- Last twenty years has seen increase in inequality with the incomes of the top 10% growing much faster than the incomes of the bottom 10%
- Impact on children and social mobility: economic status of parents at birth more of a determinant of lifetime outcomes than 30 years ago
- Education part of the solution, but cannot solve social inequality on its own.

References

- Early Childhood Matters: Evidence from the Effective Pre-school and Primary Education Project (Sylva et al, 2010)
- Providing a Sure Start: How Government discovered early childhood (Eisenstadt, 2011)
- Evaluation of Children's Centres in England (Sammons et al, 2015)
- Sound Foundations (Mathers et al, 2013)
- Parents, Poverty and the State (Eisenstadt and Oppenheim, 2019)