



Introduction

In March 2010 the 3500th Sure Start Children's Centre opened its doors in Hitherfield School, Streatham, South London. This event marked an important point in the growth and success of the Sure Start initiative because the opening fulfilled the Labour Government's goal of a Children's Centre in every community across England.

The Sure Start Children's Centre initiative is considered by Government to be a key method in tackling the debilitating consequences of socio-economic disadvantage which is locking so many families in the United Kingdom (UK) into inter-generational cycles of poverty, deprivation and hopelessness.

In the 1970s and 1980s there were a few isolated attempts at developing integrated provision but it was not until 1998 that this ambitious early years programme was launched. The Sure Start programme aims to tackle the social exclusion and poor life chances of the most vulnerable and disadvantaged families in the UK. The purpose is not to provide instant results but to provide a long-term method of dealing with the root causes of disadvantage.

Since its launch the initiative has not run entirely smoothly. Early evaluation of Sure Start found that the local programmes were not particularly effective. This resulted in critics challenging the validity and methodology of Sure Start.

However, supporters of Sure Start have argued that the programme needs time to develop and that the benefits can only be seen after a prolonged period and certainly, more recently, evaluations show a modest but more positive result.

This publication is not a guide on how to work in a Children's Centre but a historical reflection on the Sure Start programme and an evidence-based rationale for early intervention. It provides valuable insights into why the Sure Start programme is such an important conduit for engaging and supporting families within our communities. This makes it essential reading for staff working in a Children's Centre or learners researching the effects of early intervention on disadvantaged families. The publication explores the damaging effects of socio-economic disadvantage and discrimination on children and families, follows the early development of the Sure Start initiative and provides evidence to support early intervention.

In places the book makes for stark reading especially when it reveals the nature and extent of the disadvantage and discrimination that many families face. The evidence provided shows that early intervention can improve the lives of families if consistent, high quality early support is offered by staff with a thorough understanding of the complex issues facing many families.

In May 2010 the newly formed coalition Government launched its manifesto during the worst economic crisis since the recession in the 1930s.¹

The new Government has an enormous task ahead, not only to address the economic issues which have pushed the UK into recession but also to tackle the spiralling socio-economic decline affecting some of our most vulnerable and disadvantaged communities.

The new Cabinet Office produced a 'State of the Nation' report which acknowledged the severity of the poverty and inequality which has become so deeply entrenched in the lives of many children and families in the UK.

The report stated that:

- Social mobility within the UK was worse than in most other European countries.
- People living in the most deprived neighbourhoods were more likely to die earlier (on average 7 years earlier than those living in the most affluent areas).
- The gap between educational attainment achieved by children from poor backgrounds and those from affluent backgrounds remains high.²