

the good childhood®

a national inquiry

evidence summary three
– learning



The
Children's
Society

the good childhood inquiry:

what you told us about learning

Foreword

Childhood is a period of constant change with intense periods of physical, emotional and intellectual growth. At no other time in our lives do we absorb and learn so much.

So how do we best support children through this learning process? How do we best equip children for life? Children learn through school, play and interaction with friends and family. How do we ensure that children thrive in all these environments? What sort of 'learning' do we want for our children?

Schooling is clearly an important element of formal learning. But if education policy is decided in a culture in which paid work is the desired outcome, are children being pressurised to meet the needs of a commercial service economy? Or are we simply behaving responsibly by protecting children against the ravages of future unemployment?

There are mixed views about Britain's exam-orientated education system. On a macro level it prepares children for the external world and aims to tackle social inequality by raising overall standards. Yet there are concerns that social and emotional competencies – which help us apply our learning – are being neglected.

Previous evidence to The Good Childhood Inquiry has highlighted the importance of some of these competencies. For example, through play we learn how to share and develop into interactive and social beings. Friendships provide fun and learning as well as a support mechanism to cope with change, for example, when children change schools or as protection against bullying.

Our evidence also shows that many children are ambitious. They want to succeed and dislike being held back by disruptive pupils. Children want their classes to be structured and clear. They want their teachers to be interesting and fun. Most of all, they want to learn. Teachers, echoing the frustrations that some children feel, complain that too much of their time is spent on dealing with problem behaviour, leaving insufficient time for teaching. As one teacher put it, 'we are not meant to be parent substitutes'.

Additionally, teachers are expressing concern that language and speech standards in young children starting nursery and primary school are falling. This suggests we need to look beyond schooling to the home environment and social conditions, two of the most important influences on children. For example, at the age of two, a child's cognitive development is a good predictor of future attainment, and by the age of six, children from disadvantaged homes are overtaken by children in better-off families.

This tells us that social mobility cannot simply be delivered by a fair and equitable education system. Learning needs to address poverty and parenting as well as academic achievement. We owe it to our children to provide them with the best possible learning experience.

Bob Reitemeier

Chief Executive, The Children's Society



“Social mobility cannot simply be delivered by a fair and equitable system. Learning needs to address poverty and parenting as well as academic achievement.”

Summary

There are different views on the most important types of learning, the best ways to nurture learning, and the environments in which it thrives. Learning involves the acquisition of knowledge and skills as well as the comprehension of ideas. At its best, learning can also be transformational. The very act of learning can alter the learner and the environment.

From an early age play helps children to learn about themselves and the world around them, and builds their confidence and resilience. Children learn from a variety of experiences in the family, in school and the community.

Levels of attainment have been rising steadily over the last 20 years, and more and more pupils stay on past 16. Yet a 'long tail' of low attainment persists. From an early age pupils from poorer backgrounds, some ethnic groups and boys consistently under-perform in comparison with their peers.

In recent years, there has been much debate about assessment in schools and in particular the formal testing of 7, 11 and 14 year olds. Proponents claim that national tests and league tables indicate standards to be aimed for and are a means to raise achievement. Critics argue that they lead teachers to focus their efforts on certain groups of students and 'teaching to the test'.

We want schools to teach children to be literate, numerate and to think critically but also to focus on the 'education of the whole child'. This implies an increasing focus on social and emotional learning. The challenge is to encourage social and emotional aspects of learning within the curriculum without jeopardising recent gains in academic attainment.

Research shows that the student-teacher relationship is at the heart of learning. Effective teachers set clear and challenging goals, achieve a balance between 'surface' and deep learning, and provide ongoing feedback. But they also create a caring environment. Schools matter too. In thriving schools, students from every background do well. These schools are characterised by strong leadership and teaching, a strong focus on learning, a positive school culture, and high expectations for all.

Kathy Sylva

Panel leader for *Learning* theme, *The Good Childhood Inquiry*.
Professor of Educational Psychology, Department of Education,
University of Oxford.

Submission sources

The views and experiences in this document have been submitted independently and do not reflect those of The Children's Society.

We received contributions relating to learning from individual MPs, peers, academics, local authority and health professionals, teachers, playworkers, police officers and many others, which we refer to anonymously. The organisations we received submissions from are listed on the last page of this document.



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Children's views on learning

We received evidence from a number of different sources:

- 68 children answered questions about learning via *The Good Childhood Inquiry's* 'my life' website
- More than 1,081 comments and 1,688 votes were submitted by BBC *Newsround* viewers in response to the same questions
- 742 children responded to the inquiry's call for evidence
- 8,000 young people took part in The Children's Society's national survey in 2005

Making friends

Many children said that the reason that they liked school was that it was an opportunity to be with their friends.

*"I find school fun because I see my mates every day."
(nine year-old girl)*

Good teachers

Children admired teachers who were passionate about their subjects and those who could make lessons interesting and fun and who were supportive and kind.

*"I like my school because it has some really cool teachers who make the lessons interesting and really make you want to work hard."
(13 year-old boy)*

A number of children felt that teachers could interact with their pupils better and be more understanding and respectful. Some also felt that lessons could be more challenging.

*"I would like to do harder work."
(seven year-old girl)*

A better school environment

Many of their responses referred to the value of a good school environment. The buildings, facilities and state of repair were discussed, with comments about the need for safer, more pleasant toilets, bigger classrooms, more attractive corridors and buildings and better computer equipment.

Bullying

A supportive, respectful and friendly environment with a positive approach to tackling bullying was also considered important.

However, a number of children expressed concern about disruptive behaviour in class distracting others from learning, which they criticised teachers for ignoring or failing to address.

*"At my school we have a big problem with behaviour. The teachers can't control the pupils... I don't learn as much as I used to because I get distracted."
(13 year-old girl)*



75% of the children we polled believe that other people messing about in lessons makes it difficult to learn. (*The Good Childhood Inquiry* 'my life' website and BBC *Newsround* website).

They cited bullying by other classmates as a reason for not feeling safe at school, and a few singled out the aggressive behaviour of older children.

*"I wish they [teachers] would deal with bullying better and not say 'stop telling tales'."
(seven year-old girl)*

Having fun

Many children talked about the importance of having fun at school, both in lessons and during playtime.

*"The best things about my school are that we get to do fun musicals every year and we have interactive whiteboards to use the Internet and make learning fun!"
(11 year-old girl)*

However, a number of children wished that they had more time and space to play. Some suggested that the school day should start later or be shorter, with longer break times and holidays.

*"I would change the hours at school because we spend most of our time at school and hardly see our parents."
(10 year-old girl)*

Use of technology to learn

Most children used the Internet for their schoolwork. In our online poll, 55% of children estimated that they spent more than an hour on the Internet every day for schoolwork, and over one in five (22%) reported that they used the Internet for more than two hours a day. (*The Good Childhood Inquiry* 'my life' website and BBC *Newsround* website).

Less pressure

Many children disliked the pressure that schoolwork and teachers place on them.

Some children suggested that teachers had unrealistically high expectations of them, which made them feel as if they are 'never quite good enough'. Some children believed that the stress of tests and exams had been the cause of self-harming and breakdowns.

“I hate the pressure at school so much. I no 6 people that self harm because of all the pressure at school.” (14 year-old girl)

Almost half of the children we polled (49%) agreed with the statement ‘I feel under a lot of pressure at school.’ (*The Good Childhood Inquiry* ‘my life’ website).

In our national survey of 8,000 young people aged between 14 to 16 years, 58% said that they worried about exams and 47% often worried about their schoolwork.

Have more say

When asked whether they have a say in the running of their school, children were divided with 40% agreeing and 44% disagreeing (*The Good Childhood Inquiry* ‘my life’ website). Those that agreed cited informal methods such as giving an opinion as well as formal channels such as a school council.

However, some children felt that teachers rarely listened or acted on their suggestions.

“A lot of our teachers think the comments we make about the school are not important. They think they know how we like the school run. But if they maybe took a minute to think about the comments we make they would make school life for a lot of children much happier and more enjoyable.” (14 year-old girl)

A number of children liked being able to contribute to their learning by expressing their views and choosing subjects they enjoy.

“I think we should have more say in what lessons we do. For example, I really hate German, but have had to do it for three years.” (11 year-old girl)

Preparation for life

Many respondents believed that their school is helping to prepare them for life, although they had different views as to what ‘preparation for life’ means. Some took it to mean being furnished with academic skills and knowledge, others talked about preparation for employment, gaining practical and social skills and being prepared for a harsh world.

“School does prepare you for certain parts of life, like how unfair things can be, and as a child you don’t have much power over what happens in the world around you.” (15 year-old boy)

Other respondents felt that the focus at school is too academic and has limited practical applications outside school, with insufficient personal and social development.

“I hate the pressure at school so much. I no 6 people that self harm because of all the pressure at school.” (14 year-old girl)

Adult and professional views on family

These views were expressed in submissions from 1,184 adults and 442 professionals to *The Good Childhood Inquiry*.

The role of parents, family and the home environment

Many submissions referred to the importance of the parental role in facilitating education through talking, reading and playing with their children, particularly in their early years.

“[Parents are the] primary educators of their children, helping them to walk, talk, dress and wash, and teaching them from a very early age the difference between right and wrong.”

In later years, assisting children with homework and providing an intellectually stimulating environment were also considered important.

Several submissions would like to see an increase in support to families that lack resources or the confidence to assist their children’s learning, particularly existing schemes that seem to have a positive effect on learning outcomes.

The importance of play

A number of references were made to the value of opportunities to play in structured and unstructured ways, indoors and outdoors, and to experience risk.

“Children should be given longer to play and to learn in their own way before participating in formal learning where targets and measured achievement limit and confine the learning process.”

It was also pointed out that play should be valued in and of itself.

“Regardless of the long term benefits identified by child development experts, play has an intrinsic value for the experience of childhood.”

Some expressed concern about a reduction in opportunities to play outside due to fears that children would be at risk and there were calls for more child-friendly communities and spaces.

There was also consensus that children did not have sufficient opportunities to experience and learn to manage risk and hence learn to judge their own limits and abilities.

“Collapsing childhood into child protection, or risk aversion, leads to bad childhoods. We need exposure to risk, bacteria, dangerous games, dangerous peers, dodgy adults etc and support in negotiating these, to be happy and healthy.”

The importance of facilitating speech and language development

Speech and language development was emphasised as the foundation for all learning. A number of submissions raised concerns about an apparent increase in children with poor speech and language skills.

“Over the past ten or so years, early years teachers have been reporting that a significant proportion of children enter school with very poor speaking skills. Children don’t get the chances they used to, to practise talking at home. Equally concerning is the fact that the school curriculum doesn’t allow for much sustained talk either.”

Educational provision during early years

There was a consensus of opinion that the quality of learning in the early years is vital for a good childhood. It was thought that there should be a greater emphasis on childcare provision with one submission suggesting that the early years workforce should be paid as well as teachers. Other submissions called for a later start to primary school with most agreeing that formal education should not begin before the age of six and that children should be allowed to develop at their own pace.

“Educational targets and assessments at early stages in a child’s life ‘cabin crib and confine’ exploration and enterprise. Formal education before the age of seven can also be seen as an inhibiting factor in the true childhood business of exploration and creativity.”

A balanced curriculum

Many submissions called for a more balanced curriculum that includes social and emotional as well as academic learning.

“Learning must be about more than simply teaching a child to read and write. It must also include teaching about morality and values.”

One submission called for a fundamental review of the National Curriculum.

“To ensure that every child achieves their full potential and to make primary education an enriching and enjoyable experience for all, regardless of their ability or background.”

Some felt that schools should assist young people to develop life skills that will help them to understand themselves and others. These would include learning how to problem-solve, negotiate and manage challenges, explore and manage their feelings, communicate clearly and navigate a positive path through an increasingly global and competitive world.

Many submissions called for social and emotional learning, and in particular personal, social and health education (PSHE) to form a compulsory part of the school curriculum. One submission called for ‘a whole shift in our culture with much greater emphasis on the importance of empathy and emotions rather than achievement targets’. Others advocated for Citizenship classes to be accorded a higher priority by schools.

The role of teachers

A number of submissions discussed the role of teachers, with many highlighting their role in inspiring pupils to learn, creating positive learning environments, establishing discipline, setting boundaries and managing behaviour. Many of them argued that teachers should be allowed ‘more flexibility to decide how they teach and what they teach to inspire both themselves and the children’. However, others saw a need to monitor teaching quality.

Submissions pointed to the importance of teachers praising and encouraging all children, creating a positive and aspirational learning environment and having high but reasonable expectations of children, including disabled children. Discipline should be encouraged and enforced and ‘teachers should act like adults not like ‘mates’ to children.’

School and classroom size

Some submissions argued that schools were too large, with one submission identifying nearly 10% of secondary schools as having populations of over 1,500. They argued that size matters and that ‘young people thrive in small scale learning environments where positive personal relationships can develop in the context of a supportive community and where they can have their learning needs met on an individual basis’.

Peer networks and social interactions in schools

Several respondents emphasised the value of fostering peer relationships in schools, as well as developing strategies to prevent bullying. Disabled children, in particular, were thought to benefit from peer interactions.

“A good childhood is one where equal importance is given to social interaction with peers and formal education.”

School choice and admissions policies

Some submissions discussed the impact of the ‘choice agenda’ on the intake of schools and drew attention to the unfair, unequal and socially divisive nature of selection in schooling. A diverse peer group was considered to contribute to a better learning environment.

“Segregation in schools fundamentally undermines the chances of pupils and teachers from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds growing up together and developing skills to deal with diversity, both of which are crucial to the creation of an integrated society.”

“Learning must be about more than simply teaching a child to read and write. It must also include teaching about morality and values.”

Tests, exams and league tables

Many adults and professionals were concerned about increasing pressures being placed on students of all ages due to testing and exams. These concerns often sat alongside wider questions about the purpose of education and the value of a system focused on targets.

“The constant drive through examinations from the age of 14 to age of 18 is creating too much stress. Should there be a re-structure to allow for education to be about life preparation not just educational achievement that meets government and local school targets?”

Some submissions offered clear prescriptions, such as halting the testing of children under the age of 15. Another submission asserted that league tables generate a culture of competition and a language of failure that impacts on how children and their parents perceive education and learning.

The particular needs of some groups of children

Several submissions called for funding regimes to reward ‘those [schools] that take on children with the greatest need rather than those that teach or care for the easiest children.’ Some felt that the present system was not meeting the needs of a range of groups of children including ethnic groups, asylum-seeking children, looked-after children, disabled children, children with mental health issues, lesbian and gay pupils and children from lower social-economic groups.

The importance of listening to children’s views and experiences

The right of children to participate in decisions that affect them was highlighted by a number of respondents.

“Adults need to understand that children can form and express their views in coherent and highly perceptive ways. Their inclusion should not be seen as ‘cute’: something the media often presents... We must continue to promote participation as a right and not as a gift.”



Submission sources

Action for Prisoners’ Families	Kids
Active Training and Education	Learning Space
Alone in London	Leckhampton After School Club
Anorexia and Bulimia Care	Manny Lewis, former chair, Early Education
Association of Catholic Women	Media March
Association of Child Psychotherapists	MENCAP
Association of School and College Leaders	Mental Health Foundation
Association of Young People with ME	Moorthorpe Children’s Centre
Baptist Union of Great Britain	National Association of Head Teachers
Barnardo’s	National Children’s Bureau
Blue Balloon Foundation	National Heart Forum
British Association of Social Workers	National Literacy Trust
British Institute for Brain Injured Children	National Pyramid Trust
Care Co-ordination Network UK	National Youth Agency
Centre for Crime and Justice Studies at King’s College London	Norland College
CfBT Education Trust	National Union of Teachers
Charlie Waller Memorial Trust	Nurture Group Network
Childhood Bereavement Network	Play England
Childhood First	Polka Theatre
Children’s Links	Pre-school Learning Alliance
Children’s Trust, Tadworth	Refuge
Churches’ Network for Non-violence	Relationships Foundation
Commission for Racial Equality	Royal College of Midwives
Comprehensive Future	Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health
Daycare Trust	Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents
Early Childhood Forum	Save Kids TV
Family Education Trust	Save the Children
Family Links	Schools OUT
Federation of Children’s Book Groups	Scout Association
Food Standards Agency	Sex Education Forum
Fostering Network	Shelter
Girlguiding UK	Skills Active
Hertfordshire Children’s Trust Partnership	St John’s Wood Adventure Playground
Home-Start UK	Stonewall
Housing Justice	Sure Start, Rosehill
Human Scale Education	Sustainable Development Commission
I CAN	The Salvation Army
International Council for Self-Esteem	Turtle Key Arts Trust
	Winston’s Wish
	YWCA

The Good Childhood Inquiry

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- The Right Revd Tim Stevens, Bishop of Leicester and Chair of the Board of Trustees, The Children's Society
- Professor Kathy Sylva, Professor of Educational Psychology, Department of Education, University of Oxford

How to contact us

For further information about *The Good Childhood Inquiry*, please visit www.goodchildhood.org.uk or call our Supporter Action Team on 0845 300 1128.

We will continue to gather the thoughts and views of children and young people until early 2008. They can tell us what they think by visiting www.mylife.uk.com

For further information about the work of The Children's Society, please visit www.childrenssociety.org.uk

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