



— Talking Points —

Framing Early Child Development in the United Kingdom

The following talking points can be used flexibly—as a source of themes for longer written pieces, as short responses in media interviews or public appearances, or as set-ups to “pre-frame” a conversation on specific policy or programme proposals. Each pulls from rigorously tested messages that have been shown to shift thinking away from common but unproductive ways of thinking about child development, early learning, and child abuse and neglect, and to build the public’s support for evidence-based programmes and policies designed to improve child and social outcomes. They need not be used word for word, but when adapting, communicators should take care to maintain the core frame elements in each.



We have a social responsibility to make sure all children in the UK are given the opportunity to thrive, and that means making a collective investment in all of our children’s development. We need to honour our obligation as a society to provide children and their families with access to programmes and services that help all children to be healthy, to get a good education, and to develop well. Devoting resources to young children and the programmes that support them, such as our initiative [insert name of initiative or programme here], is an important contribution to the future wellbeing of all of our communities.



It’s important to make sure children have the support they need to build strong, healthy brains. One way to think about brain development is to imagine it as an ongoing construction project. The brain’s basic architecture is built in a process that begins before birth and continues into adulthood, step by step, just as the foundation of a new house is laid before the frame is erected, walls added, and so on. Sturdy houses are built from the ground up—in the same way, laying a strong foundation in children’s early years increases the probability of positive outcomes. A weak foundation increases the odds of later difficulties. Our programme (insert name or description of programme here) helps to lay that strong foundation by . . . [insert explanation].



We know how to create programmes that support children’s healthy brain development. One vital ingredient in brain development is the “serve and return” interactions that children have with their parents, other caregivers, and community members. young children naturally seek interaction with adults through babbling and facial expressions—think of it like the serve and return in a good game of tennis. If adults do not respond by returning these kinds of noises and gestures, the serve and return breaks down and the child’s developmental process is interrupted, which has implications for later learning and health. The Better Start initiative is committed to providing high-quality programmes and community resources that reflect this understanding.



Children’s mental health is similar to the levelness of a table. Just as levelness allows a table to function properly, the mental health of children enables them to function in many different areas. When children’s brains develop without the support of healthy relationships and access to good health care and nutrition—or if they are exposed to abuse, neglect, or violence—their development wobbles, just like a table on an uneven floor, and that can lead to poor development outcomes. But tables can’t level themselves. In the same way, children need help and support to establish stable mental health. That’s why it’s necessary that even very young children have access to programmes and resources that can identify potential problems early on and provide appropriate interventions.



Chronic stressful conditions in a child’s life such as extreme poverty, neglect, or community violence—what scientists now call toxic stress— affects the way that the brain and body develop and can lead to lifelong problems in learning, behaviour, and both physical and mental health. Children who experience toxic stress when they are very young develop an exaggerated stress response that, over time, weakens their mental and physical defense systems. That makes them more vulnerable to illnesses and diseases like high blood pressure, diabetes, and depression. We need to reduce children’s exposure to toxic stress wherever we can. We also need to support the services and programmes that can buffer the effects of toxic stress in children in these circumstances and help them to make the stress more manageable.



Just like a scale that can be weighted to one side or the other, children’s development can tip towards either positive or negative outcomes, depending on their circumstances, environment, and experiences. While positive factors like supportive relationships and strong learning opportunities stack up on one side of their development scale, negative factors like abuse, neglect, or community violence and lack of resources can pile up on the other, weighting the scale in the wrong direction. Our goal as a society is to tip the development scale positively for as many of the UK’s children as possible, by “stacking the scale” on the positive side. We can do this, for instance, by making sure all children have access to early child care options that

promote early learning and the development of social and cognitive skills that kids need to be resilient in the face of challenges they encounter as they grow.



Think of how a rope is made, by weaving strands that, taken together, increase the strength and usefulness of each strand. Learning is a lot like that: it's about the brain weaving skills together. Successful learning and development result in a strong set of strands—social, emotional, and cognitive skills—that can be combined to form skill ropes. These skill ropes can stretch and flex to help us perform the full range of tasks and activities that our lives demand. Children need to develop strong individual strands, and they do that through opportunities to practice stretching, weaving, and reweaving these strands in challenging situations with support from adults. Our child care centres, schools, and community programmes should provide all of our children with the kinds of learning opportunities that will help their brains develop these strong skill ropes.