

2.7 Chapter summary and key priorities for action

The challenges facing children in their early years in Walsall are substantial: they have a 'poor start in life' with high infant mortality rates and poor educational attainment at ages 3-5, together with high levels of obesity.

Parents, supported by all services, are the key to achieving the best physical and mental health and wellbeing outcomes for their children; therefore parenting support is essential to improve early years outcomes. Research has identified that it is both the nature and the accumulation of risk factors that threaten children's mental and physical wellbeing and long term outcomes. This risk is countered by the accumulation of resilience factors promoting positive outcomes. In turn it is the balance of risk and resilience that determines outcomes. Hence interventions that target the development of multiple opportunities, resources and strengths in children, families and communities show the best outcomes.

Improving child safety and safeguarding includes tackling a wide range of issues, including abuse and neglect, accidental injury and death, bullying, crime and antisocial behaviour and ensuring a safe home environment. A substantial minority of children experience risk each year in Walsall and it is important that Safeguarding is treated as a high priority to ensure children are identified and appropriately protected.

Supporting parents by providing parenting programmes has a good evidence base and we need to further invest in enhancing more parents' skills in caring and motivating their children to ensure better life outcomes.

Investing in the early years, thereby improving early cognitive and non-cognitive development and children's readiness for school is vital for later educational outcomes. High quality preschool experience has proven positive effects on children's social, emotional and cognitive development that impact on their whole adult life.

Priorities for action:

- *Prioritise across the borough 'a good start in life' in recognition of the lifelong cost benefits for health and wellbeing*
- *Reduce infant mortality through holistic support for families from before birth, with a priority for maternal health interventions. This should include home visiting support for disadvantaged young parents and a focus on reducing levels of smoking in pregnancy and increasing rates of breastfeeding, particularly in deprived areas*
- *Promote and support parenting skills and build on recent improvements in the provision of evidence-based parenting programmes, advice and assistance*
- *Provide specialist Parenting Practitioners to deliver evidence based parenting programmes to complex & vulnerable families open to specialist services.*
- *Strengthen referral pathways from children's social care services.*
- *Provide good quality early years education and childcare proportionately across the social gradient*

- *Support schools and parents to improve children's attendance from early years onwards*
- *Ensure there is a focus on early years and that expenditure on early years development is focussed progressively across the social gradient*
- *Enhance safeguarding by:*
 - *Parenting support programmes for young parents to reduce neglect*
 - *Support for Domestic Violence Treatment and Prevention Projects*
 - *Targeted prevention work through the Think Family Team*