



The Best Start In Life

A consultation by the Children's Parliament

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Introduction

In 2010 the Scottish Government announced that Professor Susan Deacon was to undertake work about the importance of the early years of children's lives. The Children's Parliament was invited to organise an event in Edinburgh at which children could have their say.

The Children's Parliament brought together a group of 9 and 10 year olds from 6 primary schools in Fife to take part in activities and discussion about children's needs and rights in the early years. As well as these children we also involved a number of our MCPs (members of the Children's Parliament) from one of our Fife based CP groups. These older children (aged 14) brought their own views and supported younger children's participation.

In the afternoon the children met with Professor Susan Deacon and other senior personnel from Scottish Government, NHS and Local Authorities to share their work and key messages.

This report and a short DVD accessible via the Children's Parliament website captures the views of the children.



What the children did

The children worked in small groups and discussed various questions. They used big props which helped them think about the life journey of two imaginary children: Jack and Chloe. Through this they considered:

What do children need in the early years?

What gets in the way of children having their needs met?

Considering this: what do adults need to do now for children in Scotland?



The children then worked on their own to identify the **most important thing children need in the early years**, and the **responsibilities adults have toward meeting children's needs**. They did this by creating small boxes, with messages inside and by decorating the outside with views on adult responsibilities.



What do children need in the early years?

The children said that:

When they are pregnant Mums need to be careful and feel safe. They need to have confidence and look forward to having their baby. First time Mums need help and support. Midwives are really important. Mums need to have a family around them. They shouldn't drink alcohol or smoke or take drugs.

Babies need special care and a safe home. They need people to play with them. To be healthy and have strong bones and teeth they might need visits from people like health visitors. They need to be warm and fed and have their nappies changed. They need their Mum and Dad and their grandparents.

Toddlers need to be helped with learning how to talk and walk. They need watched 24/7. They still need healthy food. They learn to play and need to meet and know their family and start to make friends. They might need day care. They need to learn the difference between right and wrong.

By the age of 5 children need their own hobbies and interests, toys and friends. They need a good school. They need lots of attention from their family. They need respect. They need to eat breakfast, dinner and supper.

By the age of 8 children need to try new foods, they need exercise and to be healthy. They need to be with their family and they should be able to choose what they like and what they look like. They need friends, fun and freedom. They need brothers and sisters that are nice to them. They like to have games and technology.

The **overwhelming emphasis** of the children was that from pregnancy through to 8 years old children need:

- **Love and care**
- **Safety and protection**
- **To have hopes and dreams**

“Children need protection, an open mind, love and understanding, trust and respect, peace, and a chance for hopes, dreams and goals.”

“Children need self-belief, love and care, a role model to guide them, trust, to know they are special, and protection and security.”

“Children need education, safety, love, health, life, clothing and support. Some children are poor and vulnerable so they need people to take extra special care of them.”



What gets in the way of children having their needs met?

The children said that these issues can affect a child in their early years:

Throughout their early years having a Mum or Dad that has problems with **drugs or alcohol** will affect your life.

If your family is **poor** it might mean you can't get the things you need to be healthy, happy or safe. It can be difficult for a family if there is only a Mum or a Dad to afford things for their children.

If your family is **homeless** this is a real problem. If your family **move house** and you have to **change school** this can be a problem too.

The problem of **Mum and Dad splitting up**, getting divorced, or losing contact with your parent because your parents split up is a key concern for children. When families spilt up children often lose touch with their Dad.

By **5 to 8 years old** if a child is not doing well in school this will affect their life. Sometimes teachers can treat you badly.

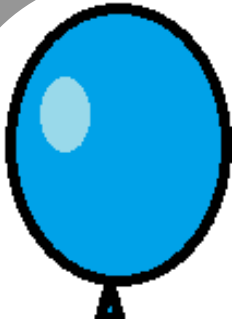
By **8 years old** children identified more dangers that can affect the child. This includes danger from strangers and bullying. If you are not listened to or you have no-one to talk to you might not get what you need in your life. Children can get lonely or depressed too.



What should adults do for children in Scotland *now*? What are their responsibilities?

The children explored what different adults, in different roles, can do now. They considered parents, grandparents, neighbours, teachers, social workers, Police officers, medical professionals. This is a summary of their key messages for each group in relation to a number of themes.





1. Adults should keep children safe and healthy

“Adults need to ensure they can take care of themselves before they can take care of another living thing.”

Mums and Dads should:
“Take you to the doctor when you are ill and make sure you have a safe home and good protection.”



Neighbours should: “Look out for children playing in the street.”

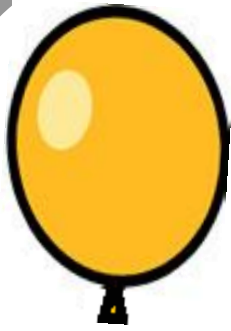
Police should: “Arrest people when they try to hurt you badly.”

Doctors should: “Help children if they are hurt.”

Social workers should: “Help you if your parents are not being nice to you.”

Grandparents should: “Love you, care for you, feed you and give you a home if your parents are gone.”

“If you fall over, a teacher should make sure you’re not hurt.”



2. Adults should help children learn and grow

“Teachers can teach right from wrong, so can all adults.”

Dads should: “Teach you things, like maths and talk to you and help you if you are upset.”

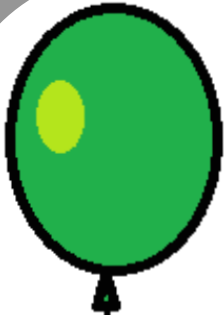
Grandparents should: “Teach you new skills and teach you how to respect others.”

Adults should: “Teach children to appreciate the basic things they have (home, food, education) that others don’t.”

“Adults need to listen to what children have to say, help children learn and grow up, and help children understand things.”

“A teacher should make sure you understand what she is teaching.”





3. Adults should be positive about and respectful of children

“Teachers should not shout at you or get angry at you if you get something wrong.”

Neighbours should: “Co-operate with others and be nice to children.”

‘Let your child have a say. Take care of each other.’



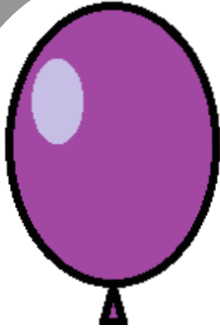
Adults: “Must always explain things before they start and keep an open mind.”

“Adults need to be honest when speaking to young children.”

Dads should: “Take children to the places they like and not walk out on the family.”

“Don’t spoil them but don’t bully them either. Encourage them to achieve but don’t be too hard on them if they don’t.”

Grandparents should: “Think about the rest of the family, not just the baby and mother.”



4. Adults should provide a loving and caring home for children

“Children need a clean and comfortable house, rules and boundaries to keep them on the right path, love and a caring family, a person to talk to, special events celebrated such as birthdays and Christmas and freedoms.”

Grandparents should:
“Love you, care for you, feed you and give you a home if your parents are gone.”



“Adults should take interest in our hopes, dreams and goals, trust and respect us, listen to and understand us, provide support and love, be open-minded towards everything/one, and put children first.”

“Adults need to look after us, trust us when we got out to play, take care of us and listen to us.”

Mums should: “Love you and care for you.”

Dads should: “Love you forever no matter what happens!”

Social workers should: “Make sure kids have a safe home and that the parents aren’t struggling.”

What can adults and service providers learn from listening to children?

The adults who joined the children for the afternoon session were asked to feedback on what they learned and what they would do as a result of their meeting.

These are just a small number of responses that are typical of the thoughtful comments which were received.

“Today I learned that children have to deal with so many relationship changes and loss very early in life. I was reminded that what is important to them is love, caring and security – that they are not different to the rest of us. Based on what I heard today I will continue to pursue my efforts to ensure adequate parenting ‘support’, not just when a problem has been identified. Children need to be happy and healthy for the ‘best possible start’.”

“Today I learned that the most important message from the children was really very simple. They wanted to be loved and cared for. Based on what I heard today I will continue to re-enforce the importance of emotional health and well being in the lives of young children.”

“Today I learned that children believe the same things are good for babies and children as everyone else. Based on what I heard today I will ensure that this knowledge complements other information when raising early years issues.”

“Today I learned that you can protect children too much from involvement and understanding of issues that affect their lives. Based on what I heard today I will be more inclusive and encourage others to be so.”

“Today I learned that if we really want to ‘get it right for every child’ we need to engage with young people more in this kind of activity and take account of their views to shape our practice and services. Based on what I heard today I will, in my current role, stress the importance of creating environments where children and young people will be listened to better.”

Acknowledgements

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Thank you to the adult guests who spent time with the children in the afternoon session.

Thank you to Professor Susan Deacon for this opportunity and to Fiona Brown, Scottish Government for support in planning and arranging the day.

More about the Children's Parliament

We are an independent charity. We want children to have the confidence, skills and opportunities it takes to be an active citizen.

We run groups, projects, events and consultations. We use creative arts approaches and make sure that while we have fun we also consider what we can do to make the world a better place for ourselves and for others.

Through our activities we help children and adults learn more about human rights, especially as they apply to children.

We work across Scotland. We work directly with children (up to 14 years old) and we always make sure we work with children from different backgrounds and with different abilities.

Through training and project work we support parents and professionals to understand how children's human rights impact on life at home, in school and in the community.

We are positive about Scotland's children.

For more about us visit <http://www.childrensparliament.org.uk>

'I think the most important thing that children need is a safe, stable home where they are loved and cared for.'

