

Growing Up in Scotland Conference 18th March 2009

Speech – Adam Ingram, Minister for Children and Early Years

(Check against delivery)

Introduction

Good morning everyone and thank you to Val Cox [conference chair] for welcoming me here today. It is a great honour to be surrounded by so many people who work with and for young children and their families, and I am glad that we all share the same priorities – to improve outcomes for children.

Whether you are from the voluntary sector, a local authority, you are a health practitioner or anyone else who has a vested interest in children's outcomes; I know that you are all keen to hear the findings from the 3rd sweep of Growing Up in Scotland. And I would like to give a particular thank you to the Scottish Centre for Social Research, in collaboration with CRFR at the University of Edinburgh for carrying out this important research.

I am aware that you all have a very busy and stimulating day ahead, with many interesting workshops to choose from as well

as hearing more detailed analysis of the findings. But I would like to take this opportunity to explain:

- why the Scottish Government values Growing Up in Scotland;
- how it has influenced the development of Scottish Government policies; and
- what this means for everyone here today.

Value of GUS

GUS is an evidence base that I value greatly, as it follows the same group of children over their life course, which allows us to explore the impact that early years experiences have on child development outcomes, and in the longer term, on later life outcomes.

GUS makes a unique contribution to the evaluation of the Scottish Government's performance towards the national outcomes – in particular, GUS is uniquely placed to develop our understanding and inform our thinking on what factors contribute to the *best start in life*, and to *tackling the significant inequalities in Scottish society*.

By tracking children over their life course, and exploring the experience of those who achieve different outcomes, Growing up in Scotland, provides the Scottish Government with information on what creates the ‘best start in life’.

Sweep 3 is the first sweep that it has been possible for us to look at differences in outcomes in detail, and already, at ages 3 and 5, we can see significant differences between groups of children based on their experiences in life demonstrating how important this early period is.

The range of reports being published today – varying from Food and Activity; Childcare; Parenting and the impact of children’s early activities on cognitive development – shows the broad range of areas which this survey covers.

The Early Years Framework

And the wealth of knowledge available from this survey was pivotal in informing the development of the Early Years Framework, developed jointly by the Scottish Government and COSLA - published at the end of last year together with Achieving Our Potential, the anti-poverty framework, and Equally Well, the health inequalities framework. These 3 frameworks herald a new dawn in social policy. I am confident

that implementing these frameworks over the next 10 years can deliver a radical change in outcomes for children and their families.

At the heart of the early years framework, is a philosophy of early intervention - building the capacity of individuals, families and communities to secure the best outcomes for themselves. It is about moving from intervening when a crisis happens towards prevention, building resilience and providing the right level of support before problems materialise.

Parenting

But perhaps the central message in the new framework, and one that is backed up by the findings of GUS, is the importance of parenting. This is particularly true during the first 3 years of a child's life. In fact, the findings from year 3 of GUS demonstrate that children's activities and interaction between parents and their children do have an influence on a child's cognitive development and that they can moderate – though by no means eradicate – the effect of socio-economic advantage.

The findings also show that parents who reported more satisfactory family and friendship networks engaged in more

activities with their child, and were more open to seeking help and support.

That is why the early years framework has a long-term objective of being able to support parents to build on the confidence and skills that will help their children go on to achieve positive outcomes.

Communities and Play

Alongside the central role of parents, communities can also play a pivotal role in supporting children and families. And as I just reflected, strong parental networks result in strong and sustainable communities. Through the early years framework, I want to encourage this informal support as a means of helping parents and developing community cohesion.

Specifically, the importance of play within the community setting is central to how children learn, both in terms of developing physical health and in developing social skills, resilience and wellbeing.

Indeed, evidence from GUS continues to demonstrate that there appears to be a considerable socio-economic divide between highly active and inactive children. And play can be one of the

most straightforward, not to mention fun, ways of improving health and learning outcomes for children.

And with this in mind, the framework has stated a long-term objective for every child in Scotland to be able to enjoy high-quality play opportunities in every community and to have an understanding of risk and boundaries.

Implementation

So with this evidence base, and the early years framework published, what steps are we taking to make sure that the importance of issues such as parenting and play are recognised?

First and foremost, the framework makes bold proposals to bring a greater focus to parenting skills, which in the short term include commissioning an advertising campaign that will support parenting skills and promotes the value of parenting, as well as local partners working together to develop a parental capacity-building model for antenatal and postnatal services.

And to achieve our play objectives, our first step is for the Scottish Government, in collaboration with Play Scotland, the Police and the Care Commission, to lead a debate on understanding and balancing the benefits of play through risk.

However, we also have to make sure that those who support parents and families are given the right training and support. And that is why we have given great attention to the role of the workforce and the services that work with children and families on a daily basis.

Seeing everybody here today, the breadth of the workforce is clearly huge, encompassing social services, health and education as well as those working with parents in adult services and those working in communities. And it is crucial that you all have the right training, the right support and are able to offer the right support to the families who need it.

Conclusion

I strongly believe that focusing on the early years is central to building a more successful Scotland. But the early years framework is a ten year policy and we have a long road ahead. The Scottish Government and COSLA will continue to work together alongside local partners to implement the framework so that we can see a change in outcomes for our children today and in the future.

I look forward to working with all of you to make the changes needed to support children and their families, and we will continue to use the evidence from GUS to do so.

May I thank the researchers once again for this fascinating and insightful study and wish you all an interesting rest of the day.