

# Early Child Development Transformational Change Programme

“Investing in the early years is one of the [smartest investments](#) a country can make to break the cycle of poverty, address inequality, and boost productivity later in life. Today, millions of young children are not reaching their full potential because of inadequate nutrition, lack of early stimulation and learning, and exposure to stress. Investments in the physical, mental, and emotional development of children - from before birth until they enter primary school – are critical for the future productivity of individuals and for the economic competitiveness of nations.” ([The World Bank](#))

## What is the Early Child Development Programme?

We are renewing our focus on improving early child development by bringing together a programme of work to:

- Provide **oversight** and better **integration** of the policies that contribute to early child development with a focus on **prevention**.
- Re emphasise the **importance of pre-birth and early years** across all policy areas.
- Identify any **policy** and **implementation gaps**, informed by current **evidence** (including what is needed **pre-conception**) and build **collaboration** across the whole system to address them.

## What do we mean by Early Child Development?

This work is focused on what happens during the period from **pre-birth to three**, when the brain and metabolic and immune systems develop fastest, laying the foundations for life.

Evidence shows the **4 things** that are needed for babies and young children to develop are:

- **Sensitive responsive care-giving**
- **Stimulation and play**
- **Nutrition**
- **Protection from avoidable harm**

It is ultimately about making sure our knowledge of the **science** of what is needed for healthy development is translated into **policy, service delivery** and **culture** in Scotland. These **short videos** provide helpful illustration of the evidence:

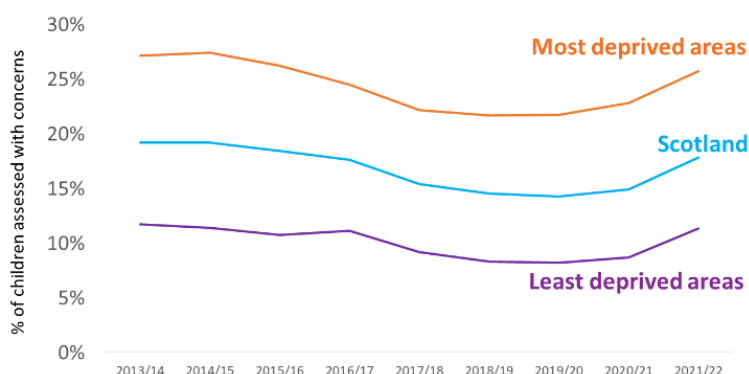
[Partnerships in Early Childhood: Saving Brains \(harvard.edu\) \(9 minutes\)](#)

[How Early Childhood Experiences Affect Lifelong Health and Learning - YouTube \(5 minutes\)](#)

[Building Adult Capabilities to Improve Child Outcomes: A Theory of Change - YouTube \(5 minutes\)](#)

## Why are we doing it?

### Developmental concerns at 27-30 month review



<sup>1</sup>We know that what children experience during their early years and parents’ capacity to provide nurturing care lays lifelong foundations for health and life skills. We already invest in a range of evidence-based services and resources to support families and child development from pre-birth.

We are acting to address the increasing numbers of developmental concerns. As a

<sup>1</sup> Source data: [Early child development statistics - Scotland 2021 to 2022 - Early child development - Publications - Public Health Scotland](#)

priority, we need to tackle the **inequalities** in developmental concerns at 27-30 months, as children in our poorest areas are more likely to have concerns than those in more affluent areas.

These inequalities often last **throughout people's lives** – resulting in poorer overall health, worse educational outcomes, more involvement in the criminal justice system, and less participation in the economy and therefore more chance of being in poverty than if we got it right from the start.

These outcomes affect not only individuals but also **public expenditure** on the repercussions of systems that don't provide the support that families need, and therefore our overall success as a society.

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## What's new about it?

We have been aware of the importance of the early years and prevention for many years, and we need to build on the good work that is going on around Scotland. The evidence base continues to grow, and our understanding of implications of healthy child development for the long-term impacts on the brain and the body are increasing. This makes it vital that we develop knowledge and adapt policy and practice across Scotland to ensure we are bringing together policy initiatives around the individual, aligning and streamlining governance and practice and delivering the best outcomes to achieve healthy child development by working with delivery partners, communities and families.



Some of our building blocks for Early Child Development

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## What are we doing?

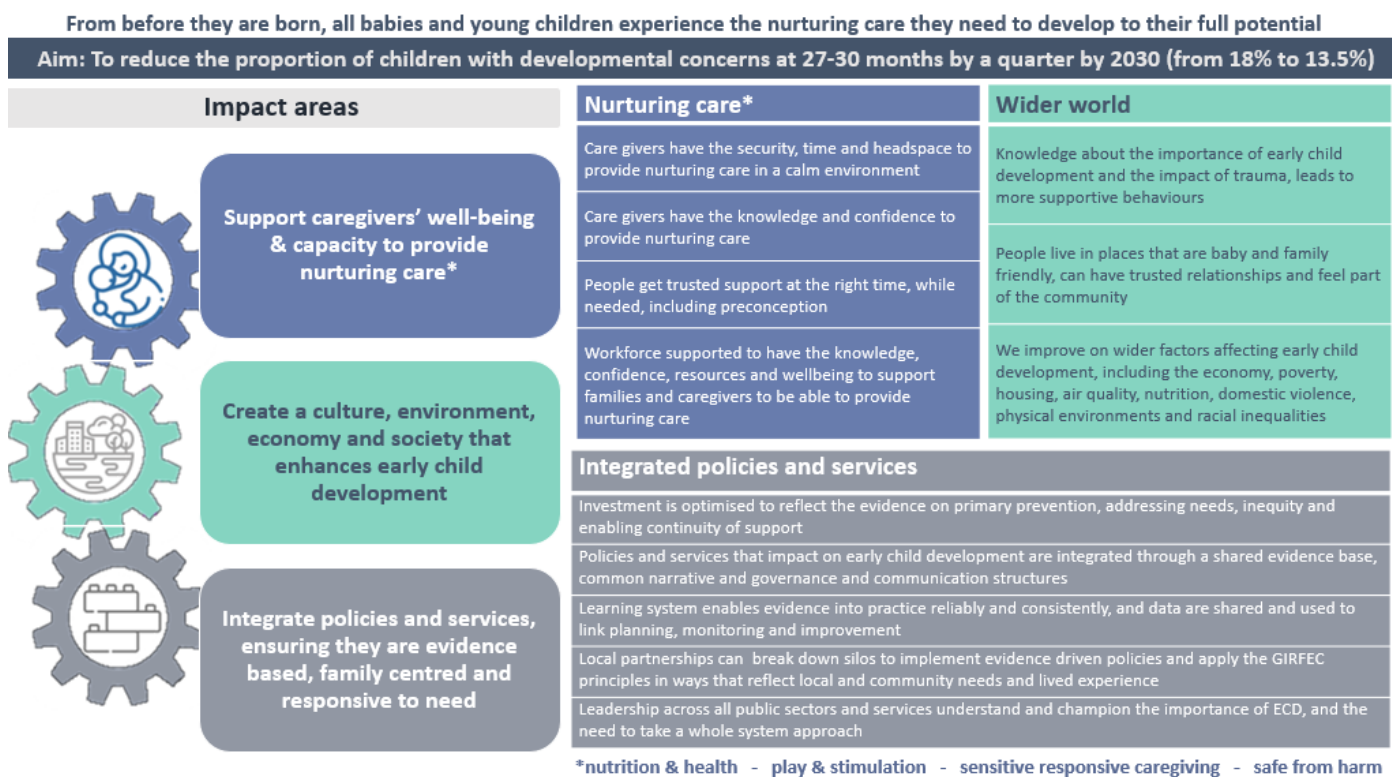
The programme is underpinned by the [Quality Improvement journey](#). We have been taking time to **understand** the current evidence base, and learning from previous change programmes. We are engaging with a range of stakeholders to understand what is needed. We are building on work with local partners, to identify implementation gaps and opportunities to test new ways of getting evidence in to practice reliably and consistently. Everyone needs to be aware of the science and importance of early child development, so that all policies support our society to create the right environments for children to flourish.

We have identified a range of current strategies, programmes, legislation, services, guidance and advice that relate to early child development. This is helping us to:

- Propose which core policies and programmes impacting on how children grow and develop, or on how parents support this, should be incorporated into a **portfolio approach**.
- Align governance, identify and report on the measures and delivery milestones to provide a more complete picture of progress, and build more cohesion between them including seeking any opportunities for integration while strengthening the impact.
- Assess policies against the international evidence to identify any policy gaps or areas for improvement, with a particular focus on the World Health Organisation's [Nurturing Care Framework](#).
- Provide a foundation for work with service users and staff to further understand and address barriers to **implementation**, and identify opportunities to **spread innovation**.

## Theory of Change

Based on an in-depth review of the evidence on what is needed to improve early child development, and a range of knowledge and experience of the current system, we have developed a high-level **theory of change**, which identifies the areas we need to address. As we learn more, this theory can be refined further.



If Scotland can make improvements as described in the change theory, we believe a realistic improvement **aim** is that:

**We reduce the proportion of children with developmental concerns identified at 27-30 month review by a quarter by 2030 (from 18% to 13.5%)<sup>2</sup>.**

To achieve this aim, we want to see a reduction in the gap between the most and least deprived areas, and will also track this as one of our programme indicators.

Scotland's policies are globally recognised on many aspects – but that is not translating into improved outcomes for all, so we need to further understand what else needs to be done, what can be done better or more reliably and consistently, and what would result in most impact.

For more information, contact: [prebirthto3@gov.scot](mailto:prebirthto3@gov.scot)

<sup>2</sup> A range of options were considered when developing the aim. Working to 2030 ties in with the Child Poverty Action Plan and The Promise. Child health reviews are designed to pick up concerns so that children can get the support they need, and we would not want to jeopardise this by setting the aim too low. Reducing the proportion by a quarter would result in the lowest levels seen since we started measuring, 13.5%, while recognising this context.