

Speech: Children and Families

Minister's NAHT early years speech

Thank you for that kind introduction. I am delighted to be here today for what I am sure is going to be an inspiring event for the sector. I notice that you are now in your second year, which would normally be an occasion to strike fear into most parents who dread the 'terrible twos'. I am sure that our event today will be smooth and uniformly well behaved.

Whether twos, threes, fours, or even fives, the early years are critical to shaping a child's future success. This is the time when talent and opportunity hopefully meet; this is when the foundations are laid for developing a child's latent potential and when you can have the biggest impact on setting a child on a path towards an exciting and fulfilling future.

I can hardly overstate its importance.

That's why this government has extended high-quality pre-school education and childcare as a priority. What could be more crucial, ladies and gentlemen, than giving a child the best possible start in life? In schools and early years settings like yours up and down the country, I know teachers are working their socks off to make sure all their children get a high quality start in life. It's because of the efforts of everyone in this room and beyond that we are now seeing more children start school ready and able to learn.

But the early years are also a time when development gaps between disadvantaged children and their peers can become entrenched – and once there, they will only get wider. On average, disadvantaged children are four months behind at age five. That grows by an additional six months by the age of 11, and a further nine months by the age of 16. We're talking more than a year and a half behind and there is no catching up by then. Their peers are not going to wait.

Added to this, more than a quarter – 28% to be precise – of children finish their reception year still without the early communication and reading skills they need to thrive at primary school. Imagine how difficult your time at school will be if you are not able to express yourself clearly, and struggle to read and write.

This is totally unacceptable. It is tragic that children are missing out on the chance to fulfil their potential. This government has ambitious plans to cut that number in half over the next 10 years.

What I'm not going to do is lay this on your doorstep and say to you 'you solve it'. Every element of society needs to pitch in here and this is something I'll come back to again later in my speech.

My Department is working closely with the sector to deliver on our commitment to reform the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile. These reforms are, I think, an opportunity to improve outcomes for all children, but in particular to close the attainment gap between disadvantaged children and their peers.

We're working with the profession to make sure we get these important reforms right. Twenty-four schools have begun a year-long pilot to test a revised set of clear and specific early learning goals that require a greater focus on language and vocabulary development. We've worked closely with teachers and experts – including the NAHT – to draft these goals. One of these is a new goal on self-regulation, which will focus on ensuring children are developing crucial social and emotional skills alongside their cognitive development – neither of these two things can be achieved without the other. I understand some of you will be discussing this subject later in the day. I'm looking forward to hearing what comes out of your deliberations.

I also expect these reforms to reduce teacher workload by putting an end to unnecessary evidence gathering. The participating schools will be piloting a revised approach to assessment and trying out alternatives to local authority moderation, which I hope will support and empower teachers in making a rounded judgement about a child's development, without being over-burdened by the collection of physical evidence. I want to free up teachers to spend more time teaching, interacting with and supporting children to ensure they are developing the vocabulary, skills and behaviours they need to thrive once they get to school. We are very much at the start of this journey. I intend to work with the sector to deliver these reforms so we will engage the profession and parents as widely as possible, including through a full public consultation. I think this will help us take advantage of reception year as a window of opportunity to address key development gaps between disadvantaged children and their peers.

But we know that these gaps can emerge much earlier in a child's life, well before they enter reception. This is why we recently launched a capital bidding round of £30 million to invite schools to come forward with projects to create new high-quality nursery places for two, three and four-year-olds. We're especially keen on seeing proposals that include innovative approaches to boosting social mobility and we'll be allocating funding to the most disadvantaged areas for this reason.

The bidding process for this fund opened on September 24 and we're looking forward to hearing some exciting proposals. We particularly welcome bids that showcase innovative ways to close the disadvantage gap in the early years, and encourage schools and local authorities to work in close partnership together and with other educational institutions and organisations.

I know that the most important people in every early years setting are the ones teaching young children day in, day out. For that reason we will be investing £20 million to train and develop early years professionals, again focusing on some of the most disadvantaged areas of the country. The main aim here is to make sure that practitioners in the most challenging areas have the knowledge and skills they need to support young children's development in early language, literacy and numeracy, particularly the most disadvantaged.

We want to improve practice in settings up and down the country, so that every child, wherever they're from and whatever their background, arrives at school with the firm education foundations already in place.

Ladies and gentleman, one of the challenges within the early years is understanding, with confidence, what really works to improve outcomes. Which is why I have prioritised building the early years evidence base. One of our initiatives involves work with the Education Endowment Foundation, a charity that develops innovative approaches to curbing the attainment gap. We have set up a fund together with the EEF to better understand what works in early years settings to improve outcomes for disadvantaged children. Successful projects will be announced and will be rolled out later in the autumn, when we will also launch a second bidding round.

In spite of all this investment, I know that funding in schools is a real challenge – not least for those of you who work in maintained nursery schools. Believe me, I do know how difficult it can be to balance the books, and – at the moment – to plan for the long-term. I want to thank those of you who have been involved in the research we are doing on the value that maintained nursery schools offer. We will be considering very, very carefully the information that we are getting back from you and others, and our research will inform Spending Review decisions about future funding. But I urge all councils, all local authorities, not to make premature decisions on the future of these schools at this stage. I mentioned earlier that improving outcomes for children is a collective endeavour and we are all in it together. Schools and early years settings are not shouldering the responsibility for improving educational outcomes in the early years on their own. Other local services and local authorities have a key role to play too and coordinate the efforts of other partners such as public health. High-quality integrated services are essential if we are going to make a positive impact for those children and families most in need of support.

That's why earlier this year we launched the Social Mobility, Early Years and Language Peer Review Programme, which we're delivering together with the Local Government Association. Over the next 18 months we will work with around 30 local authorities, helping them to reduce the attainment gap in the early years and improve educational outcomes.

One of the key objectives here, ladies and gentleman, is to learn from local authorities that already have great results on school readiness, particularly on speech, language and communication outcomes, to understand how they did it so that we can then feed this learning back into the sector. We have also formed a partnership with Public Health England and the Department of Health and Social Care to support health professionals to spot children early who may be at risk of developing speech, language and communication problems, targeting those areas with the greatest need.

The partnership will develop training and guidance for health visitors, and provide an early language assessment tool to help them identify emerging language needs, so that the right support can be put in place for children and their families.

But beyond this, ladies and gentleman, there is another key player I've not mentioned who has the most important role in giving a child the best start in life. The truth is that, however much we improve our early education offer, and however effectively we join up public services, most of a child's time is spent at home and the greatest interaction will be with their parents.

I believe that more can be done to ensure that all parents have access to the best advice, tools and resources to support their children in their earliest years. We are already working with the Education Endowment Foundation, to identify the best home-learning programmes, offering practical advice to parents who want to do more reading with their children. We'll then look to share the best ideas much more widely.

But you know, this has to be a society-wide ambition, a shared cultural goal, something a bit like the 5-a-day campaign to get us to eat more fruit and veg. Which is why we are inviting businesses, broadcasters and a broad range of other organisations to come together as part of a coalition to explore innovative ways to boost early language development and reading in the home.

I'm delighted that we'll be joined at a summit in the autumn by the National Literacy Trust, as well as by the BBC and ITV. And that leading businesses including WH Smith, British Land and KPMG have also signed up. This is an important opportunity for us to work together to raise awareness and support parents' confidence around what they can do to help their child's early language development, introducing them to more words, more stories and more books. I know these plans to close the disadvantage gap are ambitious. But if we work together – and if history teaches us anything it's that people, coming together, working together on a common purpose are capable of extraordinary things – I know we will get there. Because ladies and gentlemen, there is no safety net. Children only get one shot at their education. We owe it to them to make sure it's the best it can possibly be.

I want us, together, to narrow the gap and provide better opportunities for the children who have the hardest start in life. Together we can make sure each and every one of them can fulfil their potential, regardless of background or where they live.