

THE VALUE OF A SURE START

There are about 3600 Sure Start Centres in the country providing support and care to vulnerable children and families. The Children's Centres aim to give every child the best possible start in life providing access to a wide range of family support services:

- drop in activity sessions for children such as stay and play sessions, family support including support and advice on parenting, information about services in the area and access to specialist targeted services and Parental Outreach
- Child and family Health Services, such as antenatal and post natal support, information and guidance on breastfeeding, health and nutrition, smoking cessation support, and speech and language therapy
- links with Jobcentre Plus to encourage and support parents and carers who wish to consider training and employment.

Evaluation and research clearly demonstrates the specific benefit to young families of the support provided by Sure Start Centres and giving each child the best possible start has far reaching repercussions for the whole of society.

As a current trustee and for ten years the Chair of OXPIP – the Oxford Parent Infant Project - I have seen at first hand the benefits which early intervention in a child's developments brings. The security of the relationship between a baby and his or her carer is fundamental to the long term outcomes for that individual and everything we can do to help carers provide a stable environment is of intrinsic value. At OXPIP we found that baby massage sessions had wide ranging benefits from the concentrated contact between baby and carer to the wider support provided by coming to the sessions and sharing the joys and challenges of being responsible for a young life. OXPIP is based at a Children's Centre on the outskirts of Oxford where it provides therapy to young families as part of the integrated approach to early intervention.

One of my current projects is setting up a Parent Infant Project in my constituency of South Northamptonshire – NORPIP. We have secured funding, are looking for a base, have the services of our first therapist and are ready to go. I hope that NORPIP will pave the way for establishing a network of Parent Infant Projects throughout the country providing therapy to promote secure early attachment in vulnerable families.

On Wednesday I spoke in the Sure Start Centre debate in Parliament. There was cross party consensus on the value of early intervention and the future importance of supporting Children's Centres. However, since the debate I have been disgusted to see in the press attempts to lay blame at the Government's door for the possible closing of Sure Start Centres. The debate was positive and enlightening. No Centres have to close. I wholeheartedly support the Localism Bill with its objective to bring decision making for local issues back to local people who are best placed to make informed judgements for local people in the places that they live. Local Authorities now have the responsibility to allocate the Early Intervention Grant without any fetter from Central Government of specific ring fencing for its use. However, Councils now also have the responsibility to look closely at their consciences to justify their allocation of the EIG to ensure that Sure Start Centres are given the top priority they undoubtedly deserve.