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## COVID-19 AND BETRAYAL OF CHILDHOOD

### Children's centres are the foundation of social regeneration

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Aynsley-Green praises the last Labour government's Every Child Matters policy,<sup>1</sup> which included the ambitious Sure Start programme, a massive financial and organisational investment in child health and development.<sup>2</sup> Its founders' vision was to strengthen communities around young children in areas of social deprivation,<sup>3</sup> but the focus was blurred when Treasury funding was dispersed to local authorities, soon compounded by the financial crash, and then by the election of a Conservative led government hostile to public spending.

Sure Start did not become a national treasure and is now rarely mentioned. Nor is the recent research by the Institute for Fiscal Studies, which showed that, by the start of secondary school, 30% fewer of the most disadvantaged children from Sure Start areas had been admitted to hospital for injuries, averting costs to the NHS of £65m (€72m; \$88m).<sup>4</sup> One of Sure Start's original targets was to reduce the proportion of children admitted to hospital: it achieved exactly that.

Such outcomes are, of course, the tip of an iceberg of socially promoted resilience, gained through both home visits from staff (including health visitors) and social bonding between adults—staff and parents—meeting together in children's centres. Young children thrive when care givers get on with each other,<sup>5</sup> and multiple child care is our evolutionary heritage.<sup>6</sup> With our covid inspired respect for key workers, the reinvention of child and family centres, with better training, pay, and continuing professional development for staff, is a priority. "Gaps in child development arise very early in life, and once they appear, they tend to persist and eventually widen over the life cycle."<sup>7</sup>

Aynsley-Green calls for early intervention and leadership to build local communities. Creating as many children's centres as there are primary schools is the place to start.<sup>8</sup> Real friendships between adults who look after children are the foundation of social regeneration.

Competing interests: None declared.

Full response at: <https://www.bmj.com/content/371/bmj.m4667/rr-0>.

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