Addressing inequalities early in life

The trajectory of a human's life course is by no means determined at birth. Nevertheless, the circumstances a child is born into and events taking place during the early childhood or even gestation shape life-course trajectories. A substantial amount of research in the Dynamics of Inequality Across the Life-course (DIAL) research programme has examined what these influences are, and how disadvantages can be ameliorated.

Ensuring that all children have access to necessary services is a core aim of many governments and international organisations, including the European Union. The European Child Guarantee works towards ensuring that all children can access key services in order to reduce social exclusion. Supporting parents through a variety of means is vital to improve the wellbeing of families and children.

The long-term consequences of the peri-natal period

The Life Course Dynamics after Preterm Birth – Protective Factors for Social and Educational Transitions, Health, and Prosperity (PremLife) project has examined in depth how the circumstances during pregnancy and its length have long-lasting impacts into individuals' lives. Preterm children, born before 37 weeks of gestation, have been identified as being disadvantaged in a number of different spheres of life, including educational attainment and peer relationships. This makes it important to identify potential mitigating factors.

The researchers have examined, for example, the role of parental education for improving educational attainment (Bilsteen et al 2022) and that of physical exercise for mental wellbeing (Brylka et al 2021). Both of these were found to be important. Nevertheless, their influence tends to be equally strong for preterm children and for those who were born at term.

Improving the prediction – and prevention – of preterm birth is also necessary. Steroid drugs are used when a premature birth is likely in order to speed up the development of the foetus and thus improve the chances of survival. Yet, not all of those treated end up being born preterm. The use of steroids also has adverse effects by substantially increasing the risks of mental and behavioral disorders among the treated children (Räikkönen et al 2021).

Development of children's skills

Children's socio-emotional skills have been researched extensively in the Social InEquality and its Effects on child Development: A study of birth cohorts in the UK, Germany and the Netherlands (SEED) project. This research documents how a range of socio-emotional difficulties at different stages of childhood are related to later academic achievement (Tamayo Martinez et al 2022). The findings also highlight that a major factor behind many of these associations is attention problems.

Research from the Growing up Unequal? The Origins, Dynamics and Lifecycle Consequences of Childhood Inequalities (GUODLCCI) project demonstrates that inequalities in children's socio-emotional skills have increased between cohorts born in 1970 and 2000 in the UK

(Attanasio et al 2020). This relates to children's skills in regulating both externalizing and internalizing behavior, and the increase in inequality is particularly strong for boys.

In addition to wider gaps in these skills, they have also become more strongly related to family characteristics such as mother's education and smoking behavior. Since these skills are predictive of unhealthy behaviors later in life, interventions to reduce these inequalities and increase children's skills is crucial.

The importance of time spent with parents

Children's development is strongly linked to the time they spend with their parents, as shown by research in the The impact of childhood circumstances on individual outcomes over the life-course (IMCHILD) project. In addition, time spent with the mother (with or without the presence of the father) has been found to be more influential for the development of cognitive and socio-emotional skills than time spent with the father (Le Forner 2021).

However, this finding is driven by the group of fathers who spend relatively little time on educational activities with their children. Therefore, the main policy recommendation is to encourage fathers in particular to spend more time with their children. Building the foundation during paternity leaves could be a possible way of doing this.

The length of parental leaves can also have long-lasting impacts on children's wellbeing (Heisig & Zierow 2020). Using information from a policy reform in East Germany, researchers were able to take into account selection into differences in the time children spent at home (with their mother) during the first year of life. They were thus able to estimate the differences in life satisfaction between children who had spent just five months at home and those who had spent the full first year at home.

As adults, the latter group were found to be more satisfied with their lives. These findings suggest that countries where paid parental leave is substantially less than one year would benefit from reviewing their policies.

Supporting families with young children

Further research from the GUODLCCI project has examined the effectiveness of Sure Start Centres in England (Cattan et al 2022). The centres brought together a broad range of support services for families with children under 5. The findings suggest that the centres were successful in improving the long-term health of children in the local areas. These improvements were particularly strong in more disadvantaged areas. Thus, centres of this type could help to reduce inequalities in health.

The SEED project has also shown that the relationship between parent-child relationships at age 3 and socio-emotional difficulties at age 11 cannot be attributed to children's vocabulary skills (Rush et al 2021). Supporting parents to build high quality relationships with their children from an early age onwards is crucial for children's socio-emotional development.

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