

MP calls for pre-school intervention for vulnerable

By Alison Kershaw, PA

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Too few people understand the work involved in bringing up a baby and should be given more information on raising children, a Government-commissioned review has concluded.

Would-be parents must be made aware of the importance of meeting a baby's emotional and social needs during their early years to ensure they grow up to be rounded, capable adults, according to MP Graham Allen's report on early intervention.

He calls for a new National Parenting Campaign to be established to inform parents and the wider public about good parenting skills.

Mr Allen, Labour MP for Nottingham North, was tasked in July last year with leading the inquiry, which will look at how to give children from disadvantaged backgrounds the best start.

His report, which draws on international evidence, says the quality of a child's relationships and learning experiences in the family has more influence on their achievement than any innate abilities, material circumstances or the quality of their nursery and school.

Research suggests that warm, attentive, stimulating parenting strongly supports a child's social, emotional and physical development, it says, while children who spend their early years in impoverished, neglectful or abusive environments often do not learn empathy or social skills, which can lead to problems later in life.

In his report Mr Allen calls for a "change of culture around parenting ... the way in which parents interact with babies, children and young people".

He says: "Many parents have a strong desire to do the best for their children but many, especially in low-income groups, are ill-informed or poorly motivated on how to achieve this."

All parents need to know how to "recognise and respond to a baby's cues, attune with infants and stimulate them from the very start, and how to foster empathy", the report says.

It adds: "Parents in particular need to know whom to turn to for help and where to find them, and how to foster a positive home-learning environment, as well as the usual physical information about breastfeeding and avoiding smoking, toxic substances and stress."

While there is a lot of information available, parents can find it hard to know what to trust, Mr Allen says.

He adds: "Too few of those thinking of embarking on parenthood understand how to build the social and emotional capability of a baby or small child, and awareness among the wider public is virtually non-existent."

Mr Allen calls for local charities, employers and others to work with experts to take fresh action, such as raising awareness of the responsibility of good parenting among would-be parents and helping the public to understand the importance of developing social and emotional skills in the early years.

He recommends a new National Parenting Campaign "as the crown jewel of the Big Society project, pursued with enough passion and vitality to make it irresistible even to the most jaundiced".

The MP adds: "I recommend the creation of a broad-based alliance of interested groups, charities and foundations to ensure that the public, parents, health professionals and, especially, newly pregnant women are aware of the importance of developing social and emotional capability in the first years of life, and understand the best ways of encouraging good later outcomes for their children."

This would be done locally rather than led by central government.

The report also says that 11 to 18-year-olds should be taught the skills "to make good choices in life".

"They may teach young people what it means to make and sustain relationships and to have a baby," it says.

The review notes that children who do not learn good social and emotional skills in their early years, and grow up with poor outcomes, can often pass this on to future generations.

The aim of early intervention is to break this cycle, it says.

Mr Allen said: "There isn't anything more important than effective parenting, raising the next generation to achieve for the country as well as themselves."