

A fair start

for every child



Our strategy

START

STRONG

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STRONG

Ensuring a fair start for every child

Every child matters but not every child gets a fair start.

In the UK today, too many babies' and children's earliest experiences and opportunities are limited by the circumstances in which they are born.

Our vision is for every baby and young child in the UK to have a good early childhood. This means ending entrenched inequalities in early experiences and outcomes, giving all our children a fair start.

Early childhood shapes us as individuals and shapes our future as a nation. When children do not have a fair start in life, the consequences can last a lifetime, affecting their health, wellbeing and opportunities, and the future of our society and economy.

Change is possible. Factors like family income, ethnicity and geography should not determine whether babies and young children have what they need to thrive.

Every baby and child should have nurturing relationships, a safe and stable home, a strong community and opportunities to play, learn and belong.

Parents want the best for their children, but the systems around them can make it harder for families to provide the nurturing care their children need. Parents need a society that stands alongside them, an economy that gives them the time and security to care for their children and local services they can rely on when they need them. With bold action to redesign the systems around families, this can become a reality.



Start Strong is building a new movement, united by our shared vision. We will work together to transform systems so that they back parents and give all children a fair start.

We have much to build on. We have strong evidence to guide us, many passionate and skilled people who care, and examples of what works.

Transforming systems requires changing mindsets, culture, power and relationships. Changing the stories we tell shapes the way people think about issues and opens up new solutions.

Through the collective efforts of our movement, we will shift mindsets and build broad support for solutions, creating a context in which politicians can make the bold, long-term changes that babies, young children and their families need.



**Our vision is
for every baby
and young child
in the UK to**

**have a good early
childhood.**



To deliver our vision, Start Strong will:

Change the story.

Shift how people think and talk about early childhood, build public support and inspire political action.

Mobilise a broad movement for change.

Bring people together to tell a strong shared story and drive progress towards our collective vision.

Support bold action.

Support politicians to redesign systems and take ambitious, long-term action to give all children a fair start.

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The opportunity

We know that change is possible. We have many reasons to be hopeful.

Early childhood is a time of extraordinary opportunity. It is a period of rapid growth and development, when positive experiences, environments and relationships can bring benefits that will last a lifetime.

Babies and young children are remarkable. Babies arrive in the world ready to connect, communicate and learn. For most children, early childhood is a time of joy, curiosity, play and growing connections with the people and world around them.

The benefits of positive early experiences build over time. Children who have healthy and happy early childhoods are more likely to make friends, enjoy learning and thrive when they start school. These children are more likely to have skills, such as language and emotional regulation, will make it easier for them to learn other things.

The benefits of their strong starts build across their lives. They will be more likely to achieve throughout school, have better social and emotional skills and mental health, find fulfilling work, earn more, and live healthier lives.

Parents and other primary caregivers are vitally important to babies and young children's development and wellbeing. Children need nurturing care from adults who keep them safe and support them to play, learn and explore the world around them.

For many families – even those facing challenges – the arrival of a new child brings joy, hope, possibility and fresh beginnings. Parents and wider families, regardless of circumstance, overwhelmingly care deeply about their children and want them to thrive.

**Positive experiences,
environments
and relationships
can bring benefits
that last a lifetime.**

We have many strengths to build on in the UK today:

As professionals, academics and policy makers, we know more than ever about what supports healthy child development, and we have evidence that change is possible.

Research and insights from families and communities helps us to understand how children develop, what holds families back, and what makes a difference during this vital period.

There are dedicated and skilled practitioners and volunteers doing wonderful work with babies, children and families everyday, and fantastic local services making a real difference.

Yet, despite all we know and all that is happening, too often, a child's start in life is still shaped by the circumstances in which they are born. Our challenge now is to redesign systems to ensure all babies, young children and families can thrive.

We know that this is possible, and the benefits will be profound, diverse and lasting – for children, families, communities and our society.

Evidence of the long-term benefits of early support



Research showed that children from low-income families in England who had access to integrated early years support in a Sure Start children's centre:

- **achieved more at school.** They achieved, on average, three GCSE grades higher than similar children who did not.
- **had fewer special educational needs.** They were less likely to receive support for Special Educational Needs at age 7, 11 and 16.
- **had better mental health.** They reported fewer mental health problems like depression and anxiety as teenagers and had fewer hospitalisations for mental health related causes.¹



The building blocks

of a strong start



Nurturing, responsive love and care from consistent adults.



The conditions for good health and wellbeing

including adequate nutrition, clean air, green space and access to healthcare.



Security and stability

including emotional and physical safety, a secure home, and material resources.



Opportunities to play, socialise and learn

through everyday experiences and high-quality early learning and care.



Freedom from discrimination and opportunities to belong

including supportive communities where babies and young children are valued, included and have a voice.

The inequality

Every child matters. But not every child has a fair start in life.

All families can face challenges during early childhood. Over recent decades, factors such as cuts in local services, the high cost of living, and increasing community disconnection have increased the pressure on families. Across society there are also worrying trends in early childhood: young children spend less time outdoors, less time playing, being read to and talking to others, and more time on addictive technology.

These challenges do not impact all children equally. Children's experiences and their outcomes can vary significantly based on factors such as their ethnicity and gender, the money their parents earn, whether they or members of their family have health problems and/or disabilities, and where they live. Rather than things getting fairer, some gaps between children are growing.²

Parents want to do what is best for their children but can be constrained by their own wellbeing and the environments and systems around them. Challenges such as poverty, poor health, stress, conflict, discrimination and housing instability can make it harder for parents to provide the nurturing care that babies and young children need to thrive. Children need routines, stability, predictability and consistency,³ and it can be difficult for parents to ensure these things when they live with insecurity and instability in income, employment, housing and support.



**Rather than
things getting fairer,
some gaps
between children
are growing.**





A lack of safe public spaces and accessible and affordable activities, together with time pressures (often driven by working patterns) limit families' abilities to provide their babies and young children with opportunities to play, learn and explore the world around them.

Some families experience multiple disadvantages at the same time. For example, they might experience poverty, disability, poor housing and parental conflict. Poor outcomes are never inevitable, but the more disadvantages a child faces, the more likely they are to miss out on a strong start.

Inequalities begin before birth. Children can have a different start in life depending on whether their mother was safe, supported and had the nutrition she needed for a healthy pregnancy. As children get older, inequalities in their health and development can become wider, and it is harder to close the gaps, even with support in place.

Many of the roots of national challenges, such as youth unemployment, poor physical and mental health, and involvement in the criminal justice system lie in early childhood. This means that many of the solutions lie in this life stage too.

The evidence on gaps in development



By age 5, children from low-income families are, on average, almost 5 months behind their peers in development. This developmental gap continues to grow, and by the time they take their GCSEs, children in low-income families are an average of 19 months behind.⁴

These young people are less likely to leave school with the qualifications and skills they need to progress in education and training.



The unfair start:

The evidence

Levels of poverty and disadvantage

In the UK, 27% of all children live in poverty.¹ Families with young children are more likely to live in poverty: 51% of all families living in poverty have a child aged between 0 and 4.⁵

Some families and communities are also disproportionately impacted by poverty and material disadvantage. For example, child poverty rates among Bangladeshi ethnic groups are almost 3 times as high as among White ethnic groups.⁶

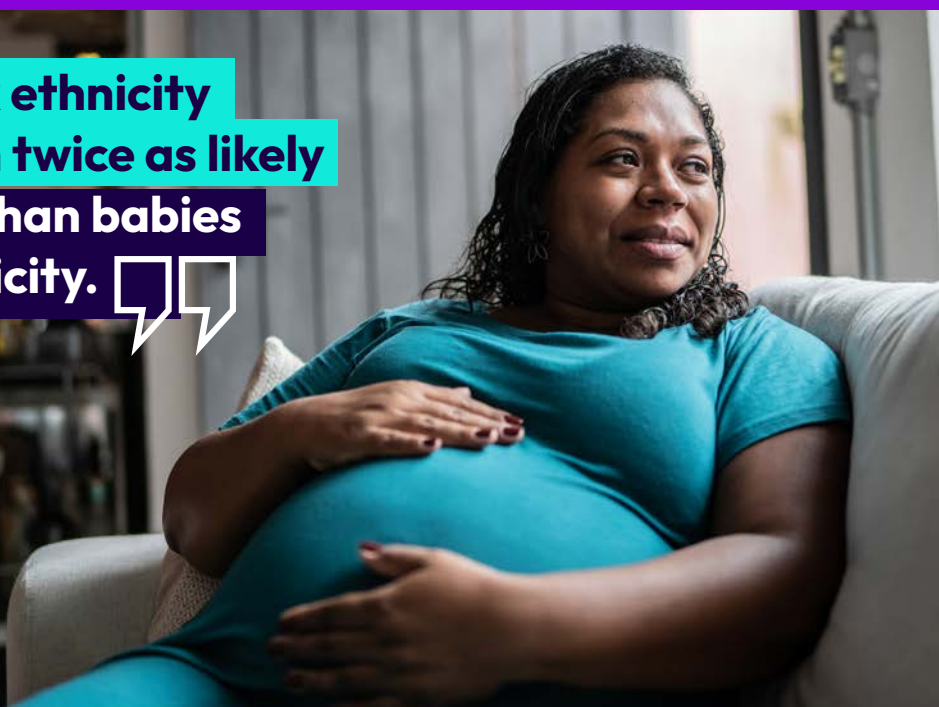
Families do not have equal access to leave and financial support. For example, fathers in insecure work or on low pay are less likely to be able to access paternity benefits.⁷ This impacts family income, stress and the time parents can spend with their children. Fathers and non-birthing parents in the most deprived areas are less likely to take time off when their babies are born compared to those in the least deprived (60% compared to 87%).⁸

Inequalities in birth outcomes and infant mortality

There are persistent racial disparities in birth outcomes. For example, babies of Black ethnicity are more than twice as likely to be stillborn than babies of White ethnicity.⁹

In England, babies living in the 10% areas with the highest levels of deprivation are more than twice as likely to die as babies in the 10% least deprived areas.¹⁰

Babies of Black ethnicity are more than twice as likely to be stillborn than babies of White ethnicity.



¹ Using the widely used measure of child poverty: having income below 60% of the UK median household income, with income measured after housing costs have been deducted.

Inequalities in access to nutritious food

There is significant regional variation in breastfeeding. For example, 41% of babies in the North East of England are breastfed at 6 to 8 weeks old compared to 60% in the South West of England.¹¹

High infant formula costs, combined with wider cost of living pressures are leading to more parents using unsafe feeding practices, such as re-using leftover formula, reducing sterilisation and watering down feeds.¹²

Young children in low-income families are less likely to consume fruit and vegetables and more likely to consume food high in fat, sugar and salt.¹³

30% of caregivers of 16–18-month-olds report they cannot afford balanced meals.¹⁴



In England, 13% of babies and young children aged 0 to 4 live in homes that fail the Decent Home Standard.

The impacts of insecure and unsafe housing

In England, 13% of babies and young children aged 0 to 4 live in homes that fail the Decent Home Standard. This includes 8% of these children living in homes with damp.¹⁵

The number of children living in temporary accommodation in England is at record levels.¹⁶ Babies are more vulnerable to the hazards of poor housing. Temporary accommodation has been named as a contributing factor to the deaths of at least 58 babies under 1 in the last 5 years.¹⁷

Housing insecurity brings stress and instability to families' lives. Living in unsafe housing also means babies and young children have fewer opportunities to safely play, move and explore, with impacts on health and development.

Babies and young children are particularly susceptible to the impacts of the climate emergency. Lower income families often live in housing with poorer ventilation and without outdoor space.¹⁸

Opportunities for play and learning

Children in areas with more disadvantage have less access to high-quality early education. Areas with high levels of deprivation have fewer childcare places with "good" Ofsted ratings.¹⁹

As a result of a range of factors, such as pressures on families and a lack of access to safe spaces to play, children in families with low income, and from some ethnicities, spend more time on screens, and less time enjoying outdoor play and positive activities such as story sharing.²⁰



Getting it right by design

Inequalities are not inevitable. Policy makers can design systems that give children a fair start.

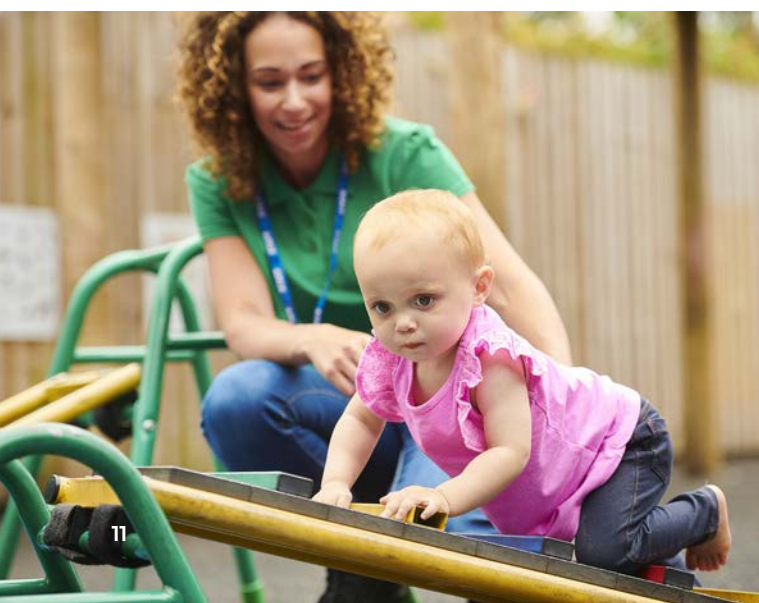
We know it is possible to give children a fairer start in life. Other countries have lower levels of early childhood inequalities than the UK.²¹

Tackling inequalities means changing economic and social conditions so that fewer babies and young children live with challenges like poverty and poor housing. It also involves breaking the link between children's backgrounds and their experiences and opportunities. This includes making it easier for **all** parents to provide their babies and young children with the nurturing care, quality time and positive activities that support early development.

“**Parents are not asking for government to raise their children, but to back them in their important role.**”

Parents are not asking for government to raise their children, but to back them in their important role. They need a society that stands alongside them, an economy that gives them the time and security to care for their children, and local services they can rely on when they need them.

Early childhood policy in the UK has often focussed on addressing challenges facing families. **It is time for a bolder approach to transform the systems around families, creating the conditions that enable them to thrive.**



Some early childhood services in parts of the UK have been eroded over recent decades. The nature of services on offer to babies, children and families varies greatly between different areas of the UK, and there is also substantial variation in quality and sufficiency. Historically, governments have often funded short-term, siloed and programmes and initiatives aimed at fixing problems. **It is time to make early childhood services protected public infrastructure, services which all families know they can trust and rely on.**

Start Strong will support governmentsⁱⁱ across the UK to take bold action to change the systems around families, so that they consistently deliver what all babies and young children need, backing parents and giving every child a fair start.



The role governments can play in giving every child a strong start:



Create the conditions that enable families to thrive

Tackle the wider social and economic factors that shape early childhood, improving access to safe and secure housing, family-friendly employment and adequate incomes.



Invest in effective local services

Guarantee every family access to joined-up, trusted support. Ensure services are easy to navigate, delivered by stable and skilled workforces, coordinated locally, and designed to build on families' strengths rather than responding to problems in isolation.



Shape and steward other systems

Ensure all parts of society, such as employers, housing providers, technology companies, food businesses and others, support, rather than undermine, babies, young children and their families.



Strengthen communities

Take action to build and strengthen local relationships, networks and community assets and spaces to reduce isolation, and strengthen the practical and emotional support around families.

ⁱⁱ. Governments mean all governments in the UK, local, regional and national.



The need for

a stronger shared story

Transforming systems requires changing mindsets, culture, power and relationships.^{22,23}

The way systems are designed and operate is underpinned by the mindsets people hold. Mindsets are the shared beliefs, assumptions and ways of thinking that shape how people understand a problem, what they see as possible, and the solutions they consider.

To transform systems, we need to shift dominant mindsets that maintain the status quo. Changing the stories we tell can shape how people think about issues, change what they see as possible and open up new solutions. This is why narrative change will be core to Start Strong's work. It is essential to create the conditions for bold action and sustained change.



Changing the stories we tell can shape

how people think about issues, change what they see as possible and open up new solutions.



Mindset changes that could open up new solutions for early childhood

Fatalism to hope

When people believe that some problems cannot be fixed, or that some children are destined to have a difficult life, they are less likely to support action to address inequalities. Support for action is stronger when we share a mindset that change is possible, and that government action and investment can give more children a fair start.

Individual to systemic

When people attribute inequalities in early childhood simply to differences in parents' skills, capacities or motivations, it can reduce support for government action and narrow the solutions that are considered. Support for systemic action is stronger when we recognise that the conditions and systems around families shape their ability to provide nurturing care.

Private responsibility to public infrastructure

When early childhood is seen primarily as a private family matter, support for government action and investment is limited. There is more support for action when we share the mindset that caring for the youngest children is fundamental to the functioning of society, and early childhood support should be an essential part of our public infrastructure.

Deficits to strengths

When we believe that professionals and academics know best, and that services need to “fix” families, we can fail to recognise and harness the strengths and expertise of families and communities. The best solutions are developed when we empower families, build on their strengths and recognise that they also bring valuable expertise, which can be brought together with other forms of insight and evidence to improve children's lives.



A photograph of four children playing on a red brick path. In the center, a young girl with blonde hair, wearing a denim jacket over an orange shirt and blue jeans with patches, is in a dynamic pose. To her left, a girl with dark hair and a pink shirt is also in motion. To the right, a boy in a patterned vest over a light-colored shirt is walking. In the foreground, a child with curly hair, wearing an orange jacket and blue jeans, is crouching. The background features a blue wall with colorful graffiti, including flowers and abstract shapes.

Public demand for action drives policy change

At present in the UK, there is insufficient public pressure on national and local governments to act on early childhood, and insufficient disquiet about the erosion of services and poor outcomes for children.

Campaigning on early childhood can be fragmented, issues-based and focussed on incremental change. To achieve transformative change, we need to create sustained, collective pressure on political leaders to prioritise action on inequalities in early childhood, and support them in this important task.

As part of achieving transformative change, Start Strong will drive the collective effort required to build broad social and political consensus on the need for urgent action: ensuring that giving every child a fair start is a long-term national priority.

Our priorities

Start Strong's work will focus on driving change at three interconnected levels.

Change the story.

Shift how people think and talk about early childhood, build public support and inspire political action.

Mobilise a broad movement for change.

Bring people together to tell a strong shared story and drive progress towards our collective vision.

Support bold action.

Support politicians to redesign systems and take ambitious, long-term action to give all children a fair start.

We will change the story

We will:

- Test and develop new stories that can shift how people think and talk about early childhood, and build public support for action.
- Undertake a range of ambitious communications and campaigning activity to change the story and build a more supportive public and media environment, in which bold political action on early childhood is expected and valued.

Start Strong's work will not always be visible. We will lead where we can add most value and partner with or support others where they are better placed to lead. We will work with those who already have influence and public platforms, encouraging them to use their voice to champion babies and young children, and to tell a powerful shared story.

We bring courage, ambition, fresh thinking, new ideas and new partners. We will be rigorous in assessing how our activity is shifting public mindsets and support and we will learn and adapt to maximise our impact.

Narrative change research

Working with partner organisations, More in Common and Purpose Union, we have undertaken research to understand how the UK public think about early childhood and to develop and test narratives to find which stories can shift mindsets and build public support for change.

This research, to be published in Autumn 2026, will shape our own campaigning and will be shared with partners across our movement, helping everyone to tell a more consistent, compelling story about why early childhood matters and what needs to change.





We will mobilise a broad movement for change

We will:

- Build and mobilise a vibrant and strong movement across the UK, bringing together families, communities, practitioners, organisations and decision-makers to tell a strong shared story.
- Bring the expertise of babies, children, families, practitioners and communities into advocacy.
- Convene, connect and coordinate campaigning organisations to strengthen collaboration, reduce fragmentation and increase collective impact.
- Bring new and influential voices into the movement, particularly those from outside the early childhood sector, to ensure a broad coalition that can cut through across the political spectrum.
- Strengthen campaigning capacity in the sector through providing new insights and resources that help us to tell a stronger shared story and deliver greater impact.

We believe lasting change happens when we build on existing strengths in the system and create solutions that reflect the wisdom, experience and aspirations of families and communities. We are particularly committed to sharing and shifting power to increase the influence of babies, young children, families, practitioners and communities whose voices are too often excluded from decision-making.



We will support bold action

We will:

- Support and challenge decision makers at all levels of government (national, regional and local) to act with greater urgency and to drive ambitious, long-term systemic change.
- Draw on our movement and wider communities to provide thought-leadership, evidence and insight to help decision makers to redesign systems to give all children a fair start.



National Vision

Our first task is to develop a bold, shared vision for babies and young children in the UK. This National Vision will set out our shared aspirations for babies and young children, and what children and families should be able to expect from the society around them. The Vision will provide a long-term framework to guide Start Strong's work and future projects and priorities.

The Vision will be developed through a national conversation and a Citizens' Assembly in Autumn 2026. This approach demonstrates our belief that the future of early childhood should be shaped not only by evidence and professional expertise, but also by the values, experiences and aspirations of people across the UK.

By combining public insight with the best available evidence, we will create a vision and priorities for Start Strong that reflect both what children need to thrive and the kind of society people want to build.

Crucially, this will help ensure that the solutions we champion have public support behind them – building the mandate needed to turn ambition into lasting change.

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to join the movement



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Defining early childhood

We will focus our efforts on the period from pregnancy until a child reaches the age of five.

Early childhood isn't one uniform period. What children and families need changes significantly from pregnancy through birth, infancy, the toddler years and into the preschool period.

There is no significant change to children when they reach five, but this is the time at which children in the UK begin statutory education, and when children's experiences and the supports available for them and their families often change. We recognise that many aspects of early childhood continue beyond this point: children are still developing foundational skills like language and emotional regulation, and continue to need nurturing care, play and responsive relationships.





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Our founding partners:



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