WHAT DOES RESEARCH TELL US ABOUT THE QUALITY OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE FOR CHILDREN UNDER THREE, AND WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE?

Sandra Mathers
University of Oxford, Oxford, UK

During their first three years, babies and young children experience phenomenal growth in brain development, and in their understandings of themselves and the world around them. They are active and curious learners from birth, able to lead their own learning within the context of close, intimate and supportive relationships with responsive adults. While we know a great deal about the kinds of relationships which babies and toddlers need to thrive, there is still much to learn about how to create these environments in the context of early childhood education and care. There is a new consensus that pedagogy for under-threes needs to be specialised, and different to provision for older children (Dalli et al, 2011). With increasing numbers of children under three attending early-years settings across Europe, it is vitally important that practice and policy development is guided by the latest research.

This paper presents the findings of a review on the dimensions of quality in early years education and care that facilitate the learning and development of children from birth to three. The review draws on international research reviews conducted primarily in the UK, US, Australia and New Zealand, in order to make recommendations for policy and practice. It addresses the needs of all children under the age of three years. However, given growing recognition of the role early years provision can play in supporting children from deprived backgrounds to overcome their early disadvantage, the review focuses specifically on the Government's flagship policy to provide early education places for the most disadvantaged 40 per cent of two year olds in England. This represents one of the most ambitious government initiatives in recent years, and one which is based on sound research evidence demonstrating the benefits of early years provision for children from deprived backgrounds. However, although the programme has significant potential to narrow the attainment gap and improve outcomes for children, the research evidence is clear that developmental benefits will only be achieved if children are able to attend high quality provision (Smith et al., 2009). Drawing on the research evidence, the paper set out ten steps to ensure the success of the early education programme for two year old children; and a further two recommendations for promoting high quality pedagogy for all children under the age of three. Much of this is relevant to developments in this area in other European countries.