



thrive at five

Thrive at Five's vision is a society where every child can thrive and achieve their potential.

Our mission is to help children in their early years develop strong foundations for life and learning. Focusing on some of the UK's most disadvantaged communities, our place-based model supports positive development from pregnancy to five. We achieve sustainable change by unlocking the power of parents and carers and enabling collaboration to strengthen early years support.

thriveatfive.org.uk

Charity number 1195059

Why the early years?

The development of a child's brain from pregnancy to five is critical. Rapid brain growth means that by age two a child's brain is around 80% of its adult weight. Early development profoundly shapes the adults we become, and by age five, is predictive of a range of life outcomes including educational and socio-economic attainment, health and wellbeing. Focusing efforts on the early years is one of the best investments we can make for the long-term health, wellbeing and happiness of society.

The problem we need to solve

Many children are not thriving in early childhood. In a 2022 survey, primary school teachers reported that, on average, 46% of children aged four or five had arrived for their first year in reception not 'ready for school'. Some children struggled to play or share with other children; could not hold a pencil; were not toilet trained¹.

2023 Early Years Foundation Stage Profile (EYFSP) data, which measures social and emotional, physical and cognitive development at the end of the first year of school, found that on average 65.2% of children reached a good level of development¹.

Outcomes were worse for children from more disadvantaged backgrounds, with only 49.1% of children eligible for free school meals reaching a good level of development². These children are, on average, 4.8 months behind their peers by the end of reception and we know that inequalities often persist and widen.



"I first came to parent, baby and toddler groups to bring my granddaughter, she was very shy, wouldn't leave my side. She's just come on leaps and bounds. It's amazing. The parents are great. You feel welcome. There's lots for the children to do. They have moon sand, play dough, water, shredded paper goes everywhere. But they love it. I'll get to chat with the other mums and the grandparents. It's sociable. Helps with your mental health."

Patricia, Stoke-on-Trent

"Children were starting in nursery at three or reception at four and very often, they'd already lost, developmentally, a year of their lives. One school reported that 90% of reception aged children were not at the age expected levels for speech and language, and all were struggling to deliver intervention programmes to all the children who needed them. With the scale of need in our schools, it is impossible for one teacher and a Teaching Assistant to deliver."

Norah Minshall, Early Years Development Lead, Stoke-on-Trent



¹ A 'good level of development' can be defined as a child reaching the 'expected' level of development at the end of their reception year using the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile.

² Education in England: Annual Report 2023. (2023). The Education Policy Institute.

Our levers for change

Parents and carers are the first and most important influence on children's development. To provide effective support to babies and toddlers, parents and carers themselves need to be supported by their communities and the early years system, to build their confidence and capability. However, the current system is often detached from children and families and does not reach those who need support the most. The system is also fragmented, piecemeal and somewhat ineffective, without sufficient

reference to what the evidence, data, and critically, the views of parents tell us about needs and how best to address them. Currently, there is insufficient join-up of early years support in disadvantaged neighbourhoods and a need to foster stronger links between services, parents and carers and the community. Building on the lessons from other initiatives, Thrive at Five seeks to address these issues with a long-term and sustainable solution.

Thrive at Five's approach

We achieve change with a two-fold approach:

- 1 Unlocking the power of parents and carers to give their children the nurturing care and supportive environments they need.
- 2 Enabling collaborative action within and across the public, private and voluntary sectors to coordinate and strengthen early years systems, practices and pathways of support.

Evidence and data underpin our approach and strong relationships are the golden thread that run through all our work as we build trust between and within communities and support services.



What do we want to achieve?

As we build a stronger ecosystem of support around children we aim to increase the number achieving a good level of development by the end of their first year at school. We will do this by improving the following which are critical to positive early development:

- 1 Children's early communication and language development
- 2 Attachment and parenting responsiveness
- 3 Levels of parental wellbeing
- 4 The quality of children's early home learning environments
- 5 The quality of early education and care.

"The foundations for virtually every aspect of human development – physical, intellectual and emotional – are laid in early childhood. What happens during these early years, starting in the womb, has life-long effects on many aspects of health and wellbeing."

Sir Michael Marmot, Director,
UCL Institute of Health Equity

Putting the approach into practice

We employ local teams in local authority areas where there is a shared commitment to improving outcomes in early childhood. Collaboration starts with a data-informed exploration of the early years landscape. We identify what services and community assets are available and use this analysis, and in-depth conversations with everybody in the community, to understand the experiences, opportunities and challenges which exist. With this learning and using the evidence of what works, we co-design the best approaches to improve support from pregnancy to five.

Together with our partners, we find ways to strengthen the system and upskill the early years workforce. Our local team, including our parent champions, engage with parents and carers to ensure that support meets their needs and increases their confidence and capability so they can, in turn, meet their children's needs. We continually test, learn and refine our approach and embed the things that work for children, parents and carers.

Thrive at Five support each local place to deliver this work in the following ways:

A minimum five year commitment

We know that making meaningful and sustainable positive changes to early years outcomes takes time. In each place, we are committed to working for a minimum of five years to properly embed a thorough change process.

A local backbone team


We provide capacity for collaborative action through 'backbone' teams of talented and passionate local people. They work in partnership with the whole community, supporting system join-up in the public, private and voluntary sectors, alongside supporting parents to be at the heart of driving change to services and positive outcomes for their children.

Access to expertise

Our backbone teams are supported by a national team which includes expertise in the delivery of early childhood programmes, and research and evaluation. The national team is supported by Thrive at Five's Board and Advisory Council to ensure decision-making takes account of the best available evidence.


Additional resource

We support the implementation of new activities by channelling additional capacity, technical expertise and funding to support local practitioners, organisations and parents to implement solutions where gaps are identified.



“Thrive at Five is taking us on an amazing journey, the children and the families in our community are benefitting, there is no doubt about it. I pledge to keep the magic alive.”

Reception teacher, Eaton Park School, Stoke-on-Trent



“What Thrive at Five has achieved in a year has been exceptional.”

Jon Rouse, City Director, Stoke-on-Trent City Council

Evaluating and replicating the Thrive at Five model

The Centre for Evidence and Implementation is evaluating our work and the Isos Partnership is helping us to develop a “playbook”: a step-by-step guide on how to roll out the Thrive at Five model. Our long-term ambition is to take an effective and replicable model to scale, across geographical areas where the work is most needed. We are currently working in two local authority areas, Stoke-on-Trent and Redcar and Cleveland, with the aim to roll out the model in two more areas by the end of 2025.

“I had been allocated a little girl who suffered with selective mutism. I would collect her from the classroom in silence – with not even a hello – but by reducing her anxiety, this little girl began to talk. I found it hard to stop her sometimes! Her anxiety switched her voice off in social situations but within our little group she felt confident to speak out.”

Jacqueline Thedens, Staffordshire University Student, delivering early language intervention

“Without coming to parent, baby and toddler groups there isn’t much you can do. Has my nephew changed? Massively. He doesn’t push and shove anywhere near as much. He’s talking more. Fine motor skills wise and stuff, he can grab and share. As somebody coming with a lot of depression, you feel a lot better after coming.”

Laura, carer, Stoke-on-Trent



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Contact us

Thank you for your interest. We would be happy to answer any questions you may have.

Please contact:

Aida Cable Chief Executive Officer
aida.cable@thriveatfive.org.uk

thriveatfive.org.uk

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