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2010

# Evaluating Sure Start in England

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## Publication Details

Melhuish, E. & Belsky, J. (2010). Evaluating Sure Start in England. In J. Oates (Eds.), *Supporting Parenting* (pp. 44-45). Milton Keynes, United Kingdom: The Open University.

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# Evaluating Sure Start in England

## **Abstract**

The National Evaluation of Sure Start (NESS) was commissioned to study Sure Start Local Programmes (SSLPs), addressing the nature of SSLP communities, programme implementation and impact on children, families and communities, as well as costeffectiveness.

## **Keywords**

sure, evaluating, england, start

## **Disciplines**

Education | Social and Behavioral Sciences

## **Publication Details**

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# Evaluating Sure Start in England

*While an initial evaluation of Sure Start Local Programmes showed mixed results, a second study found a wide range of positive outcomes*

The National Evaluation of Sure Start (NESS) was commissioned to study Sure Start Local Programmes (SSLPs), addressing the nature of SSLP communities, programme implementation and impact on children, families and communities, as well as cost-effectiveness (Belsky *et al.*, 2007).

The first evaluation phase compared the functioning of thousands of children aged 9 months and 36 months, and their families, living in 150 SSLP areas with counterparts in 50 communities destined to receive Sure Start programmes in the near future. Results revealed both small positive and negative effects (Belsky *et al.*, 2006). Whereas the relatively less disadvantaged families benefited somewhat from the programme, adverse effects emerged for the most disadvantaged families. Specifically, non-teenage mothers in SSLP areas engaged in less negative parenting and their 3-year-old children exhibited fewer behaviour problems and greater social competence. But children in SSLP areas from workless households, from lone-parent families or born to teenage mothers scored lower than their comparison counterparts on verbal ability, with those of teenage mothers also showing more behaviour problems and less social competence. The negative findings may have been the result of SSLPs failing to reach those families most in need.

In a second evaluation phase, children seen at 9 months of age with their families in the first phase were studied again at age 3, and compared with counterparts in similarly disadvantaged areas not receiving SSLPs. Second-phase findings showed multiple benefits of SSLP exposure and virtually no adverse effects: relative to comparisons, parents in SSLP areas used more services, engaged in more supportive parenting, and had more socially competent children (Melhuish *et al.*, 2008a).

Increases in the amount of child/family exposure to SSLPs and improvements in the quality of SSLP services over time may explain why the first phase of impact evaluation revealed some adverse effects of the programme for the most disadvantaged children and families, and why the second phase of evaluation revealed beneficial effects for almost all children and families living in SSLP areas (Melhuish *et al.*, 2008b).

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- *Findings from an initial evaluation of Sure Start showed small positive and negative effects.*
- *Adverse effects were most apparent in the more disadvantaged families.*
- *The second evaluation showed many positive effects and no significant negative effects.*

