

Support for children born prematurely could be the difference between success and failure in school

‘Narrow the gap’ for preterm children

EDUCATION

By Gabriella Jóźwiak

Each primary school classroom has as many as four prematurely born children. But according to the National Forum for Neuroscience in Special Education, few teachers are aware of this. Fewer still know how to recognise the specific educational needs of preterm children and how to address them. Yet experts say this population is growing, and liken the significance of their needs to those of autistic and Downs Syndrome children.

In May, the forum delivered a briefing to the government on the educational needs of children born preterm. Forum co-founder Barry Carpenter, visiting professor at the University of Worcester, wants the government to lead a study into improving teaching for prematurely born children. He is studying the educational outcomes and needs of preterm children in special schools, in partnership with schools network SSAT and premature babies charity Bliss. They want mainstream schools and parents to learn from the results and recognise preterm children’s special educational needs (SEN).

Medical advances

Carpenter says addressing the educational needs of preterm children has become more urgent as advances in medical science have boosted survival rates. “In 2000, only 23 per cent of prematurely born children survived,” he says. “Today, 63 per cent will, and are likely to have a disability that will give rise to special needs.” He says the needs of preterm children vary from having profound disabilities that require specialist care to SENs that are recognisable as existing behavioural conditions. “They do have particular learning pathways because the brain is learning differently,” he says.

“Preterm children are often in a state of hyper-arousal – they’re



Addressing the educational needs of preterm children has become more urgent in recent years

always on alert. If you’re constantly like that, you won’t be listening well in the classroom. Vision is the one sensory area that tends to get damaged. So teachers need to be aware that their visual processing – the ability to read and decode – can be delayed, as can their language development.”

Carpenter says preterm children commonly display low attainment in maths. He says 10 per cent are diagnosed with autism by the age of 10, and 60 per cent have an attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) diagnosis. “But these are not the children that scream and shout,” says Carpenter. “They have an inattention variety of ADHD where they flit from one thing to another – they’re not being disruptive.” He says few teachers are aware of the differences.

Carpenter wants head teachers to ask parents about their child’s birth history during the school admissions process. He says teachers will then be able to look out for signs that a child needs particular help and evaluate teaching methods. He says that with the right approach, teachers could help mitigate children’s problems. “We could reduce their anxiety and improve working memory,” he adds. “We could improve their emotional resilience and divert mental health problems

that tend to appear in adolescence.”

Bliss chief executive Andy Cole agrees that schools should address children’s birth history from the start. He says summer-born, preterm children face particular challenges. “If you should have been born in November and you’re born in August, the potential real gap is 14 or 15 months in the school year,” he says. Cole has worked with parents and local authorities to defer starting school, but he says a lack of clarity in the school system means councils’ understanding of the issue varies. “We would like the government to send out very clear guidance to local authorities that the birth history of a child is very important, because the system needs more flexibility,” he says.

Intensive SEN support

The Epicure longitudinal study of extremely preterm children that began in 1995 has shown that premature babies that do not defer starting school can perform just as well educationally as those who do, but only if they receive intensive SEN support. Cole says this gives a strong financial argument for early intervention. “They do as well, but the school and local authority have to invest more to get the same results,” he says.

Jessica Nash, head of special schools network at SSAT, says the

ABOUT PREMATURE BABIES

- Preterm children are those born less than 37 weeks from conception. They are considered “very preterm” at less than 32 weeks and “extremely preterm” at less than 28 weeks
- Only six per cent of teachers feel they have received sufficient training to teach prematurely born children (survey by University of Warwick)
- 80,000 children are born preterm in the UK every year. About 90 per cent survive (Medical Research Council)
- Common developmental characteristics of preterm babies include reduced cognitive capacity, social and behavioural difficulties, learning disabilities, and poor academic outcomes
- Up to 70 per cent of very preterm babies will require special educational needs services by middle school age (academic study, 2009)
- By the age of 11, 53 per cent of extremely preterm children in mainstream schools will need additional support
- Children born at 32 weeks or less are 50 per cent more likely than their full-term peers to have behavioural difficulties, such as ADHD, autism symptoms or depression

all-party parliamentary group for education has pledged to discuss the issue. SSAT is also planning to promote to mainstream schools the findings from Carpenter’s studies in special schools. “The plan is to host a families workshop that would include sharing the types of strategies schools can use to meet this group’s needs,” says Nash. “We are asking schools to encourage the child to be in charge of their own learning, but give them explicit structure and direction.”

SSAT hopes schools will test strategies to discover what works best. “The more that professionals understand the range of these children’s needs, the better able they are to respond,” says Nash.