Settling into the School Years: 
Follow-up of the Cardiff Child Development Study (CCDS)

It’s been some time since we sent you the DVD with highlights of your child’s first three years. Since we last saw you we have been busy looking at videos, listening to interviews, tabulating questionnaires and writing papers based on the findings from the CCDS. We feel very privileged to have such a unique insight into family life during the first decade of the new millennium! There has been a lot of interest in our study both nationally and internationally and because you have been so kind with your time our research findings are beginning to influence policy and practice.

Due to our success so far, we’ve been lucky enough to receive more funding from the Medical Research Council to meet with you all again, after the children have settled into primary school. It is because of your kindness in sharing little snapshots of your lives that we are able to keep the study going and make sure that we can capture family life in Wales. We are hoping to make contact with you over the coming months to ask if you would allow us to make another visit to your home, between the time your child is six and seven and a half years old. Meanwhile we’d like to tell you about some of our recent findings.
Sharing Is More Common than Aggression

Many people believe that human infants are naturally rather aggressive and have to be taught to share. Our study is one of the first to show that it’s actually the opposite: sharing is more common than aggression. We studied the children’s behaviour with other children they’d never met before in the birthday parties we held at the University. We’ve already told you that, when they were one-year-olds, the children were far more likely to share toys with the other partygoers than they were to tug on toys or try to strike out at the other children. This remained true when we held parties again when the children were between two-and-a-half and three years old. Most of them shared toys with the other children; about half tugged on toys; but very few ever tried to strike out at the other children. So we’ve shown that ‘the terrible twos’ are not so terrible after all!

Those children who were most likely to get frustrated or angry had cried more when they were babies. They had more difficult early lives and their mothers and fathers had often experienced problems with anger or depression. Even so, their overall levels of hitting others and tugging on toys were quite low and our findings show that even children who struggle with their emotions can interact well with other children. As we analyse our findings we are beginning to find out how complex young children are.

Imagination and Coping at the Birthday Parties

At the birthday parties, the children met two costumed characters, a Birthday Lady with a picnic basket and a bear. At the toddler parties, we could see the children’s imaginations at work. They pretended to eat the play food and offered cups of tea to their parents and the other children at the party. Some even offered play food to the bear! The children talked about what they were
imaging and pretending to do. However, the ability to imagine things means that sometimes we worry about things happening that we would not want. This was true for some children at the parties. After the bear left, some children expressed their worries that he might return. Other children were sad that the bear had gone away.

Our study showed that infants and toddlers can cope with an afternoon of challenging experiences. However, some infants found the parties more stressful than others and this was noticeable in their behaviour and their biology. Our analyses of the stress hormones in their saliva showed that infants whose parents had experienced times in their lives when they had felt low in mood took a little longer to settle down during the visit to the University.

Talking to Babies Really Matters

When we visited you when your baby was only six months old, we asked you to show your baby an activity board. We believed that this was a snapshot of the way you would ordinarily relate to your baby and it was great to hear many of you tell your babies all about the pictures on the board. How parents talk to babies really matters. If parents talked a lot, if they treated their babies as people with a mind, and if they used the melodic tone of voice we call ‘baby talk,’ their infants were better able to communicate with the researchers they met at the University. They developed better vocabularies and planning skills and they were less likely to show signs of anger or frustrated behaviour as toddlers.

The Next Phase of our Study

We will be contacting you about the details for the follow-up after your child turns six years of age. If your child is older than that now, we hope to visit you at home again before he or she is 7 ½ years old. We will catch up on what’s been happening in your family since we last saw you, ask you about how your child has settled into school,
and invite your child (and any new brothers and sisters who have since arrived) to play more games, including a special computer game we have invented for the purposes of our study. By doing this follow-up study, we are hoping to build upon what we’ve already done and learn more about the factors that promote children’s health and wellbeing. We would be delighted to see you again to hear your stories.

With very best wishes,

Dale Hay and the CCDS Team