



Wirral Child Health and Development Study

Winter 2014

MERRY CHRISTMAS
AND
THANK YOU!

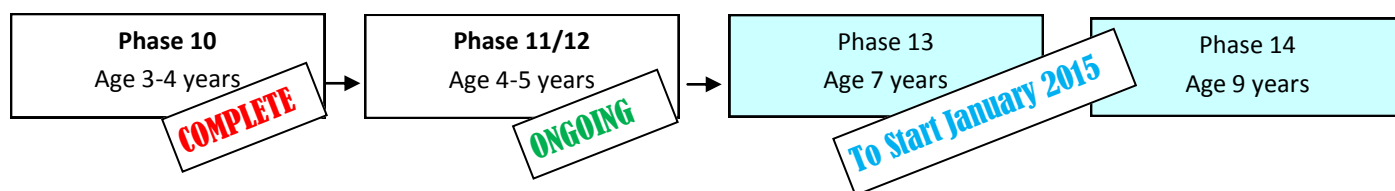


We are excited to let you know that the Medical Research Council (MRC) has awarded us another grant so that we can follow all the children, together with yourselves, in the Wirral Child Health and Development Study up to age 9. The MRC is backing our study because you have helped us follow your children all the way from pregnancy through the early years, and no other study in the world has done that the way we have. So this success is because of all of you. Future children and their parents will benefit from all of your efforts.



We would like to take this opportunity to thank all of you for your enthusiasm, time, patience and the many, many pages of questionnaires you completed. Please give an extra special thank you to your children who have taught us so much! Now for an update on the study...

We are currently busy planning the next phase and look forward to catching up with all of you again when your children are around 7 years old.



In the meantime, we are finishing off data gathering at phases 11 and 12 so if you've received a questionnaire recently please send it back to us as soon as you are able. If you've been meaning to send one back to us but it is still on the 'to-do' pile, we would love to have it back, no matter how old it is! You can post it to us at the address on the back page, or we would be happy to come out and collect it. Also if you have lost touch with us for any reason, we would love to hear from you - just complete the contact details slip on the back of this newsletter. We are always happy to hear from any families involved with the study!

Since our last newsletter...

Phase 10: 3 - 4 year assessment

We have finished Phase 10, where we invited all the families in the study to complete a home assessment when their child was around 3 and a half years old.

We visited over 800 families, bringing with us a suitcase full of toys, games and puzzles. The children played with our model animals, lego sets and dressing up outfits and won lots of stickers for their hard work. These tasks helped us to understand more about the children's language, memory, and their social and emotional development.



The main part of the assessment for mums was completing a set of questions about their child and family life. Many also joined in the fun by playing with their child on camera! Play is an important part of family life, one that can support the development of attachment, learning and communication skills. It is something we like to capture as part of our assessments each time we see First Steps families. We had a great response from fathers and father-figures who also gave their view of their child's development and life at home. It is really valuable for us to have multiple perspectives on each child's development. **Thank you for inviting us into your homes!**

Phase 11 and 12: 4 - 5 year assessment

For families in the more detailed part of the study, we have been carrying out mother and child assessments, including:

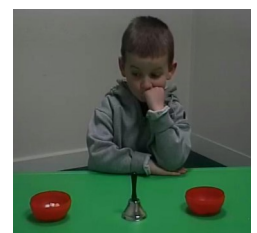
- Mother and child interactions during play.
- Computerised measures of emotion recognition and the ability to reason about other people's behaviour.
- Story-telling games tapping understanding of people's intentions and actions.
- Biological and physiological responses to social challenges.
- A set of tasks assessing overall cognitive development.
- Computerised and table top tasks assessing specific mental abilities, such as memory, attention and effortful control over their actions.

Effortful control is the ability to resist doing something we do almost automatically in order to do something less favoured and therefore more 'effortful' instead. See below.

'Snack Delay': How hard is it to wait for sweeties?...when you're 4?



In 'Snack Delay' children had to wait for five minutes without eating any of the sweets in front of them (whilst we secretly observed from the next room). Five minutes was just too long for some children, while others found that a quick lick of the sweets was enough to get them through! When they thought nobody was watching, we saw children talking to themselves,



singing 'One Direction' songs and chilling out in the comfy chair! All of the children enjoyed the sweets at the end and often said this was their favourite part of the assessment. We are also extremely grateful to over 500 families who completed postal questionnaires enabling us to link the face-to-face assessment data collected in the detailed study to the larger study population as a whole.

Fabulous First Steps Facts

The most popular boys names in the study are **Thomas** and **Jack**

The most popular girls names in the study are **Chloe** and **Lily**

At phase 10 you filled in a total of 36,585 pages of questionnaires!

By age 4 65% of our children had become big brothers or sisters!



We now have families living all over the British Isles and as far as Australia, Canada and the USA.

First Steps' families have completed 5,790 hours of child assessments!

We have had 3 grants from the MRC thanks to your efforts

We have collected over 2 litres of saliva for DNA and RNA analysis!

Our first scientific paper on your babies was reported in the Times of India reaching an audience of 20 million!

Fabulous First Steps Findings so far..

When your children were just a few weeks old you filled out a short questionnaire about how often you stroked your baby's back, tummy, head, arms and legs. We asked about this because important research in animals has shown that the amount of licking and grooming of their pups that mothers do in early life affects their baby's later physiology and behaviours. So we wanted to test whether something like this happens in humans. We found that where mothers had been more stressed (anxious or depressed) during pregnancy their children were more emotional at 7 months than other children, but stroking in early life reduced this effect. We have now found that the effect of stroking seems to last longer, right up to the last assessment when your children were 4.5 years! More stroking over the first few weeks of life seems to make children less anxious especially where their mothers were anxious during pregnancy. People keep asking us whether we would recommend that all mothers stroke their babies as much as possible. We cannot yet say 'yes' to this because it could be that doing a lot of stroking has some advantages, that we have measured, but might have disadvantages that we have not yet found. The best scientists wait to ensure that important findings can be repeated somewhere else in the world before they make recommendations for change. However, now on the basis of First Steps Study findings there are several other research groups in the World trying to test the importance of early stroking in child development. We have published two papers on this, and have another two in the pipeline, so thanks to you, stroking has really been put on the map.

When you had only just recovered from giving birth we asked some of you to bring your babies to the Lauries for the Neonatal Behavioural Assessment when we found out how they responded to sounds and sights, and to slightly annoying procedures such as having their outer clothes taken off. We found that in many ways babies change a lot, so those who were more emotional then were often quite calm by 7 months, and the other way round. Babies vary a lot even at that age, in how much they keep eye contact with an adult who moves their face from side to side. We have found that babies who do that a lot are more likely to respond to other children's emotions, based on the questionnaires, when they are 2.5 years old. So we think some babies come into the world more ready than other babies to make contact with people, starting with their parents. This could be important because we have also found that children who respond less to other children's emotions when they are 2.5 years, are more likely to get into fights when they are 4.5 years old. We are the first to find these things out so we need others to check them out, but if it is true, then it may be that some babies and young children need extra help from their parents to get in touch with other people, so they can get along better with other children.

Starting School

Since our last newsletter all of the First Steps children have made the major transition into starting full-time school. We know some children find this step easier than others and many researchers are trying to find out what early factors influence how ready children are to start school. 'School readiness' is about both behavioural readiness and academic readiness. Behavioural readiness means that children need to have behaviours that allow them to fit into school life, mix with other children and cope with the social and emotional demands of the school day. Academic readiness includes basic skills in understanding educational material (e.g. naming colours, shapes, numbers) and an ability to communicate. All First Steps parents were asked to report on these abilities at the time of starting school by filling in a measure included in the questionnaire pack. In addition, for the 2013 school intake of First Steps children, teachers were also asked to complete the same School Skills Survey developed by Cambridge University. These children were spread across 107 primary schools on Wirral and the rest of the UK! So we were really pleased that despite their busy workloads, staff from 103 of these schools successfully completed the measure to help the study out! We now plan to use all the information gathered in the preschool years from birth to identify early influences on later school readiness. We can also test out which aspects of school readiness best predict success in school in later life. We will aim to publish these findings in scientific journals to add to the knowledge of early years children's services and schools.

Why is teacher report so important?

Up until now we have only asked mothers and fathers to report on the First Steps children. Now that the children have started school we hope to collect information from teachers too and we will be able to give them vouchers for their time. Scientific research findings are always much stronger when based on the reports of several different people, this is because children sometimes behave in different settings in different ways. Life in school is often more structured than life at home and this can be challenging. Also children are expected to mix with many other children their own age, for example, sharing, taking turns and working out friendships every day. Teacher reports on how each child manages this are important, BUT FIRST WE WOULD ALWAYS GET YOUR WRITTEN PERMISSION before approaching your child's school teacher for any future study phases.

Thank you—hope to see you all again soon!

Our Contact Details

Address:
First Steps Study,
The Lauries Centre,
142 Cloughton Road
Birkenhead,
Wirral, CH41 6EY



Telephone: 0151 650 5490
Freephone: 0800 051 7597
Text: 07956 297 412
Fax: 0151 650 5491
E-mail: first.steps@liv.ac.uk

Have you had a change of address, telephone number or e-mail or will you be moving soon?

Please let us know by phoning or emailing us or completing the form below and posting it to the above address.

Participant's (Mum's) Name:

New Address:

Home Telephone:

Child's Name:

Work Telephone:

Child's D.O.B

Mobile:

GP Details: