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Life Chances

Last week the House of Commons gave over three hours to debating how we can improve life chances for the least well off in society. It was a great privilege for me to open the debate; it is an incredibly emotive subject and one which first drew me into standing for Parliament. I am far from alone in this; MPs from all parties come alive when debating how to give every child a real chance at success in life: it is something which needs urgent attention.

New figures show that we now have nearly a million young people unemployed and not in education. This is rapidly progressing from a terrible waste of talent to a full blown crisis. Something is clearly not working in our system.

It is an immensely thorny issue with all kinds of contradictory indicators and statistics. There is much traditional orthodoxy on all sides which needs to be challenged if we are going to look for real answers with fresh eyes. But thanks to the reports published by Frank Field and Graham Allen we have compelling proof that we need to act in the earliest phases of a child's life. By age five it is possible to make an astonishingly accurate projection of where that child will be in his or her 20's.

It means looking again at what we are doing in the early years; Sure Start and similar programmes are the right idea, but after ten years of investment the key early predictors of later educational success remained pretty much unchanged. So we need to think afresh about what is done, how it is done, and who benefits – how best to reach the hardest to reach. We especially need to support parents in difficult circumstances in deprived areas.

In the early years, most of the success factors are not rocket science: a healthy pregnancy, strong early attachment, spending time with baby, talking to her, reading, singing nursery rhymes and so on. But, though it may not be rocket science, as I know myself from recent experience, most new parents discover they have much to learn, however good their own childhood was.

But there is a bigger challenge with hard-to-reach families, whose own childhoods may not have been so good and who may not be so eager to learn. Reaching out to these parents is key if we are going put an end to ever more of our young people ending up out of school, out of work and out of options by the time they are 24. But that challenge is at the very heart of this debate and one I know there is a real appetite to rise to.