Taking part in order of appearance:

Ruth Walsh
Single mother, with a two year-old

Sir Michael Rutter
Sits on the government’s official evaluation of Sure Start, a professor
of developmental psychopathology

Sir Paul Ennals
Chief executive of the National Children’s Bureau

Naomi Eisenstadt
The first director of the Sure Start programme

Walter Gilliam
The director of the Edward Zigler centre at Yale University

Professor Edward Melhuish
Heads the National Evaluation of Sure Start

Sarah Teather
The children’s minister

Paul Ennals
From the National Children’s Bureau
WALSH: As an isolated parent suffering from depression, in a way I interacted and played with Billy more when I was in the children’s centre than I possibly did at home. I became less isolated and I think I became a, certainly, definitely a better mother.

ABRAMS: Ruth Walsh is a single mother with a two year-old. She’s campaigning against a council plan to withdraw funding from local Sure Start centres. She says without these centres, parents like her will just go under. And once you’ve met her, it’s pretty hard to argue with her.

WALSH: It would be a crime to lose it. I think without that, I was heading for a very, very dark place and I’m not sure that I would even still be here, to be quite honest. I certainly wouldn’t be the mother I am for Billy.

RUTTER: The aim was not primarily to improve things for parents. I mean that’s a desirable aim, but it was set up to improve the outcomes for children and that’s what one needs to be seeing as the main thing to be evaluated.

ABRAMS: And where is the evidence that Sure Start is improving things for children?

RUTTER: We don’t know. That is still lacking.

ABRAMS: That was Sir Michael Rutter – he sits on the government’s official evaluation of Sure Start. So - he ought to know what he’s talking about. Sure Start was one of the key policies with which Labour came to power in 1997.

And the coalition’s just underlined its commitment to keeping it going. And making it better.

But, here’s a question… and if you listen to anyone in the world of early years, it’s a seriously heretical question: Could this actually be a cut worth making? Twelve years and £10bn since Sure Start first drew breath – some people, like Sir Michael Rutter, who you just heard, are still struggling to describe what it’s done, for children.

We’ll hear more from him later. But first, a little history lesson.

ARCHIVE - GORDON BROWN SPEAKING IN PARLIAMENT: A sure start for all Britain's children is not only right but it is the best anti-crime, the best anti-drugs, the best anti-unemployment and the best anti-dependency policy for this country's future.

ABRAMS: Sure Start was one of the key policies with which Labour came to power in 1997. And its aims – spelt out there by Gordon Brown in 2000 – were nothing if not grand. Sure Start was going to help Britain to end both child poverty and social exclusion. It would do so through a network of locally-run children’s centres which would bring together health, education, child development. It would make sure children hit the ground running when they started school. The benefits were going to be endless.
ENNALS:  It was a time for dreaming and it was a time for drawing up some of the big, big ideas. I think there was no idea bigger than Sure Start

ABRAMS:  According to Sir Paul Ennals, chief executive of the National Children's Bureau, it was full steam ahead from day one.

ENNALS:  Well, in the early days of New Labour, there was that sense that there was a great opportunity. You may remember that mood of optimism that many of the barriers of the past could potentially be overcome.

ABRAMS:  What would you have hoped it could achieve?

ENNALS:  The government always recognised that in the long-run if you were to end child poverty, it was not just a matter of boosting the incomes of the poorest families, but it was also a matter of boosting the skills of the next generation so they would be in a position to keep themselves out of poverty. And what that meant was trying to get on top of some of the biggest issues as early as possible because even in those days the research evidence was showing us that the most cost effective way of tackling challenges of disadvantage is to tackle those challenges when the children are at their youngest.

ABRAMS:  Sure Start was rolled out with breathtaking speed – from 60 centres in 1999 to 500 in 2004. Today, there are 3,500. Naomi Eisenstadt was the first director of the programme - and she ran it for seven years. She's a major evangelist for its virtues. Yet even she was saying at the time - things were moving too fast.

EISENSTADT:  In 2000, in the Spending Review 2000 we moved from 250 to 500. My advice to ministers was: “We don’t know anything. We haven’t even set up the evaluation contract yet. Why are you doubling the size of the programme?” The truth is that ministers did not believe it couldn’t work. On the other hand, I have to say that my advice at the time was don’t expand. Now my view is that ministers were right and I was wrong. And the reason that’s my view is because if we had waited for the evaluation results and then started expansion, there’d be no Sure Start today. And I’m very proud that we have an infrastructure of children’s centres that are available to all children.

ABRAMS:  But you said your advice was not to expand at that point. Why did you say that?

EISENSTADT:  Well because we didn’t have any evaluation results in and I thought we should wait. And I have to say ministers felt very… (Sighs) There’s something about when you’re in government when you’ve been out of government for a long time, you really want to make change happen on the ground. You really see the need. You really think we have a chance now to do something that really makes a difference for children and we’re not going to wait
ABRAMS: So, the person in charge of the programme knew there was a need for solid evidence. But somehow that faith, that it was all going to work, seems to have taken over. Well there’s no harm in going full steam ahead - is there - if you’re definitely on the right course? To be fair, Birkbeck College and Oxford University were brought on board at an early stage, to evaluate the programme. The rhetoric - to use a phrase very much in vogue at the time – was that this was going to be “evidence-based policy-making.” But at that point – or so it seems with the glorious benefit of hindsight – it all started to go wrong. Sir Michael Rutter, who sits on the advisory board for the evaluation, says ministers were told they’d need what’s known as a randomised controlled trial. That means children would be randomly allocated to a Sure Start group or a non-Sure Start group. The outcomes for both groups would then be compared, after a few years.

RUTTER: Academics were I think pretty unanimous in their view that a randomised control trial was the way ahead. Randomised control trials are not perfect, but it would have been perfectly straightforward to decide to introduce Sure Start in some areas and not others, and instead of leaving that up to chance to do it in a randomised controlled way with all the proper safeguards that went along with that. But they didn’t do that and they didn’t allow that.

ABRAMS: Who vetoed that and why?

RUTTER: Government vetoed that. I have no way of knowing the inside story as to who did what, but the instructions were clear.

ABRAMS: What do you think the thinking was? You know the academics are saying to ministers or their advisers “if you want to know whether this works, you’ve got to do this” and they’re saying “no - do that - why?”

RUTTER: I guess probably because they were worried that for something which they’d placed such a lot of emphasis on, evidence that it was less than perfect would be unwelcome.

ABRAMS: So, the Sure Start ship steamed out into the wide blue ocean without proper charts. Well, to be fair, not quite. Because there was already a long-standing programme just like Sure Start, which had produced lots of evidence about what worked. Labour ministers often talked about it. It was called Head Start, and it’d been running in the United States since the sixties.

GILLIAM: From what I can gather, it appears that Sure Start was informed by the passions of Head Start, but not as much by the sobriety of Head Start that followed in the 1980s and 90s.

ABRAMS: Walter Gilliam’s the director of the Edward Zigler centre at Yale University – Zigler was one of the founding fathers of Head Start, and the centre continues his work. Dr Gilliam says the history of Sure Start’s a history of missed opportunities. To be precise, missed opportunities to not repeat the mistakes already made in America.
GILLIAM: The Head Start programme has certainly had a lot of successes in its time, but it’s also had an awful lot of challenges, and many of the challenges have come from the fact that when it began in 1965 it quickly grew into a national programme before there was an opportunity to be able to make sure that the local agencies knew exactly what they were doing and exactly what the curriculum would look like with these young children. And as a result we’ve been fighting the quality battle ever since.

ABRAMS: How long had Head Start been going when it was rolled out nationally?

GILLIAM: It rolled out almost immediately - within a year or two.

ABRAMS: Similar situation in the UK with Sure Start.

GILLIAM: Shockingly similar.

ABRAMS: Like Sure Start, Head Start had begun life with the aim of cutting poverty – that didn’t happen. Ministers here knew about Head Start’s troubles, of course. There was even a congressional inquiry going on - right at the point when they were making the big decisions. But they didn’t want too much national control of Sure Start, for political reasons – it needed to be ‘owned’ by local communities; nobody wanted to be accused of ‘nanny state-ism’. And they were just convinced that no matter what had happened elsewhere, their programme would reduce social exclusion.

But this raises rather a fundamental question: Why were they so sure? Certainly there were lots of people saying this was going to happen. But where was the evidence? Sir Michael Rutter thinks it was always hopelessly over ambitious.

RUTTER: To see this as a way of dealing with child poverty was naïve.

ABRAMS: Are you saying that you can’t really alleviate poverty through early childhood centres of this sort?

RUTTER: No. I mean it may help indirectly, but no I think that you’ve got to deal with it in terms of policies in relation to income distribution, benefits, taxation, so on. It’s the structural effects that are much more important in relation to poverty and we have a real dilemma in how best to deal with that.

ABRAMS: So, what happened next was hardly surprising. In 2005, with a general election looming, and big announcements about yet another expansion already in the ether, the first results from the evaluation, began to come in.
ABRAMS: I’ve got a copy here. And, it doesn’t make comfortable reading to be honest. Sure Start hadn’t alleviated poverty and in fact, the report says the poorest families living in Sure Start areas may even have been disadvantaged by it. It’s not really clear why – but certainly, the services were better-used by families who weren’t quite so badly off. And there was only patchy evidence that Sure Start, was making any difference, at all.

Belatedly, ministers decided to do what the US evidence suggested they should have done initially. They brought much more central control into the programme. Naomi Eisenstadt, then the director of Sure Start, has nothing but praise for the way the crisis was handled.

EISENSTADT: I have huge respect for ministers because they held their nerve. They didn’t say we’re going to cut this programme. They said tell us what the problem is and how do we fix it. And the advice we gave to ministers about what we needed to do, they did take. So for me I think to say that it all went smoothly - of course it didn’t; but to say that we learned as we went along. I think that was the right thing to do.

ABRAMS: There were big, grand claims made about poverty, about social exclusion. That was never going to work, was it? If you look at the States the evidence was already there that those great big aims were never going to be met.

EISENSTADT: Well of course they expected too much, and I think because there’s no magic bullet.

ABRAMS: Difficult times, for sure. But, it was early days, and ministers were still optimistic, about the effects Sure Start might have, longer term - on health, education – even crime. And so, they did what ministers do - they slimmed down its aims, so it’d be more likely to meet them. Sure Start’s anti-poverty phase came abruptly to an end. Now it took on a rather more pragmatic mantle – henceforth, it’d be all about education.

In this new phase, the programme had just two official targets. The first was to increase the number of registered child minders. The second was to raise educational attainment - particularly by narrowing the gap between the poorest, and the rest. And, when the latest evaluation came out last year - looking at five year-olds who’d been in the programme since birth - it seemed a whole lot more positive.

It said worklessness seemed to have dropped in Sure Start areas. And parents really felt Sure Start was making a difference. They thought their homes are happier, more stable places, with better discipline. They even thought their children were healthier.
ABRAMS: It is encouraging. But – what worries me about it is that in most of the areas the researchers looked at, there was no change at all. And most of the positive effects they found weren’t independently measured. They were reported by parents. Professor Edward Melhuish, who heads the National Evaluation of Sure Start, says there has been progress.

MELHUISH: We’ve been operating now, Sure Start, for roughly 10 years. We’ve overcome some of the problems and many of the issues have improved, but still there’s a great deal of room for further improvement.

ABRAMS: You looked at 21 measures, there were eight significant effects.

MELHUISH: Yes.

ABRAMS: Of those eight significant effect, there was one that you could certainly measure that was positive, which was lower body mass index, less obesity.

MELHUISH: Yes, yes.

ABRAMS: There were five which were reported by mothers…

MELHUISH: Yes.

ABRAMS: …that they felt better - very much subjective measures.

MELHUISH: Yes.

ABRAMS: There was one measure that you could measure that was actually negative - parents less likely to attend parents’ evenings…

MELHUISH: Yes.

ABRAMS: … and one where mothers, some mothers actually reported more depressive symptoms. I mean it doesn’t seem like a complete ringing endorsement, does it?

MELHUISH: I wouldn’t say it was a complete ringing endorsement, no.

ABRAMS: A study that finds mothers actually feel happier and more depressed at the same time does need to be questioned. But the most concerning thing about the latest evidence, is that it doesn’t show any measurable impact by Sure Start, on children’s attainment when they go to school. None at all. Overall – listen to this – “There was limited evidence that Sure Start programmes benefited children directly.”

Professor Melhuish does have an explanation, for why Sure Start might not have noticeably affected children’s readiness to learn.
MELHUISH: When the children were three years-old, we found that the children had improved social development, improved health outcomes; and there was improved parenting in those areas, which seem to be a consequence of the Sure Start programme. Then when we followed up the same children when they were five-year-old, we also found improved health and improved parenting, but we didn’t find the same benefits for social development. But this is because in the intervening period pre-school education had been made freely available to every child in the country, so that meant that the non Sure Start children were getting pre-school education between ages three and five anyway. And that probably led those three year-olds not in Sure Start programmes to catch up with the Sure Start programmes on social development, and that’s why we didn’t find a difference at five years.

ABRAMS: I guess the obvious question then is if the other children catch up through being in nursery education…

MELHUISH: Yes.

ABRAMS: … why bother with Sure Start?

MELHUISH: Well it’s not… I mean there were still benefits at age five. I mean we still showed the health benefits, we still showed the parenting benefits, which in the long-term might lead to longer term child outcome benefits.

ABRAMS: So the message from the academics is still the same – let’s hold our nerve. It should work out in the longer term. OK, it won’t cut poverty. And if we want children to do better at school - we could focus on improving nursery education.

But it might lead to health benefits. And parents really, really like it.

We put some of the findings to Ruth Walsh – the mother from West London who said it almost literally saved her life. She found them hard to believe.

WALSH: I know in my heart, in my soul that it’s benefited my child. And that’s not just because it’s benefited me. I’ve seen other children come to the children’s centre and they develop and they grow and they become socialised. I’ve seen the difference the children’s centre makes to other children. How this study can’t see that is just quite frankly beyond me. If it does just help parents, if that is the reality of it - yes it is of huge value. But that isn’t … that is not the true picture.

ABRAMS: I’m not knocking her. If parents who are struggling genuinely feel better because of Sure Start, that is a positive. And there does seem to be clear evidence that really good Sure Start programmes can make a difference to children - in all sorts of ways. The problem is, too many of them, aren’t good enough. Ask any of the academics studying Sure Start, and they’ll tell you those weak headline results, are masking a multitude of sins, and virtues.
ABRAMS: And to some extent, the coalition government’s taken that on board. Last week Sarah Teather, the children’s minister, restated the government’s commitment to keeping Sure Start - and improving standards. But even she admits the evidence isn’t strong.

TEATHER We’ve had a long running evaluation of Sure Start that to begin with was only looking actually at the initial early local programmes, but we’re expecting more information to come in over the next few months really, so a more detailed evaluation. And what the evaluation suggested was that the early local programmes did have an impact on behaviour for the whole population. But I should say that our knowledge base really about children’s centres and what works is still in some ways quite low, and part of the reason we’re making the changes that we’re making to children’s centres is to try and build on what we know works but also to give the opportunity for children’s centres to innovate more.

ABRAMS: I mean when you look at the national evaluation of Sure Start, as I’m sure you have, there’s no evidence in there, is there, that it’s raised educational attainment, there’s no evidence it’s cut child poverty? The best thing you can really say about it is that the parents love it and think it works. How are we going to make sure it gets better?

TEATHER (over) That’s … that’s not quite what it says, Fran. But I mean, as I said, this was an early, early programme, so this was looking at the initial local programmes. But I mean I do think that there’s an awful lot more that we need to do to improve the way in which children’s centres are targeting those children who most… and families who most need that support.

ABRAMS: The government’s been looking for political consensus on what to do about the early years. It’s commissioned a virtual blizzard of reports. The current field of experts includes two Labour MPs - Graham Allen and Frank Field – plus the chief executive of the Action for Children charity, Dame Clare Tickell. It seems Sure Start’s entered yet another new phase – instead of being about poverty, or education, now it’s all about child development. The new buzz phrase is ‘Early Intervention.’

And so the whole debate seems to have moved on from huge, sweeping theories to a series of small, very specific ones. There’s a particular claim that keeps cropping up – it’s about how children’s brains are 80% developed by the time they’re three. And how if we don’t make the most of this crucial window of opportunity, all is lost. Sir Michael Rutter, who’s on the Sure Start evaluation board, is a professor of developmental psychopathology. So I thought he’d know about it. I showed him the front cover of Graham Allen’s report.

What does this – I mean there’s a picture here of a normal brain and an extremely neglected brain. The normal brain’s about twice as big. I mean what do you make of that?
RUTTER: Well I don’t believe a word of it. It’s overly dramatic. It is true that good studies have shown that extreme neglect has effects on brain size. That’s true, but it’s nothing like as dramatic as this and these pictures wrongly imply you can look at a brain and say, ah, that’s from a deprived child, that’s from a normal child. It’s not like that.

ABRAMS: Let me just … I’ve just, I’ve written down a few quotes from the Graham Allen report that I’d like to just read to you. “The early years are a very sensitive period when it’s much easier to help the developing social and emotional structure of the infant brain after which the basic architecture is formed for life.” I mean that’s just a bald statement in this report. I mean is it right?

RUTTER: No it’s not so. It is true that for certain kinds of things there is a window, a sensitive period if you like, when things happen; but the idea that brain development stops after age three is just wrong.

ABRAMS: OK, so this isn’t the only argument for “early intervention”. It’s also about good parenting, in part. But this brain science idea does keep cropping up. The children’s minister, Sarah Teather, admits it isn’t the strongest part of the case.

TEATHER: The evidence is very clear that the early years are absolutely critical. Academics may argue about whether or not it is the only critical moment and whether or not interventions at other stages can change some of the other patterns that have been ingrained in the early years or not. I mean I have a pharmacology degree, but I’m afraid I’ve been out of medical science for some years, so I probably should stick to the politics.

ABRAMS: So, we should rein back a bit on the brain science. And some of the other evidence that keeps being repeated’s pretty thin, too. There’s a graph, which gets reproduced all over the place. It shows for every pound invested in the early years, you get £7 back. Where does it come from? Paul Ennals from the National Children’s Bureau explains.

ENNALS: The US has done more evidence on the benefits of early intervention than anyone else and much more than us, and some of it is very useful but we always have to be very cautious when analysing it. First, many of their early intervention programmes are looking at the impact on very poor families, and the biggest cost benefit that they show is a reduced number of 18 year-olds going into prison, and in the United States anything up to one in four of their target population goes into prison at about 18. Now in this country the proportions going into prison are much less. What that means is even if we delivered the same programme to the same population in this country, the cost benefit here would be significantly reduced because we wouldn’t see a similar reduction in the number going into prison. It doesn’t mean the programme might not still be right, but those evaluations that show a seven to one ratio in the States - one dollar in one year saves seven dollars when the young person has become 18 or 19 – a seven to one ratio will probably produce a two to one ratio, two point five to one ratio in this country.
ABRAMS: So, our best evidence about what we can save, through early intervention, is based largely on the prison budget of a country which locks up five times as many people as we do. Mind you, if Sure Start saved any money, it’d still be worthwhile – given the current bill’s £2bn a year. But the prospects don’t look good. Despite that, last week the work and pensions secretary, Iain Duncan Smith, launched a plan - for ‘Early Intervention Bonds.’ – investors are supposed to pay for these programmes, on the basis that the government’ll pay them back later, out of the savings.

The city’ll decide whether these bonds are a good buy, or not. Meanwhile the government has come up with one clever financial wheeze. It’s announced a rise in early years spending. But – it’s given the money to local councils which are facing massive budget cuts – and which can, if they want, spend it on something else. It’s called ‘localism’, – its all about relinquishing control, letting communities decide. Just the kind of thing that led to virtually no measurable gains in Sure Start’s first five years. Paul Ennals of the National Children’s Bureau, suspects it won’t work.

ENNALS: I think the research evidence is clearest that children learn better if they are supported by well trained and well qualified staff. That services are most effective if they’re integrated - in other words if they bring together health, social care and education together in a joined up model for children; if services are not only available for the most vulnerable, but are also somewhat more universal. Put simply, services only for poor children tend to end up as poor services.

ABRAMS: Do you think that’s where we’re going at the moment? Are we heading for good, effective services with well trained staff which are available to everyone?

ENNALS: I think the biggest change we’re seeing at the moment is that the government doesn’t see it’s their job to determine what will be done in the future in early years’ provision. I am most nervous that we will end up preserving children’s centres with insufficient qualified staff and insufficient joined up services.

ABRAMS: The thing about Sure Start is, no-one’s ever going to abolish it because it’s popular – and it can be anything a government wants it to be. Social leveller, jump start for the education system, means of making the poor into better parents. But is it actually going to work? Sarah Teather, the children’s minister, very much hopes so.

TEATHER: It’s really a question of trying to use some commonsense and making sure that centres are more responsive to local need. So we’re going to do that through a number of ways. First of all, we’re about to begin trialling Payment by Results, so we’ve set some outcomes. We want them to focus on making sure children are ready for school, that their child development is good. We want them to focus on parents’ aspirations and skills because the evidence says that’s what makes the difference. We want them to look at child and family health because we know that will make a difference to children’s outcomes
ABRAMS: But academics are telling us that it’ll only work if the quality is tightly controlled. Surely leaving parents and cash strapped local authorities to deal with it’s a recipe for failures, isn’t it?

TEATHER: I mean I’d love to tell you that Whitehall’s experience of trying to run everything from the centre meant that quality could always be tightly controlled, but I think we both know that that’s not the case. And actually local authorities are the right people to make decisions about commissioning services in their local area.

ABRAMS: So Sure Start isn’t going to end poverty. It isn’t the most obvious way of getting children ready to learn. And it probably isn’t going to save the huge sums of money some people seem to think it will. So - why bother?

Well – I’m not sure it matters, whether Sure Start survives, or not. But I do still think we should carry on putting money into helping the poorest families - while their children are young. Because there are programmes that work - education, health, parenting. So, instead of letting a thousand flowers bloom – again – we need to find out what those programmes are doing – and do more of it.

We need less of the political slogans. And more focus on the real evidence, about what actually works.