

Breakthroughs for children in the UK

The first playgroups and after school clubs in the UK

During the Second World War, children suffered through the conflict having nowhere safe to play, often playing unsupervised on dangerous bombsites. Save the Children took on this challenge and created children's play centres in the air raid shelters of the large cities, allowing children to play in a supervised and safe atmosphere. We built on this work in the late 1940s and pioneered the first after-school clubs for 8-14 year olds and the first 'nursery playgroup' for younger children. These were the first groups of this kind in the UK and have now become the norm for children.

Free school milk and school dinners

In 1933, a report published by Save the Children confirmed the importance of school meals to children's nutrition and development. Save the Children used this to campaign for free school meals and milk. In 1944, this became mandatory and now more than 60 years on, the most vulnerable children in the UK are still able to receive the nutritional benefits of this work.

Juvenile custody as a last resort

In the 1980s and beyond, if a young person or child committed a crime, he or she would be imprisoned. Save the Children believed that children should not be locked up and worked on alternatives to detention for young offenders. We set up community-based alternatives, such as befriending schemes, and we led on the development of intermediate treatment that allowed an 'at risk' child to remain at home but be involved in activities, informal education and social training to prevent further offending. The policy of using custody as a last resort for children and young people is now a central principle of juvenile justice legislation and policy across the UK and indeed in international standards.

'Child-friendly' hospital care

In the past, when a child or young person went into hospital they were treated as adults and no consideration was given to the different needs of children. Save the Children believed that giving children the opportunity to play in hospital would have powerful therapeutic benefits and would also reassure children frightened by this alien environment. In 1963, Save the Children started the first hospital playgroup in the UK at the Brook Hospital in London. We rolled out play schemes around the UK and only finished the work when the NHS accepted the principles. It is now standard practice for hospitals to have facilities that are tailored for children and young people.

Child-focused policies for children with imprisoned parents

In 1971, internment was introduced in Northern Ireland, which allowed the government to indefinitely detain suspected terrorists without trial. At that time, there was no consideration given to the impact that an imprisoned parent can have on a child. Save the Children and the Quakers established the first visitor centre for internees' families, with Save the Children providing the childcare. This marked the start of Save the Children's role as a powerful advocate for the rights of this particular group of children. Through this work we raised key issues: the importance of minimising the harmful impact on a child of having a parent imprisoned; the need to provide information; alternative services and support for the families of prisoners; and the need to maintain good contact between children and imprisoned parents. Child-friendly visitor centres and their associated services became a feature of all prisons in Northern Ireland and spread through the UK and beyond. Much of this work has been taken over by other voluntary organisations and much of the prison-based work is now mainstreamed. The Home Office now requires all future prisons to include child-friendly visitor centres.