

Several constituents have written to me about childhood literacy.

I am passionate about early childhood literacy. It was the subject of my maiden speech in parliament and I continue to champion policies which support children from the earliest years.

While it is clear that children of different classes are born with an equal distribution of ability the social class gap in attainment opens up by 22 months old. The best odds of a pupil who is eligible for free school meals achieving the expected standard occur in the Foundation Stage, and even then the odds are that they are two and a half times less likely to achieve it than the more affluent pupils. The odds worsen at the end of Key Stage 1 and remain about three times less likely to achieve through to age 19.

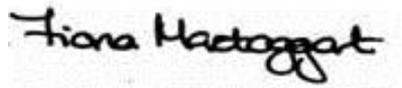
And that is why the early years are so crucial and especially why reading, which can unlock other areas of learning, is the most important skill. The cuts to early years services, e.g. childcare and Sure Start which play such vital roles in child development risk making Britain's attainment gap, which is wider than comparable countries, worse. I am strongly of the view that we need high quality early years services, led by qualified teachers which help children to use their instinct for play to become a driver for learning.

I've always supported this cause, and I believe that as well as providing quality teaching and learning for children we must help parents to play a role. That means helping parents to speak and read English. To do that I have campaigned for free ESOL classes and I support "Quick Reads" which are short, interesting books aimed at getting adults reading.

But if we can tackle the problem of illiteracy at an early age we can make a real difference. Sharing songs and stories, as they do through music time in Slough libraries, can make a real contribution but there is no substitute for properly resourced early childhood services and I assure you I will support the Read on. Get on. campaign in any way I can.

I will press the Secretary of State for Education to act on the points made by the campaign.

Yours ever,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Fiona Mactaggart". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Fiona Mactaggart MP