We have now completed the age 7 assessment wave (Phase 13) on the study and are busy carrying out the age 9-10 year assessments (Phase 14). We had such a fantastic response from families at age 7 years and we are incredibly grateful for all your support. At age 9 we are hoping that all of our First Steps families will visit us in our study base (The Lauries Centre, Birkenhead) and we are also carrying out some home visits. See page 2 for more information on the age 9 assessment.

This wave marks the 10 year anniversary of First Steps, we can’t believe how much the time has flown by! The children still continue to delight and amaze us every time we see them, and we work hard to try and make the assessments as enjoyable and interesting as possible for them, largely helped by our infamous ‘prize cupboard’!

We have seen over 350 families so far at age 9 and we are busy collecting questionnaires from class teachers about each child’s behaviours, emotions, relationships and performance in school. So far at age 9 we have 93 schools on the Wirral and across the UK who have helped us, and at age 7 we reached a grand total of 156 schools who gave the study their support!

We will be seeking further grant funding to continue the First Steps Study at age 11 and 13 years. We know that adolescence is an important period of development and we could learn so much from studying all of your children during this time. We will let you all know if we are successful in gaining the extra funds, later in the year.

So far the information we have collected from the First Steps families has led to 14 published papers in scientific journals. We have had important findings reported in national newspapers and presented them to other scientists and clinicians in conferences all over the world. Locally we have presented the results to health professionals, head teachers and council leaders.

We recently ran our own conference at the University of Liverpool to jointly celebrate 10 years of the study and our new child development study in India (see back page for more info). None of this would have been possible without the help of all our study families on the Wirral and beyond. THANK YOU!!

If your child is already 9 or 10 years old and you haven’t heard from us then please do not hesitate to get in touch, we would love to hear from you.

Our contact details are on the back page.

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One of our study children seeming very happy with her thank you prize!
Phase 14: Assessment in The Lauries Centre for everyone

For the first time we are inviting everyone to visit our child development lab at our study base in The Lauries Centre in Birkenhead. This allows us to keep the assessment more standardised (the same for all families) and means we can make use of our computer set-up and recording equipment here. This now means that everyone can have a DVD recording of the assessment to keep, as well as the usual shopping vouchers and prize for your child. We have designated parking spaces or we can provide a free taxi to bring you in. For our families who live further afield we can re-pay travel costs. When you cannot manage to get in to The Lauries Centre we are also carrying out some home visits, but we prefer mum and child to come in to see us if at all possible.

The age 9 assessment involves:

- A mini interview to help us learn about how 9 year olds spend their free time
- An online ball throwing game “Bloxy Beachball”
- Mother (or primary carer) and child joint play tasks and discussions
- A set of games and puzzles assessing child cognitive development
- A computerised task for the children assessing effortful control over their actions
- Some questions about friendships and how children behave in school
- And most important of all, a trip to the prize cupboard at the end of the visit!

Now that the children are older they are naturally more curious about why they are taking part in the study and what it means to take part - so we’ve written some bits about this in the ‘Kids Corner’ on page 3.

First Steps Findings...

If you would like to see the full list of our recent findings then you can see these on our study website (www.liverpool.ac.uk/psychology-health-and-society/research/first-steps/).

As you know we are interested in the different possible ways in which stress in pregnancy might influence different aspects of children’s development over time. We have told you some of our findings in previous newsletters. Here are some new ones!

Some of you may recall giving us samples of your saliva in late pregnancy. You kindly stored them in your freezer for us! We used these samples to test how much stress hormone (called cortisol) was present over the course of two days. We have now shown that mothers’ stress levels at this time actually predict infant weight at birth, but this works differently depending on whether the baby is a boy or a girl. Higher stress in mothers in later pregnancy predicted increased birthweight in boys but decreased birthweight in girls.

This is not the first finding in which we have found opposite effects in boys and girls. Many of you will recall bringing your baby in to see us when they were only 4 to 8 weeks of age to complete a neonatal examination. We have now also found that boy babies whose mothers’ saliva contained more of the stress hormone cortisol in late pregnancy, actually showed more fussing and crying in the examination at one month of age. Strikingly, girl babies showed the opposite effect, with lower levels of fussing and crying. We think this may possibly be important for children’s long term patterns of emotional and behavioural responses to stressful events in life but we need to test this as they grow up!

In addition to the role of stress in parents’ and children’s lives we are also very interested to see how different aspects of parenting influence the development of young children and particularly their readiness to start school at age 4 or 5. We have now found that supportive parenting observed during play at the home visit at age 3.5 years has been shown to predict better teacher rated scholastic and linguistic ability in children at the time they start school. These findings help to underline the importance of early parenting support for families in the preschool years.
Fabulous First Steps Facts

At this age we’re asking our 9 year olds what they do in their free time, the top five activities so far have been: playing on a tablet, playing out, watching TV, reading and sports...

By age 7, 80% of mothers were in full or part-time work/education

We now have families living in 10 different countries all across the world - and 25 different counties across the UK!

The total height of all the children we saw at age 7 is over 17,000cm - that’s nearly nine Big Bens!

2 in 3 of our First Steps children have one or more siblings

Teachers have reported that 84% of First Steps children like being in school, at least some of the time!

85% of our children are right-handed, 14% left-handed and 1% are ambidextrous

...the top three sports played by our First Steps children are football, running and swimming!

Kids corner - what does it mean to be a First Steps child?

The First Steps study is a scientific research study which follows the development of first born children, born on the Wirral between August 2007 and May 2009

What is research? And why is it important?

Research is how we learn and make discoveries. Research happens in all different areas of life. Toy companies will look at what types of toys children like, to help them make new products. In science, we carry out research to try and help people. In the First Steps Study, we are trying to find out what helps children to grow up and feel healthy and happy. We need to study a large group of children from different backgrounds to learn about how they develop differently - with different strengths and different difficulties. You and your family have been helping us for a long time now - since you were a baby growing inside your mum! So every single one of you has helped us make new scientific discoveries, which we can use to help other children in the future. WELL DONE!

What kind of research is First Steps?

We study over 800 children (you!) by seeing each of you for assessments every couple of years. At First Steps you help us to learn about physical body outcomes, like how tall children grow, but also about behaviour, abilities and emotions. All children have different things that they are good at and different things that they struggle with. You will all know that being able to read, write, and do maths are important skills for school. But there are other important skills, such as being able to tell how other people are feeling, to control your temper, to sit still and pay attention some of the time, be able to solve simple problems, to get along with other people and there are many more. We look at all different types of abilities at First Steps, and sometimes that can seem a bit strange when you are used to tests at school which have ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ answers. At First Steps we want to learn about the individual struggles and strengths of all children. We all have different ones! By studying lots of different children like you we will be able to learn how to help other children with the things that they struggle with, and how to improve their abilities and develop strengths.

Why am I in the First Steps study?

To practice ‘good science’ we need to study all different types of children, not just children who have particular strengths or difficulties. Your mum decided to help us when she was pregnant with you and so now we want to also thank you for helping us as you grow up! We really could not do this without you! THANK YOU!
We are excited to introduce to you our new study in India!

Thanks to your help, the First Steps study has become so relevant internationally that we are now running a similar project in India! We have called it the Bangalore Child Health and Development Study. What we would really like to find out is whether the same results from the First Steps study can be seen in another country or whether some aspects of mothers' and children's lives work out very differently across the UK and India.

We recently asked 912 mothers who live in Bangalore to take part in a study from pregnancy and during the first 2 years of their child's life, as we did in the first phases of the First Steps Study research.

Alongside mothers, we are involving dads, grandparents and other significant members of the family as, in India, families more often live all together in the same home compared to the UK, and people often share responsibility for the daily care of children.

Like we did in the UK, we are asking families to see us either at home or in the child development centre (at the NIMHANS Centre for Well Being) when children are 8 weeks, 6 months, 1 and 2 years old. Mothers and other key caregivers have been asked to complete detailed interviews and questionnaires about their emotional state and the new baby, and to let us observe them playing with their children. We are also assessing children's behavioural, cognitive (mental) and language development.

We have already found out that mothers in India play with their babies in a different way (giving more instructions and teaching compared to UK mothers who talk more about their children's emotions and preferences), but we don't know yet whether this makes any difference on the later child development. We will be looking at this as the children grow up!

Last October, we organised an International Conference where colleagues from all over the world shared experiences in running long-term child development studies and doing cross-cultural research, and we presented information about First Steps and our new study in India.

Investigators from the Bangalore Child Health and Development Study, including Profs Sharp and Hill and the Director of NIMHANS, at the International Conference held in Liverpool, October 2017

Keep in touch

Don't forget to let us know of any change in address, phone number or email address. You can call us free on 0800 051 7597, text us on 07956297412, email us at first.steps@liv.ac.uk or write to us at First Steps Study, The Laueries Centre, 142 Claughton Road, Birkenhead, CH41 6EY.

Don't forget to look at our website: www.liv.ac.uk/psychology-health-and-society/research/first-steps/

Your views on First Steps! What does it mean to be in the First Steps study?

We would love to hear from you about your views and experiences of taking part in the research study.