

Key Messages

1

There is a strong case for investing in both universal and targeted evidence-based programmes that aim to improve children's pro-social behaviour and reduce antisocial behaviour. A range of services and programmes is needed to support parents and children in different ways and at different points in their lives.

2

Providing teachers and parents with new skills and techniques to manage children's behaviour reduces their levels of stress which in turn allows them to provide more positive environments for the children in their care, conducive to better behaviour.

3

Good support for those delivering a new programme is very important, and should continue to be provided if interventions are rolled out on a wider scale.

4

Many programmes that aim to improve children's behaviour involve working with parents. Getting parents involved in a programme in the first place, and keeping them involved thereafter, is a key issue.

5

Programmes often need time to bed down and for practitioners to develop their skills, before there is a measurable impact on children's behaviour. Programmes should not be dismissed out of hand if they do not show immediate positive results, although the evidence should point in a positive direction.

6

There may be additional longer-term financial benefits from programmes that are able to improve teachers' capacity to manage children's behaviour and to promote children's social and emotional learning, because their skills will be applied to subsequent cohorts of children as well as those involved in the original intervention.

7

The costs of childhood behaviour problems are borne by a wide range of agencies, underlining the need for a partnership approach to planning and funding services that aim to promote positive behaviour and reduce behaviour problems in children and young people. Many of the savings are in the future rather than immediate, requiring a commitment to long-term planning in the face of more immediate budget constraints.

For over a decade, a group of organisations has been running more than 52 prevention and early intervention programmes throughout the island of Ireland. This Initiative funded by The Atlantic Philanthropies, sometimes in conjunction with Government and other organisations supports diverse services working to influence a wide range of outcomes for children. 'Improving Child Behaviour' is the third report in the series 'Prevention and Early Intervention in Children and Young People's Services' produced by the Centre for Effective Services. It gives an overview of relevant findings from nine programmes that have been evaluated over the last three years. This briefing paper provides a summary of the key learning. It contains 7 key messages and 9 recommendations.

Why is this issue important?

Good social and emotional skills are important if children are to do well in life. They originate in the quality and stability of children's early experiences in their families, and provide the foundation for positive relationships. Yet emotional and behavioural problems in children are both common and disabling. Cohort studies in Western countries typically report that around one in ten school-aged children display clinically significant conduct problems, and a greater proportion shows some signs of difficulty. Rates tend to be higher among children living in more disadvantaged circumstances. These patterns have also been found in Ireland and Northern Ireland.

The prognosis for children with conduct problems is poor, with outcomes in adulthood including criminal behaviour, alcoholism, drug abuse, domestic violence, child abuse and a range of psychiatric disorders. Even when children have less severe difficulties, this can have a negative impact on their ability to learn, and disrupt the learning of other children in the class. Conduct problems are costly due to the trauma and psychological problems caused to others who are victims of crime, aggression or bullying, together with the financial costs of services for treatment of both the condition and its long-term consequences. Interventions that are able to reduce negative behaviours and promote positive pro-social skills among children and young people can produce significant cost savings over time.

Key Recommendations

Effective interventions to address childhood behaviour problems

International research evidence provides support for the effectiveness of a variety of approaches to improving children's behaviour, including parent training programmes, whole-school social and emotional learning programmes and high quality care and education services for pre-school children. One route to better outcomes for children aims to make small gains for a large number of children, through delivering universal programmes in pre-school or school settings that seek to improve children's social and emotional competence. A second approach is to seek to make big gains with a small, targeted high-risk group. Both can be effective and address needs at different stages.

Programmes offered in Ireland through the Prevention and Early Intervention Initiative (PEII) included both universal and targeted interventions, ranging from parent training courses lasting for a matter of weeks to a five-year programme providing families with many types of support including regular home visits. Many evaluations used the same measure (the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire) to assess children's behavioural outcomes in terms of conduct problems, hyperactivity, emotional symptoms, peer relationships and pro-social behaviour. The majority of the programmes were found to deliver improvements in children's behaviour compared to a control group. This improvement often did not reach a statistically significant level, but it was almost always a positive change in the right direction. Just one programme, Mate-Tricks, was shown to have a negative impact on children's behaviour, at least as reported by the children themselves, and this programme was subsequently halted.

The programmes were also shown to lead to positive improvements in the strategies of adults (teachers and parents) for managing children's behaviour, and reductions in the stress which children's difficult behaviour created for them. It is possible that these positive changes in children's home and school environments may produce a positive impact on their behaviour, beyond the timescale of the post-intervention measures.

1. A range of services and programmes should be developed which promote positive behaviour and reduce behavioural problems among children. Both universal and targeted approaches are needed. When children are already displaying problems, there is more scope for improvement.
2. A holistic approach which addresses the different aspects of children's lives (home, school, community) is likely to produce the best results.
3. Services should be selected based on the evidence of what works, as well as suitability for the local context. However, programmes may need time to demonstrate a measurable impact on children's behaviour, and steps on the way (such as positive changes in parenting or the classroom environment) should also be taken into account.

Acceptability to parents and children

Whilst a school-based intervention delivered to a whole class may have little difficulty in reaching its intended audience, parenting programmes or interventions that require parents as well as children to participate typically fail to engage a high proportion of those invited to attend. Take-up was often slower than anticipated and the interventions were delivered to fewer children or parents than had been originally envisaged. Strategies that have been shown in the wider literature to increase engagement include the development of trusting personal relationships between providers and service users, flexibility in timing of sessions, availability of childcare, a welcoming 'service culture', and responsiveness to what parents want.¹ The programmes in the PEII had adopted a variety of methods to increase parental engagement, including holding repeat or 'catch-up' sessions, visits to the home, communication by text and phone, and a willingness to be flexible about the times and dates of sessions. *The Incredible Years* parent training programme included provision of a crèche, which many parents said was important in enabling them to attend.

4. Extensive consultation should be undertaken before introducing a new programme, including with those likely to use the service, to ensure that it reflects local needs.
5. Time and attention should be paid when developing a new programme to ensure that it will be accessed by those for whom it is intended. For targeted programmes, this should include developing strong interagency links in order to facilitate appropriate referrals.
6. Programme delivery may need to be adapted in order to avoid participants dropping out, although too great a departure from the programme manual (lack of fidelity) risks reducing the proven effectiveness of an intervention.
7. Programmes should draw on the evidence, from the PEII and the wider literature, of effective strategies for increasing parental involvement and take-up of services.

Acceptability to practitioners

Interviews with staff delivering the programmes showed that many were very positive about the new skills and techniques they were learning, and about the potential for the interventions to make a real difference for the children and families they worked with. A key factor in their satisfaction was the attention paid to their training and support. Most of the programmes were manualised, with clear structures and procedures to follow, and many practitioners found this helpful especially when backed up by support from the programme developers. Staff delivering a new programme often needed time to become familiar with it,

1. Katz, I., La Placa, V. and Hunter, S. (2007) Barriers to inclusion and successful engagement of parents in mainstream services. York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation

and gained in confidence and expertise as the programme continued. It is therefore possible that a stronger impact on children's outcomes may be seen if a programme continues to be offered by the same workers to future groups of children and/or parents.

8. Good support for those delivering a new programme is very important, and should continue to be provided if interventions are rolled out on a wider scale.

Cost effectiveness

In times of limited resources, it is particularly important that money is invested in the services that produce the best value for money. These are not always the cheapest services at the point of delivery, and savings may occur some time in the future.

Two of the evaluations included in this briefing paper (Incredible Years Parent Training and Incredible Years Teacher Classroom Management) analysed the cost of providing the programme and considered whether they were likely to save money in the long run. Both concluded that they would. Based on reduced use of specialist services by the intervention group, the programme was judged to be highly cost-effective. This is supported by the wider literature on the cost effectiveness of programmes such as *Incredible Years*.² The teacher training programme achieved less significant changes in children's behaviour than the targeted parent training programme. However, as a universal programme it reached many more children, and has the potential to impact on subsequent cohorts through improving teachers' ability to promote positive behaviour in their classrooms.

9. A partnership approach should be adopted when planning and funding services that aim to promote positive behaviour and reduce behaviour problems in children and young people. Many of the savings are in the future rather than immediate, requiring a commitment to long-term planning in the face of more immediate budget constraints.

Further information on the learning from this Initiative

For more than a decade, The Atlantic Philanthropies, sometimes in conjunction with Government and other organisations, has invested over €96m in agencies and community groups running 52 prevention and early intervention programmes throughout the island of Ireland. A condition of funding required the organisations to rigorously evaluate the effectiveness of their work. This is the first in a series of reports on improving child behaviour and subsequent reports will be issued as more evaluations are completed between now and 2015.

For more information contact
capturingthelearning@effectiveservices.org

To download the full report Prevention & Early Intervention in Children & Young People's Services: Improving child-behaviour visit www.effectiveservices.org/prevention/child-behaviour

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Summary of learning from this Initiative so far

