Prevention & Early Intervention in Children & Young People's Services

Parenting

Key Messages

1

An evidence base of parenting interventions and practices now exists that can be delivered across the statutory and voluntary sectors in Ireland and Northern Ireland.

2

A diverse range of parenting programmes was offered around the country in both urban and rural settings. These were a mix of programmes developed elsewhere and adapted for local use as well as new programmes and services developed from scratch.

3

Both targeted and universal parenting programmes are needed in supporting parents because family circumstances and families' needs are different.

4

Tailored approaches are needed for children of different ages, as the most effective may vary according to developmental stage.

5

It is possible to improve outcomes for children in a short space of time by working with and supporting parents.

6

Engaging parents to start a programme and to stick with it is a key consideration and one which needs attention paid to it throughout the parent's contact with the service. The quality of the relationship between the parent and the practitioner contributes to the success of the programme.

7

Programmes that worked directly with parents as their main focus improved levels of parenting stress.

8

The investment has facilitated the development of an evaluation culture and has allowed organisations to deliver their work successfully and demonstrate its effectiveness.

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. 'Parenting' is the second 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 the findings of nine programmes that have been evaluated over the last three years. Four of these programmes work directly with parents as their main focus and five have an additional parental component as part of their overall objective. This briefing paper provides a summary of the key learning. It contains 8 key messages and 9 recommendations.

Why is Supporting Parents Important?

Parents play a critical role in influencing their children's lives, both before and after birth. There is increasing Government interest in promoting parent-based initiatives to improve the well-being of children. The assumption underlying this movement is that there is a direct link between the two – improving parenting will lead to improvements in children's well-being.

Parenting has been shown to influence children's social and emotional development, as well as their behaviour, education and physical health. We know that it is what parents do with their children rather than who they are that is crucial. The parent-child relationship is more important for children's development than the family income or structure. Factors such as a parent's personality, mental health, values, social support and cultural influences are important, as well as characteristics of the child themselves.

Parenting is complex, influenced by many factors and changes over time. Children need different things from their parents as they grow up. Working out how best to support and intervene with families is complicated, but using quality evidence about what are effective approaches to supporting parents with different needs is crucial.

Effective support that is offered when it is needed will:

1. Help parents to enjoy their families,
2. Help parents to have children who are happy and healthy,
3. Increase the chances of this generation growing up to be healthy, socially and economically engaged adults.

What the Parents Said About Parenting Programmes

"By the end of it you think, 'I am a good parent'." – *Mother (4-year-old girl)*

"We both got stressed at homework time. He is now enjoying it more and I am better able to manage my own concerns." – *Parent (6-year-old boy)*

"It gave me a good grounding for communication, my communication skills were much better with her and still are." – *Parent (15-year-old girl)*

Key Recommendations

Choosing an Approach to Supporting Parents

There is no 'one size fits all' approach to supporting parents during the various stages of their child's development. Existing evidence shows that the most successful approach to supporting parents is to tailor the approach to their particular needs. Learning from the Prevention and Early Intervention Initiative showed that time had to be invested to understand the needs and experiences of the potential client group. Responses included using population approaches, universal provision targeted in specific areas of social disadvantage, or availability across a wider geographical area. Programmes varied according to eligibility requirements – for some there had to be a certain severity of problems, for others they were available to all parents with a child of a particular age. There was also variation in terms of mode of delivery according to whether an individual or group-based approach was most likely to work with that group of parents.

1. Families need to receive support that is tailored to their needs in terms of how it is delivered. They need to receive the support they require, when they need it, and through interventions that are effective and known to work to improve outcomes for children.

2. Programmes and services need to be selected not only on the basis of impact, but also taking account of the most appropriate method of delivery and children's age. The decision should also be informed by what is already known to be effective, the nature of the problem, the fit of the proposed approach to local needs and the ability to resource and sustain the initiative.

Locating the Service and Engaging Families

Parenting programmes, particularly those aimed at families with multiple difficulties, report relatively low participation and high drop-out rates. As many as half of all parents referred to behavioural parent training programmes may drop out prematurely. Learning from the Prevention and Early Intervention Initiative showed that it was important to locate the service where it was accessible to parents by choosing settings that were:

1. Convenient for parents to go to (in their local community),
2. A legitimate setting for the work being done (e.g. holding sessions to help parents support their children's learning in pre-school or primary schools),
3. Delivered at home.

Parents and practitioners often spoke of the importance of building relationships and trust. Helpful strategies included negotiating with parents about the timing, length and frequency of visits, and the practitioner being supportive and non-judgemental. In group settings, the skill of the facilitator was seen to be key to ensuring that all parents felt involved throughout the programme. Organisations sometimes found staff needed extensive training and support to be able to engage families, particularly if delivering the programme was more structured compared to their previous work.

3. Services should be designed to be accessible to parents in terms of location, timing and the support given to facilitate attendance (e.g. provision of crèche facilities).

4. Providers should understand the reach of a parenting service and whether everyone is participating in the same way. Examine who from the target group is not taking part in the programme as well as who is dropping out before completion. Undertake active outreach to these groups.

5. Interagency partnership and collaboration in service delivery needs to be considered. It can help avoid duplication of services at local level, increase buy-in from key stakeholders, improve the likelihood of successful implementation of programmes and services and increase the potential for scaling up/ mainstreaming of the service.

6. Training is required to increase the capacity and skills of professionals to engage effectively with parents and to develop positive working relationships with children, parents and families.

Supporting Parenting Stress

Parental mental health issues and parenting stress can negatively impact on how parents relate to their children. Parenting stress may be a result of the challenges faced by a parent but may over time also contribute to problems. It can leave a parent less able to cope with problematic child behaviour, which may make the problems even worse. Learning from the Prevention and Early Intervention Initiative found that parenting programmes can decrease parental stress and improve parents' ability to cope.

7. Parents should be supported in coping with any stress they feel as a parent.

8. Parental stress can be a useful indicator of how well parents are coping and of problems in the home. It may be useful to collect information about the levels of parental stress individually and also collate them on a regional or national basis. This would provide useful information on individual family well-being that can guide whether support is needed, as well as on a national basis to inform service planning.

Importance of Evaluation

In times of constrained public finances we need to ensure that we spend our money on activities that provide the greatest possible social and economic return. Basing approaches on reliable and robust evidence and undertaking high quality evaluations of local initiatives are vital to this. The risk of not doing this is that we do not know if approaches are ineffective or, worse still, result in overall adverse outcomes or costly investments.

Learning from the Prevention and Early Intervention Initiative showed that it is possible to set up, implement and evaluate a parenting service in be tween two to four years. This requires identifying short, medium and long-term outcomes and evaluating them accordingly.

9. Organisations should undertake the type of evaluation that is most appropriate to the service. Decisions have to be made about the purpose of the evaluation, when it should occur, the best measurement approach to use and the available budget. There are ways to undertake quality evaluations that provide useful information at low cost. Outcome evaluations should be undertaken on fully implemented services that have had a chance to 'bed-down' and become business as usual.

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. The Centre for Effective Services has synthesised the learning from some of these organisations about how they have influenced parenting, child learning, child health, behaviour and social inclusivity. Reports will be issued under each of these outcome areas as more learning becomes available from the Initiative between now and 2015.

For more information contact
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To download the full report Prevention & Early Intervention in Children & Young People's Services: Parenting
visit www.effectiveservices.org/prevention/parenting

Summary of learning from this Initiative so far

INCREDIBLE YEARS delivered by Archways, aims to train parents in supporting children's social, emotional and pro-social development

TARGET AUDIENCE
Parents of children aged 3-7 years with emotional and behavioural difficulties

HOW IT IS DELIVERED
12-14 weekly, 2-hour parent group training sessions

WHAT'S CHANGED IN PARENTING
Significant reductions in child conduct disorders and hyperactive type behaviours at the end of the programme and at 12 months post programme. In addition 71% of children showed improvements in behaviour

TRIPLE P delivered by Longford Westmeath Parenting Partnership, aims to support children's social, emotional and pro-social development

TARGET AUDIENCE
Parents of children aged 4-8 years

HOW IT IS DELIVERED
Topic-based seminars, session interviews and group sessions

WHAT'S CHANGED IN PARENTING
Initial findings demonstrate positive improvements for both parents and children

PREPARING FOR LIFE aims to improve school-readiness, child development and parental skills

TARGET AUDIENCE
All pregnant women in several communities in North Dublin

HOW IT IS DELIVERED
Home visiting mentor

WHAT'S CHANGED IN PARENTING
Initial findings suggest improvements in knowledge and skills of parents, reduced stress and improved parental well-being

PARENTING UR TEEN delivered by Parenting NI, aims to support parents of teens in developing problem solving, communication, boundaries and self esteem

TARGET AUDIENCE
Parents of teenagers

HOW IT IS DELIVERED
Group-based intervention

WHAT'S CHANGED IN PARENTING
Findings suggest the programme has a positive effect on mental health and well-being of parents, improved relationships between parents and teenagers and less conflict situations

MATE TRICKS delivered by the Childhood Development Initiative in Tallaght, aims to improve pro-social behaviour

TARGET AUDIENCE
Children aged 9-10

HOW IT IS DELIVERED
After-school mentoring programme

WHAT'S CHANGED IN PARENTING
No significant changes

Supporting Parents

THE MEDIA INITIATIVE delivered by Early Years, aims to promote positive attitudes to physical, social and cultural differences amongst young children, practitioners and parents

TARGET AUDIENCE
Children aged 3-4 years

HOW IT IS DELIVERED
National television campaign and activities in pre-school

WHAT'S CHANGED IN PARENTING
Improved parents confidence in talking to their children about social inclusivity and prejudice

CDI EARLY YEARS PROGRAMME aims to develop children's physical, psychological and social well-being

TARGET AUDIENCE
Parents of children aged 2½ -5 years

HOW IT IS DELIVERED
Home visiting mentors and a 6-week parenting education programme

WHAT'S CHANGED IN PARENTING
Parents developed new skills and strategies for dealing with their children's behaviour which resulted in a positive change in their relationship with their children

EAGER AND ABLE TO LEARN delivered by Early Years, aims to impact on children's eagerness and ability to learn by supporting their physical, social and emotional language and cognitive development in partnership with parents

TARGET AUDIENCE
Children aged 2-3 years

HOW IT IS DELIVERED
Delivered in a child care setting and at home, it involves a series of activities as well as workshops for parents

WHAT'S CHANGED IN PARENTING
Impact on children's developmental outcomes was mixed; however parental workshops had a positive effect on parents

DOODLE DEN delivered by the Childhood Development Initiative in Tallaght, aims to achieve moderate improvements in children's literacy

TARGET AUDIENCE
Children aged 5-6

HOW IT IS DELIVERED
After-school programme delivered in 3 sessions lasting 1.5 hours per week for 36 weeks

WHAT'S CHANGED IN PARENTING
An increase in parent-child library activity and improved parental attitudes to literacy

GROWING CHILD PARENTING PROGRAMME delivered by Lifestart aims to support the child's physical, intellectual, emotional and social development and to promote school readiness.

TARGET AUDIENCE
Parents of children aged 0-5 years

HOW IT IS DELIVERED
Monthly home visits of between 30-60 minutes delivered by trained family visitors in the parent's own home

WHAT'S CHANGED IN PARENTING
Interim impact evaluation findings suggest positive effects on parental stress levels, social support and confidence in their role. Parents also reported on improvements in their own knowledge of parenting techniques which helped change their attitude to parenting.