Progress map summary

Improving the wellbeing of disabled children and young people through improving access to positive and inclusive activities

Key research messages

Participating in positive activities is associated with improved outcomes for disabled children's health and wellbeing. They experience enjoyment, achievement and a sense of belonging.

Not all services are genuinely and actively inclusive, and there are different interpretations of what inclusion means. Inclusion needs planning, resources and the active involvement of trained, skilled staff.

Disabled children and their families want inclusive services where disabled children and non-disabled children meet, as well as some specialist 'segregated' services exclusively for disabled children.

Improving participation is as important as improving access.

The progress map summary includes key research findings from the C4EO knowledge review. This knowledge review examines the evidence of how to improve disabled children's access to play, sport, leisure and cultural activities. It addresses the following questions about the activities offered:

- **How far are disabled children fully included?**

- **What do disabled children think about what's on offer?**

- **What support do disabled children need to access the activities?**

- **Does participating enhance wellbeing?**

The knowledge review found that there is comparatively little evidence about the views of families, children and young people, and about the out-of-school lives of disabled children. However, the review did include a number of studies which tell us about the services that children and families want, and the ways in which methods of service delivery enhances family life.

Implications from the research for local service improvement

When planning, delivering and monitoring existing inclusive services, consideration should be given to how genuinely inclusive services are.

Inclusive services need to be properly resourced, with skilled and trained staff who can actively support and maximise activities, including play, between disabled and non-disabled children and young people.

All staff need to be skilful in facilitating inclusive play and activities between disabled children and non-disabled children.

A range of specialist and inclusive activities should be offered so that disabled children and young people are given more choice.

Disabled children and young people, and their families, need support to help them engage and feel confident that the experience will be rewarding. This is particularly so for disadvantaged families, as they may not access leisure and cultural activities.

Limited exposure to non-disabled children's activities interferes with disabled children's social development, particularly in terms of their understanding of peer culture. This can make it difficult for them to integrate in inclusive settings. Providing opportunities to play and interact in inclusive play and leisure settings throughout childhood and adolescence helps overcome this.

A cross-agency and cross-sector information strategy should be created to ensure that all disabled children and their families receive information about local play activities. This information should include access information and reach families not previously known.

'Limited exposure to non-disabled children's activities interferes with disabled children's social development'

Taster sessions help to encourage children to try out a new activity. The information needs to be provided in a range of formats so it is accessible to all.

Local authorities should undertake 'access audits' of play and leisure services, and make changes to ensure all aspects of the service are inclusive. This will include making alterations to buildings and equipment, improving access by car or public transport, and increasing levels of staffing and funding.

Disabled children and their families should be involved in the evaluation, redesign and development of services, ensuring that a diverse group of children are represented. Local authorities should monitor the numbers of disabled children participating in positive activities and also evaluate the outcomes.

Challenge questions

These challenge questions are tools for strategic leaders to use in assessing, delivering and monitoring disabled children's access to services. They are based on the key research messages from the knowledge review, where there is strength of evidence for effective outcomes and the strategies to support them. The challenge questions are structured using the model of whole-system change from the Every Child Matters agenda, as described by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF): integrated governance, systems, strategy, processes, frontline delivery and child outcomes. C4EO does not wish to be prescriptive by choosing one framework over others, recognising that a range of models to support systems change is available.

C4EO is currently undertaking further work to identify and describe systems change models and tools which relate to this complex agenda, and may be adapted for use by strategic leaders within Children's Trusts and local authority children and family services.

The knowledge review posed questions about parents' views of service effectiveness and outcomes. This is important in the context of the Disabled Children's Service Indicator – NI054 – which will measure parents' experiences of services for disabled children, in terms of information, transparency, assessment, participation and feedback. Many, if not all of these areas, are covered in the content of the progress maps and the challenge questions.

This progress map is the first version and will be revised and updated following feedback from sector specialists, experts in the field, the regional knowledge workshops and other C4EO and sector activity.

Integrated governance

• How is the concept of inclusive services being explored and developed across your partnership?

• Has your partnership developed an 'across agency' and 'across sector' audit of generic provision, to discover which services are

currently accessed, or not, by disabled children? How are you using this information to increase provision and take-up by disabled children?

- How do you involve parents of disabled children in your partnership?

- How are disabled children and their families encouraged to participate in wider community activities?

- Has your partnership developed a joint strategy to provide specialist and segregated services for disabled children?

'Do you offer a range of generic and specialist/segregated activities so that disabled children have a variety of activities from which to choose?'

Integrated strategy

- How is inclusive practice being extended – for example to extended schools and youth provision, as well as children's centres? How do you make sure that your services are really integrated?

- How do you involve parents in planning your services?

- How do you ensure that up-to-date information on available services is easily accessible to families?

- How do you address the barriers which disadvantaged families face when accessing leisure and cultural activities, such as household income, unfamiliarity and perceived unwelcoming staff attitudes?

Integrated processes

- Do you have a programme to build and adapt community sports and leisure facilities (for example, seating, parking, changing and toilet facilities) so that they are accessible for disabled children?

- Do you offer a range of generic and specialist/segregated activities so that disabled children have a variety of activities from which to choose?

- How do you involve children and parents in ensuring the quality and variety of services to choose from?

- How do you offer services to groups of disabled children (for example, with learning difficulties) who are least likely to engage in leisure and other activities?

Integrated frontline delivery

- How do you encourage families and children to identify and use services and to try new activities?

- Have you trained your workforce to:
  - develop inclusive activities, in which all can join
  - know how to respond to children with different needs
  - help children explore new and unfamiliar activities?

- How are practical issues solved – transport, parking, space for wheelchairs and other equipment, changing and toilet facilities?

- Do staff working with disabled children in generic settings encourage friendships, and maximise opportunities for disabled children to acquire the social skills they may lack?

Impact on outcomes

- How do you know if children and families in your local area think that services are inclusive, and what should be improved?

- Do children and families find services straightforward to identify and to access?

- Have you put measures in place to determine how services are making a difference to the lives of disabled children and families in your local area?

What is the issue and why is it important?

All children have a right to play and recreation: this right is enshrined in United Nations legislation on the rights of the child. Disabled children and young people have a right to equal access to play and recreation. Taking part helps children to form positive social interactions, have fun and get active. However, disabled children find it difficult to access play and leisure activities which non-disabled children take for granted. They are less likely to take part and can be perceived by practitioners as a 'hard to reach group' who present 'additional challenges'.

It is therefore essential that those planning, delivering and monitoring play, sport, leisure and cultural activities pro-actively include disabled children and their families, and ensure that services are genuinely accessible and inclusive.

Services are changing as a result of Every Child Matters. The government has committed to improving access to positive activities (The Children's Plan), and have made a substantial investment in play services. The Ten Year Youth Strategy is focused on older children and teenagers and aims to transform their leisure-time activities and support services. It builds on earlier policies which emphasise the importance of young people participating in sports, clubs, groups or classes and sets national standards for positive activities.

Other relevant government policies include:

- recent policy on managing obesity, which is focusing attention on children's physical activities and what they do out of school

- the Aiming High for Disabled Children policy – ensuring that disabled children and young people can take part in enjoyable and enriching activities of their own choice.

- the Play Strategy (December 2008) – to ensure better access and experiences for disabled children.

This knowledge review has assessed the evidence of 'what works best' for disabled children's play and leisure services. The aim is to support local policy and service development, and ultimately improve the lives of disabled children and their families.

What does the research show?

Research in this area cannot yet identify the play and leisure preferences of different groups of disabled children, or the different types of support they need. Most studies focus on one particular group, and as it is impossible to generalise across different groups, only some tentative conclusions can be drawn.

'Disabled children and young people have a right to equal access to play and recreation. Taking part helps children to form positive social interactions, have fun and get active.'

Information about disabled children's access, participation, and experiences is very limited. However, all such studies have been included in this review, as this is often the only evidence available.

What are inclusive services?

There are different interpretations of inclusive services.

- Some agencies allow disabled children to use a service at the same time as non-disabled children, but do not actively help them to participate. These are not genuinely inclusive, but are so-called 'pseudo-inclusion'.

- Other services actively include disabled children and are designed and resourced to enable disabled and non-disabled children to participate together in activities or experiences ('active inclusion').

- Services developed specifically for disabled children with similar levels of ability ('opportunity inclusion').

Disabled children and their families want a choice of both inclusive and 'separate' provision, because they fulfil different functions.

What do disabled children want from play and leisure services?

Disabled children say they want:

- to see their existing friends and make new ones – this is often more important than the activity itself

- more choice as to where and how they spend their free time

- to be able to access the support they need to pursue their own leisure interests.

What difference do positive activities make to disabled children?

Taking part in positive activities enables disabled children to:

- develop relationships with children with similar disabilities and with non-disabled children

- experience success, enjoy and achieve

- acquire new skills

- feel part of the local community

- improve their physical health and emotional wellbeing, particularly with sporting activities

- increase their self-confidence and expand their beliefs, and those of their parents', about their abilities and potential

- have fun and learn to manage risks.

Such outcomes are dependent on appropriate and sensitive support being provided in inclusive settings. Negative experiences (such as poor staff or public attitudes) can reduce children's self-esteem and make them feel inadequate.

Barriers to access and participation

The barriers to the inclusion of disabled children in play and leisure activities are multiple and complex. They relate to:

- the child and their individual preferences, their confidence and belief in their abilities, shyness or lack of social skills and previous experience of inclusive play

- the family's tendency to participate – for example socially disadvantaged families, with lower levels of income, and access to support, and families who have less belief in their child's ability and lower levels of trust, may not readily access services

- the service, particularly the attitude and awareness of staff, their knowledge, skills and understanding

- lack of detailed, proactive, up-to-date and accessible information about the services on offer, for example, how inclusive they are, particularly for families not already known to services

- the environment, in terms of physical access to buildings, amenities and equipment, public transport and its cost, access to childcare facilities and the attitudes of other members of the public.

'Negative experiences such as poor staff or public attitudes can reduce children's self-esteem and make them feel inadequate.'

Limitations of the evidence base

There are few studies in this area, and most are of uncertain quality. There is a lack of research in England. Research from other countries may not be relevant because of cultural differences and different patterns of service provision.

There is an absence of any detailed information about the out-of-school lives of disabled children and their participation in positive activities.

There are very few rigorous evaluations of the impact of taking part in positive activities and therefore very little evidence of 'what works'.

Overall, it is difficult to draw any firm conclusions about best practice because of the limited amount of data available and the different ways in which 'inclusive services' have been defined. Any future research should evaluate the different ways in which 'inclusion' is being interpreted and implemented by services. As part of C4EO's ongoing work, we will be collecting evidence from local practice.

Views of key stakeholders

Parents and children want:

- more opportunities to participate in leisure and cultural activities, which many currently think are very limited, and in both inclusive and specialist activities

- better information about what is available, and whether generic services are accessible to disabled children; information is particularly hard to obtain for those new to services

- more choice, more opportunities to try new things, and opportunities to make friends with disabled and non-disabled children

- the opportunity to pursue individual interests

- better-informed staff

- financial help

- better facilities and transport.

Further reading

Beresford, B. and Clarke, S (forthcoming 2009) *Improving the wellbeing of disabled children and young people through improving access to positive and inclusive activities* (available at **www.c4eo.org.uk**)

Department for Children, Schools and Families (2004) *Every child matters* (available at **www.dcsf.gov.uk/everychildmatters**)

Department for Children, Schools and Families (2007) *Aiming high for disabled children* (available at **www.dcsf.gov.uk/everychildmatters/healthandwellbeing/ahdc/AHDC**)

Department for Children, Schools and Families (2007) *Ten year youth strategy* (available at **www.dcsf.gov.uk**)

Department for Children, Schools and Families (2007) *The children's plan: building brighter futures* (available at **www.dcsf.gov.uk/childrensplan**)

Department for Children, Schools and Families (2008) *Play strategy* (available at **www.dcsf.gov.uk/play**)

What is a progress map summary

The progress map (a web-based tool) is being developed by C4EO to provide easy, interactive access to the best available knowledge for children's services. Printed progress map summaries include key research findings from the C4EO knowledge review, challenges for children's services and key stakeholders' views. This is version 1 on this topic; there will be two more progress map summaries as knowledge (particularly from practice) develops during the course of C4EO's work on the disability theme. The progress maps and knowledge reviews can be found at **www.c4eo.org.uk**

Centre for Excellence and Outcomes in Children and Young People's Services (C4EO)

Funded by the DCSF, C4EO has been established to help transform outcomes for children, young people and their families. It will do this by identifying and coordinating local, regional and national evidence of 'what works' to create a single and comprehensive picture of effective practice. To find out more and to look at our resources, please visit **www.c4eo.org.uk**