

Early intervention and prevention in the context of integrated services: evidence from C4EO and Narrowing the Gap reviews



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

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- Safeguarding
- Schools and Communities
- Youth
- Families, Parents and Carers
- Early Intervention, Prevention and Integrated Delivery.

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Early intervention and prevention in the context of integrated services: evidence from C4EO and Narrowing the Gap reviews

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Introduction

This report focuses on **early intervention** and **prevention**, in the context of integrated services. It identifies the key messages for children's services, drawing on two main sources:

- Reviews published by the Centre for Excellence and Outcomes in Children and Young People's Services (C4EO). This programme aims to help those working in the sector improve the life chances of all children and young people, in particular those who are most vulnerable. It distils the best academic research and combines this with effective frontline practice.
- Narrowing the Gap¹ publications. This programme looked at 'what works' in improving outcomes (in particular educational outcomes) for vulnerable children and those at risk of failing to succeed, in order to reduce the differences in outcomes between these groups and the population as a whole, as well as improving outcomes for all.

This report was commissioned by C4EO to contribute to its theme on early intervention and prevention. The main aim is to add to the current debate on ensuring that early intervention helps to improve outcomes for children, young people and their families. It aims to complement the recent review and scoping study, *Issues in earlier intervention: identifying and supporting children with additional needs* (Statham and Smith 2010).

The report is structured as follows:

- Section 1 defines the term 'early intervention' and explains the structure of the report.
- Section 2 draws out the key messages in the C4EO and Narrowing the Gap reviews for early intervention, prevention and integrated services.
- Section 3 identifies remaining gaps and issues needing further consideration.
- Section 4 draws conclusions from the study.

¹ Further information about the Narrowing the Gap programme can be found at www.c4eo.org.uk/narrowingthegap

1 Definition of early intervention

The definition of early intervention adopted by the C4EO expert group is:

Intervening early and as soon as possible to tackle problems emerging for children, young people and their families or with a population most at risk of developing problems. Effective intervention may occur at any point in a child or young person's life.

This definition includes both interventions **early in life** (with young children, including pre-natal interventions) and interventions **early in the development of a problem** (with children or young people of any age). It includes universal interventions that are offered to an entire population to **prevent** problems developing, and targeted interventions that are offered to particular children, young people and families with existing risk factors, vulnerabilities or acknowledged additional needs in order to **protect** them from developing problems or to **reduce the severity** of problems that have started to emerge.

The recent review by the Thomas Coram Unit (Statham and Smith 2010) adopted a similar definition to the one provided above. As a result of their review, the authors identified four main areas in need of better evidence. These are:

- How can children be identified earlier?
- What promotes parental access to/engagement with services?
- Why do current types of support work or not work and for which participants?
- Who is best placed to deliver support services?

This report is structured around these four questions, using evidence presented in the C4EO and Narrowing the Gap reviews. C4EO is focusing its work on eight themes in addition to Early Intervention and Prevention, most of which have three priorities, with one review for each priority. The C4EO reports included here comprised the following themes (and priorities):

- Early Years (narrowing the gap, family support, integrated services)
- Disability (early intervention, positive activities, differentiated services)
- Vulnerable (looked-after) Children (educational outcomes, health, safe and settled accommodation for care leavers)
- Child Poverty (single priority theme on whole-area strategies)
- Schools and Communities (achievement and emotional resilience for those with additional needs, educational transition, family wellbeing and community cohesion).

The Safeguarding theme is not included because the scope of the review did not include programmes to prevent new incidences of maltreatment, or early interventions to target families at risk. It was not possible to include two other C4EO themes (Youth, and Families, Parents and Carers) because research reviews had not been completed by the time of this study.

2 Key messages relating to early intervention, prevention and integrated services in the C4EO and Narrowing the Gap reviews

What works in early identification?

This section looks at the evidence on effective early identification and attempts to address the question posed by Stratham and Smith (2010): how could children and young people in need of intervention be identified at an earlier stage?

As Stratham and Smith point out, early identification includes risk assessment, referral or signposting from other services as well as self-referral and help-seeking behaviour. It is logical to assume that early identification and intervention are key to addressing children's needs. For example, the first Narrowing the Gap report (LGA 2008a) explains that prevention and early intervention strategies that address underlying issues are more effective than intervening later when problems are more entrenched. In their review of support for families of young children, Siraj-Blatchford and Siraj-Blatchford (2010a p 23) support this view: 'The evidence supports the early identification and targeting of children at risk'.

The C4EO reports consistently highlight the importance of targeting services on children in poverty. Waldman *et al* (2009) reviewed evidence on whole-area strategies for tackling child poverty. They advocate targeting services on specific groups likely to experience poverty, such as parents with mental ill-health, children and young people with a care history and disabled parents.

Coghlan *et al* (2009) focus on narrowing the gap for young children from vulnerable groups. They point out that poverty is associated with a range of poorer outcomes for children, especially in health, safety and progress at school. A positive home learning environment and access to high-quality pre-school provision are associated with a range of positive outcomes, but children living in poverty are least likely to have these experiences.

Parents from black and minority ethnic (BME) backgrounds are also less likely to access pre-school provision and children with English as an additional language may need additional support at pre-school or school. Coghlan *et al* (2009) note that children with younger mothers may be at greater risk of poor outcomes. Another group identified in this review as needing early identification are children with language difficulties.

Although the weight of evidence is strongly supportive of early identification, one of the reviews challenges the idea that early identification is necessarily better. In their review of interventions for disabled children in the early years, Newman *et al* (2009) suggest that while early identification can be helpful, it may not be as crucial for disabled children as previously thought. On the other hand, parents of disabled children living away from home said that they may have been able to keep their children at home if help had been offered at an earlier stage (Newman 2009).

One of the key principles underpinning early identification is the need for accurate information on the groups most likely to be in need of help (see LGA 2008b; Dyson *et al* 2010). This entails comprehensive, timely data and sophisticated analyses to inform services. High-quality data should help children's services to focus attention and resources on children most at risk and in need of early intervention.

What do the reviews tell us about promoting parental access and engagement?

The evidence from the C4EO and Narrowing the Gap reviews is strongly supportive of holistic interventions that include parents, carers and families as well as the children/young people themselves. Because certain family characteristics are associated with better or poorer outcomes for children and young people, supporting families is understood to be crucial to supporting children. For example, Statham *et al* (2010 p 17) states: 'Providing support for parents to assist their child's learning in the home is the most effective way to raise achievement'.

However, services face the challenge that families who are most in need of support are often the least likely to access it (Newman *et al* 2009; Siraj-Blatchford and Siraj-Blatchford 2010a). The evidence (from Coghlan *et al* 2009; Waldman *et al* 2009; Evans *et al* 2010; Siraj-Blatchford and Siraj-Blatchford 2010a; Statham *et al* 2010) suggests that the following approaches are more likely to be successful in engaging parents/carers:

- raising awareness of services available to parents through advertising, information and personal communication/outreach
- providing services to families in the home and/or within easy reach of home (especially when children are young and for those in greatest need)
- providing services in children's centres, schools and community venues
- addressing barriers to access and engagement (such as cost, language barriers or services not being available when parents need them)
- understanding parents' perspectives and what will motivate them to engage
- offering support at key points in people's lives (especially at transition points)
- building trusting relationships over time.

Siraj-Blatchford and Siraj-Blatchford (2010a) highlight the importance of three stages in the engagement process: getting parents interested in a service in the first place; ensuring they experience the service; and engaging parents for long enough to make a difference.

The reviews argue that it is important to use 'tried-and-tested' initiatives, approaches and interventions, but also to adapt services to meet individual families' needs and circumstances. One effective approach to making services more attuned to parental needs is to involve parents from the target group in service planning and delivery (Coghlan *et al* 2009; Siraj-Blatchford and Siraj-Blatchford 2010a; Statham *et al* 2010).

The reviews (LGA 2009; Siraj-Blatchford and Siraj-Blatchford 2010a) also draw attention to the need to focus on specific groups, especially fathers and young parents, and to design services with these groups in mind.

What are the key principles of good practice in early intervention?

Key principles of good practice in early intervention concern the focus, features and type of interventions for particular target groups.

The reviews stress the need to focus on issues that affect children profoundly throughout their lives and recognise the importance of addressing family circumstances. They therefore recommend the following priorities:

- addressing structural disadvantages, such as poverty, poor health and low educational achievement among parents/carers (Waldman *et al* 2009; Statham *et al* 2010)
- providing interventions aimed at meeting the needs of adults and children simultaneously and tackling multiple sources of stress within the family (Beresford *et al* 2009; Siraj-Blatchford and Siraj-Blatchford 2010a)
- providing opportunities for parents to develop their basic skills – for example in literacy and numeracy (Waldman *et al* 2009; Siraj-Blatchford and Siraj-Blatchford 2010a; Statham *et al* 2010)
- developing parenting skills, especially for young parents and parents of children with behavioural problems (LGA 2008a; Waldman *et al* 2009; Siraj-Blatchford and Siraj-Blatchford 2010a; Statham *et al* 2010)
- supporting looked-after children – especially their learning, mental health and accommodation needs (Brodie and Morris 2009; Stein and Morris 2009).

The features of successful interventions include:

- structure, intensity and duration – ensuring that interventions are well planned and that exposure is sufficient to make a difference (Beresford *et al* 2009)
- longer-term strategic programmes, rather than short-term initiatives (Waldman *et al* 2009; Statham *et al* 2010)
- highly qualified and well-trained staff, including staff in early years settings, childminders and volunteers (LGA 2008a; Coghlan *et al* 2009; Waldman *et al* 2009; Siraj-Blatchford and Siraj-Blatchford 2010a; Statham *et al* 2010)
- good staff awareness of services, cultural sensitivity and a non-stigmatising approach (Coghlan *et al* 2009; Siraj-Blatchford and Siraj-Blatchford 2010a)
- flexibility to meet the needs of individual children, young people and families (Beresford *et al* 2009; Siraj-Blatchford and Siraj-Blatchford 2010a)
- involvement of service users in programme design and delivery.

The type of early interventions with good evidence of success for vulnerable children include:

- having a high-quality home learning environment, which has been found to reduce the negative effects of poverty on children's learning and development in the early years (Coghlan *et al* 2009; Siraj-Blatchford and Siraj-Blatchford 2010a)
- attending pre-school, especially high-quality provision. This has been found to be successful in improving cognitive and social outcomes for children living in poverty (Siraj-Blatchford and Siraj-Blatchford 2010a) and in reducing the likelihood of a subsequent diagnosis of special educational needs in primary school (Beresford *et al* 2009)
- family-centred early interventions and key worker systems for disabled children and their families (Beresford *et al* 2009)
- language and literacy initiatives for children with English as an additional language (EAL) and other children whose progress in language and literacy has fallen behind at primary school (Coghlan *et al* 2009)
- strategies to support children's educational transitions, especially in the early years (Coghlan *et al* 2009; Evans *et al* 2010)
- identification and intervention to prevent young people from becoming NEET – not in education, employment or training (Evans *et al* 2010)
- early identification of looked-after children at particular risk of poor housing and having contingency arrangements in place, including emergency accommodation (Stein and Morris 2009).

Although there is very limited evidence on effective leadership and governance of children's services, the following features have been identified as important in narrowing the gap for vulnerable groups (LGA 2008b):

- leadership placing a strong focus on vulnerable groups, including developing a local vision, championing their voice and having an unrelenting drive and passion to improve their outcomes (see also Waldman *et al* 2009)
- governance that is flexible enough to respond to emerging issues and shift resources to areas of need (see also Stein and Morris 2009).

The C4EO and Narrowing the Gap reviews consider **integrated children's services** to be a promising development for vulnerable children and their families. However, they point out that the effectiveness of service integration is difficult to prove and that because this is a relatively new development, evidence may only emerge in the longer term (Siraj-Blatchford and Siraj-Blatchford 2010b). Nevertheless, there is emerging evidence of positive impacts in relation to the following:

- high-quality pre-schools integrating childcare and education (Siraj-Blatchford and Siraj-Blatchford 2010b)
- family-based multi-agency support, encompassing health, education and social care for disabled children (Statham *et al* 2010).

In addition, Dyson *et al* (2010) suggest that there is promising evidence that the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) facilitates service integration and early intervention.

Who is best placed to provide early intervention?

The evidence suggests that both universal and targeted services are important in early intervention. Universal services of particular importance for young children's later outcomes are health, housing and education. Services should be focused on increasing resilience and preventing/reducing risk factors such as: smoking during pregnancy, low birthweight, poor/unsettled accommodation, lack of parental bonding and attachment, domestic violence, poor nutrition/not breastfeeding, lack of stimulation, poor home learning environment, not attending pre-school provision, poor attendance at school, poor emotional resilience and low achievement. This means that all children's services' frontline staff are potentially involved in providing early prevention and/or intervention. They also have a key role in identifying children with additional needs and signposting families to specialist services. Equally, staff in adult services dealing with vulnerable parents should be alert to the needs of children and young people.

Health visitors have a key role in providing families with information and identifying individual children and families in need of help. There is also a potential for health visitors to alert service managers to pockets of deprivation that would otherwise remain hidden.

Representatives from the local community can be particularly helpful in encouraging families to engage with services and in helping services to be better attuned to family and community needs. Examples include:

- teachers and support staff from BME communities in early years settings (Coghlan *et al* 2009)
- childminders (Siraj-Blatchford and Siraj-Blatchford 2010a)
- parent support advisers in extended schools and representatives from BME backgrounds on school governing bodies (Statham *et al* 2010).

3 What evidence gaps still need to be addressed?

The C4EO and Narrowing the Gap reviews identify numerous evidence gaps. The following recommendations for further data and research activity are intended to address existing evidence gaps. This desk study has identified a need for:

- better information on successful interventions for particular vulnerable groups, especially young carers, children of disabled parents, and children from Irish Traveller and Gypsy Roma families
- more evidence on successful interventions for disabled and looked-after children, including those addressing: the diverse needs of disabled children and their families (Newman *et al* 2009); the learning needs of looked-after children (Brodie and Morris 2009); and emotional and behavioural outcomes for looked-after children (Dickson *et al* 2009)
- research into the mechanisms that cause poverty to have such pervasive and longlasting negative effects (Waldman *et al* 2009; Siraj-Blatchford and Siraj-Blatchford 2010a)
- studies of the effectiveness of childminders (Siraj-Blatchford and Siraj-Blatchford 2010a)
- studies that examine the effects of interventions on children and young people with different combinations of characteristics, such as looked-after status, gender, ethnicity and disability (Brodie and Morris 2009)
- evidence of the economic costs and benefits of early intervention (Waldman *et al* 2009)
- evidence on the impact of service integration on children, young people and their families (Dyson *et al* 2010; Siraj-Blatchford and Siraj-Blatchford, 2010a and b).

4 Conclusion

This desk study has found a rich source of evidence on early intervention among the research reviews conducted for the C4EO and Narrowing the Gap programmes. The findings underline the importance of holistic approaches for vulnerable children, young people and their families. The study provides some key messages on areas highlighted by the recent review on early intervention (Statham and Smith 2010). It stresses the importance of intervening to prevent or reduce risks and increase resilience for children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds. However, there are still some priority areas that need to be addressed if staff working in localities are to have the evidence they need to make informed decisions on where best to focus their precious resources to make the greatest impact on children's lives.

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