

Progress map summary



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

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Improving children's attainment through a better quality of family-based support for early learning

Key research messages

There is a clear link between improved achievement for children and **the quality of the home learning environment**.

Young children are directly helped to achieve their potential by:

- minimising their exposure to foetal and post-natal injury, disease and infection
- confronting neglect and abuse
- supporting parents' bonding and attachment to their young children
- helping to stimulate the home learning environment by encouraging parents to engage in simple educational activities.

The evidence from the review highlights strategies that work:

- improve parents' education and/or qualifications
- help support parents and lessen mothers' depression and anxiety
- improve employment opportunities, thereby reducing family poverty
- enhance the mixing of children from different social backgrounds in early years settings
- work with parents to stimulate their involvement in and access to early years education and to home visiting.

This progress map summary includes key research findings from the C4EO knowledge review. The knowledge review assesses the evidence available about the potential and practical possibilities for improving children's early learning outcomes through family-based support. The review seeks to provide a comprehensive overview of the forms of family support that research has identified as significant and the specific learning outcomes upon which they impact. The next stage of the review will draw on examples of validated practice from children's services.

Implications from the research for local service improvement

For action by local decision-makers and managers

There is clear evidence that implementing well-focused and sustained system-level strategies for improving the quality and availability of family-based support will significantly improve the range of Every Child Matters outcomes for young children. These include:

- ensuring there is **a wide range of support available for parents** in their own right and in their parenting role, and taking practical measures to stimulate interest and involvement in their children's education. **Children's centres** have an important role in offering, for example, drop-in sessions, mother and toddler groups, and fathers' groups, which are designed to build a relationship between the parent and child that encourages their involvement in their children's education
- **providing training** is very important for all staff – teachers, health visitors, Early Years Professionals,

social workers and other early years practitioners – who have a responsibility to support parents during this stage of their child’s development. Training should incorporate information about research-proven strategies that help children realise their potential and in building relationships with parents so that they want to engage with early years settings

- **carrying out monitoring** to widen service use, particularly by different ethnic groups, as this facilitates knowledge about who uses services and why
- **targetting resources effectively**, especially home visiting. Monitoring of early years staff also helps recruitment and retention
- **making provision** to support parents affected by barriers such as lack of time, above-average distance and costs of travel, and ensuring access to high-quality, respectful, and non-stigmatising early childhood support services. This could particularly affect low income and/ or minority ethnic parents.

International research also tells us that it is important to:

- **address the varied needs of parents in poverty** in an effective, inter-agency way
- **put right the poor image of services** amongst some families – especially those described as hard to reach
- **work in true partnership with parents i.e. identifying and valuing what they bring to the relationship**
- **use the evidence base** when planning and delivering early years services within a context of local and individual needs
- **accept that making a difference takes time** and ‘quick fixes’ are not possible. Sustainable services and ongoing, reliable funding are required.

‘What are you and your partners doing to improve employment and training opportunities’

Implications for regional and national government

The knowledge review provides significant evidence to support many current Government initiatives, especially continuous assessment in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) guidance, and the extension of practitioners’ roles in family outreach, and early home learning environments in the EYFS. There may also be a need to extend and develop the Common Assessment Framework to cover the full range of risk factors identified above.

Challenge questions

These challenge questions recognise the complex systems that children’s services oversee:

- **integrated governance** – coordinated and compatible oversight and authority
- **integrated strategy** – coordinated and compatible plans of action
- **integrated processes** – putting coordinated and compatible plans into action
- **frontline delivery** – the direct work that services provide.

Integrated governance

- What are you and your partners doing to improve employment and training opportunities, particularly those targeted at families living in poverty?
- What are you and your partners doing to improve parents’ education levels and qualifications, to help lift families out of poverty?
- Have you and your partners addressed the relationships between health and safety and the ability of young children to reach their potential?

Integrated strategy

- Do you know how many high-risk families you have in your area, and have you identified the specific barriers they face?

- Do you have partnerships in place to share this knowledge of high-risk families and identify data and service gaps?
- What is the strategy for ensuring sufficient home learning and family support and outreach, and for a long enough time period, to help improve child outcomes?
- How will you build integrated family support delivery systems and processes with your partners?

Integrated processes

- What methods do you use to involve parents and children in planning services?
- How are services organised to deal with any barriers you have identified with parents, for example, parents who have work commitments or other children to care for?
- How do you help parents deal with these barriers, for instance minority ethnic group parents who may have comparatively more barriers and fewer resources to overcome them?

Frontline delivery

- Do you provide outreach for all families where there are high-risk factors, and family support for all who ask for it?
- Do outreach programmes last (longer than the standard 10 to 20 weeks) when there is an ongoing need?

How do you ensure that outreach and early learning staff:

- foster and maintain parents' belief that their child will do well, promote positive messages and not label or provide negative feedback to parents?
- are trained and supported to build authentic relationships with parents that are built on an understanding and valuing of the child's home environment?
- understand the wider family environment of the child, as it may not just be parents who are supporting the child at home?
- promote emotional attachment and bonding between parents and children?

- ensure that outreach appeals to fathers?

Impact on outcomes

- How will you and your partners assess when the steps you are taking have an impact on outcomes for children in your local area, particularly those living in poverty?
- Have you found out whether services are making a difference to children, parents and other family members?
- Have you put measures in place to determine with your partners the contribution that services are making to children's achievement and well-being?

What is the issue and why it is important?

'How will you build integrated family support delivery systems and processes with your partners?'

Parental and family support for early learning is now recognised as a central feature of successful outcomes for young children and as one of the most significant contributors to children's continued success in the education system. A specific emphasis on early learning within

outreach and parental support programmes can also be a key to improved relationships, both between practitioners and parents and between parents and children, leading to more achievement and enjoyment for children and families.

Strands of current policy and practice development that relate directly to this priority include the aim to train and qualify the children's workforce in skills and knowledge related to parental support and the support for outreach workers within children's centres.

What does the research show?

When parents' interest and involvement in their children's learning is encouraged and supported, the risk of underachievement lessens. There are **parents who do not seek support** in this way and **focused support is especially important for these families.**

Equally, **parents who ask for support** without an agency having identified a need **should also be able to call on this kind of help.**

Parents are best able to provide an effective home learning environment when they are **supported in their own right.** Improved education and employment opportunities, as well as help to reduce anxiety and depression for primary care givers will, in turn, help to lessen the risk of children's underachievement.

What matters most for child outcomes?

- **Improving** the quality of children's stimulation and early home learning environment, especially for boys; key factors include the frequency of being read to, going to the library, playing with numbers, painting and drawing, being taught letters, being taught numbers, singing or reciting songs, poems and rhymes.
- **Promoting parents'** involvement and interest in their own and their children's education.
- Children attending **higher-quality early years provision.**
- Supporting and educating the parents of children with behaviour problems.
- Programmes that target two or more child/family outcomes (such as behaviour and literacy) may be particularly cost-effective.
- **Home visiting**, when well-focused, of appropriate intensity and quality (in terms of engagement) provides a useful tool to improve child outcomes, especially for younger children, or where parents do not seek support for child development from centre-based provision.

The evidential basis of other research findings that relate to the approaches taken to engage family members, and in supporting the needs of different groups, are weaker. But it suggests:

- practical measures to encourage fathers' involvement in early childcare and

education include the targeted provision of materials such as desktop computer equipment, and optional customised reading lists

- the role of early years provision should be extended to accept a parent partnership role that includes the provision of parenting support in development of the early home learning environment
- auditing local needs and the targeting of socioeconomically disadvantaged groups
- the need for further training of staff in all services to work with families on supporting their children's learning; building this into existing courses e.g. for teachers, health visitors, social workers and other early years staff.

It also supports the early identification and targeting of children at risk and the provision of additional training for multi-agency teamwork, and for managers and leaders in budget and project management.

There is a need for more accredited training and support for childminders e.g. through quality assured networks and a case may be made for introducing requirements for accredited training.

What works in improving outcomes?

A range of established programmes were shown to have been employed effectively in the literature. Particularly notable among these were the:

Home visiting, when well-focused, of appropriate intensity and quality provides a useful tool to improve child outcomes

- Webster-Stratton's Incredible Years' parenting programme
- Nutbrown et al's (2005) ORIM (Opportunities, Recognition, Interaction, Model) literacy framework
- early literacy programmes aimed at disadvantaged families, such as Peers Early Education Partnership (PEEP)
- Enhanced Triple P Positive Parenting Programme
- well-designed and culturally sensitive outreach and home visiting

- a range of multidisciplinary strategies focused on the prevention of early mental health problems.

It is also important to recognise that **the success of any intervention depends upon a range of factors that include the level of training and professional expertise of those involved, and the duration and intensity of the interventions.**

Views of key stakeholders

‘Parents, carers and children judge the accessibility and quality of a service by the way that the staff relate to them’

These views are drawn from the C4EO progress map resources section to provide

a perspective on the views of parents and pre-school children.

There is limited information on the views of parents on effective practice

in the early years to narrow the gap for disadvantaged children, and almost no published information on the perspectives of young children. This may be because early childhood is commonly understood as a time when children are not yet able or mature enough to make their views known – although the establishment of the National Children’s Bureau’s Young Children’s Voices Network Project means that things are changing.

Where information does exist, parents highlight the following:

- early education as an important preparation for school

- the value of mixing with other children and the promotion of social skills
- early years education does work and they are impressed with their young children’s learning.

However, parents raise significant access issues:

- support tends to be available only if an agency, rather than parents themselves, has identified a need
- even where agencies do identify a learning support need, such as speech therapy, this is not always available immediately
- any support needs to be provided flexibly and recognise that many parents work.

Where information exists on the views of young children, they identify the following things as important to their learning, although they may use different words to describe them:

- play, painting and drawing, and fun, as well as access to outdoor spaces and safe, stimulating environments
- respect from adults who were ‘nice and kind’
- the opportunity to make choices about what they do and the activities they get involved in.

Parents, carers and children judge the accessibility and quality of a service by the way that the staff relate to them. This has implications for the recruitment, training and continuing professional development of early years staff who provide family-based support to children and families.

Further reading

Department for Children, Schools and Families (2008) Briefing for local authority commissioners and lead officers *Supporting parents to engage in their child's early learning*.

DCSF Parents as Partners in Early Learning (PPEL) Project – Parental Involvement – a snapshot of policy and practice – PPEL Project Phase 1 Report.

Moran, P., Ghate, D. and van der Merwe, A. (2004) *What works in parenting support? A review of the international evidence* (DCSF research report 574), London: Department for Education and Skills (available at www.dcsf.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/RR574.pdf, accessed 25 November 2008).

Reid, P. and Banks, D. (2008) *Perspectives on the early years services: qualitative research with service users*, Edinburgh: Scottish Government.

Siraj-Blatchford, I and Siraj-Blatchford, J (2009) Improving children's attainment through a better quality of family-based support for early learning: London, C4EO (available at www.c4eo.org.uk)

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 early years 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