



## Families, parents and carers

# Improving children's and young people's outcomes through support for mothers, fathers, and carers

## Key messages

- Interventions that include support for parents and carers are often effective in improving outcomes for children, although rigorous evaluations are not common.
- The range of support on offer to parents is diverse. It includes counselling, education, vocational training, parenting skills training, helplines and other information provision services, and financial support.
- Key ingredients for effective practice in supporting families in community settings are:
  - using joined-up multi-agency approaches
  - having a well-trained workforce
  - using media to engage hard-to-reach people
  - using both practical and therapeutic interventions simultaneously.
- Elements of effective school-based practice in supporting families include:
  - offering a one-to-one approach to parents
  - providing face-to-face support
  - offering a range of services in one location
  - maintaining the effects of the intervention in the long-term by, for example, running 'reunion' sessions for attendees at interventions.
- School-based programmes that work with parents and carers improve key outcomes including child behaviour, educational attainment, school attendance and substance misuse, as well as family relationships and stability.
- Fear of stigmatisation is a significant barrier to the uptake of services. Local commissioners need to consider how services can be delivered in a way that reassures users that they are not failing as parents just because they are engaging with the service, that they will be treated without judgment, and that their privacy will be maintained.

- School-based programmes are likely to minimise the fear of stigmatisation which is more often associated with referrals to specialist services.
- The most commonly reported needs of parents and carers are advice and emotional support. Because these needs can often be met without referral to specialist services, delivering support through schools may be more cost-effective than alternative service delivery models.
- The review found few cost-effectiveness studies. Some evidence suggests effective programmes for child conduct disorders and full service extended schools can be delivered at a low cost. Local commissioners should make the collection of good quality cost and outcome data a priority if they are to make a case for value for money. Doing this across local authorities would enable local commissioners to deliver better value for money by being able to benchmark costs and outcomes.
- Community-based programmes can work in improving child behaviour, improving child welfare, and reducing time spent in care and juvenile crime.
- Interventions are more likely to be effective when they are informed by the views of parents identified through a thorough needs assessment at the outset. This is particularly true of interventions with groups such as fathers (both resident and non-resident) and minority ethnic parents.
- The review did not find robust evidence of direct causal links between policy interventions designed to address family income (for example, financial incentives extended to parents to enter or increase employment) and improved child outcomes.
- It is important for local commissioners to have a good relationship with schools to develop strategies in delivery of services for parents and carers. This is likely to be of particular significance in light of planned legislation which will take some schools out of current local authority control, through the creation of academies and free schools.

## **Introduction**

This summary is taken from the research review which identifies what works when it comes to delivering support and intervention with mothers, fathers and carers of seven to 19-year-olds<sup>1</sup> in order to improve children's and young people's attainment, behaviour, and emotional outcomes. Based on a rapid review of the research, involving systematic searching of literature and presentation of key data, the review summarises the best available evidence to enable strategic managers to improve practice and outcomes for children and young people. We explored four research questions, which can be summarised as:

- What are the family support needs of parents and carers of children aged seven to 19 years?
- What is the impact of school-based initiatives and community-based initiatives that support parents in improving their children's outcomes?
- What works in engaging parents and carers in interventions to improve child outcomes?
- Are interventions which target parents cost-effective in improving children's outcomes?

Also available on the C4EO website are reviews on improving the safety, health and wellbeing of children through improving the physical and mental health of mothers, fathers and carers, and on improving children's outcomes by supporting parental and carer-couple relationships and reducing conflict within families, including domestic violence.

Matrix Evidence carried out this review on behalf of the Centre for Excellence and Outcomes in Children and Young People's Services (C4EO). The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) conducted the data work.

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<sup>1</sup> The age parameter of seven years of age was decided upon to avoid overlap with the C4EO early years reviews.

## Who are the key stakeholders?

- children and young people
- mothers, fathers and other carers with support needs
- managers of services providing support for parents and carers (including school- and community-based service providers)
- specialist frontline professionals
- education-based staff including head teachers and teachers, tutors and designated teachers, pastoral support staff and special educational needs coordinators (SENCOs)
- local authority, community and voluntary service providers
- those responsible for developing new policy in this area.

## Their contributions are valuable in the process of improvement

For the purposes of the review, **children and young people** are defined as being between the ages of seven and 19 years.

- Support services are mainly provided for children at risk of poor outcomes due to low socioeconomic status or specific diagnosed conditions such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).
- In most cases, support programmes for parents improve child outcomes.

**Parents and carers with support needs** provide the day-to-day care of the child or young person.

- Interventions targeted at parents to improve child outcomes can also improve outcomes for parents by supporting them to enter or improve employment, increase family income, increase involvement in the child's schooling and acquire skills such as time management and organisation.

**Managers of services** providing support services for parents and carers (including school- and community-based service providers).

- Evidence suggests that poor or short-term funding can put undue strain on practitioners and parents, thereby jeopardising the success of programmes. Financial planning is a critical priority in running parent-focused interventions.

**Specialist frontline professionals** can be involved in the identification of parents and carers who need support, as well as in implementing interventions.

- Having a single-point contact person in working with parents has successfully facilitated cross-agency communication.
- Practitioners need to be non-judgmental and non-stigmatising in their approach to parents to ensure their continued engagement.

“ It is important for local commissioners to have a good relationship with schools to develop strategies in delivery of services for parents and carers. ”



**Education-based staff (head teachers, teachers, tutors, pastoral support staff, SENCOs, etc.)** can be involved in running school-based interventions, and are frequently involved in evaluations for assessing child outcomes.

- Education professionals have an important role in delivering parent-focused programmes. Several studies note that parents want more streamlined or regular school contact, enabling them to better monitor their child's progress.

**Voluntary, community and local authority staff** can be involved in implementing community-based programmes.

- Community programmes in the UK typically target conduct and behaviour disorders, with good effect.
- Sharing good practices within and across local authorities can lead to improved services for parents.

**Policymakers** in government departments are engaged in introducing new policy and implementing and reviewing the effectiveness of existing policy.

- Evidence from the US suggests that welfare reform programmes, such as providing financial support to parents to return to work, are not effective in improving child outcomes, but might have benefits for the family as a whole (for example, through parental employment stability or by alleviating family and child poverty).
- More evidence is needed on the cost-effectiveness of interventions. A greater focus on the systematic collection of robust cost and outcome data would enable policymakers to ensure resources are spent only on parental interventions with demonstrable efficacy.

## What data is available to inform the way forward?

There is a wealth of publicly available data on children and young people's outcomes, particularly educational achievement and school attendance, that interventions with mothers, fathers, and carers aim to improve. The main source for this data is from statistical first releases from the Department for Education (DfE, formerly the Department for Children, Schools and Families, DCSF). Less information is available about emotional wellbeing.

C4EO's interactive data site ([www.C4EO.org.uk](http://www.C4EO.org.uk)) enables local authority managers to evaluate their current position in relation to a range of key national indicators and allows them to access easily publicly available comparative data relating to families, parents and carers.

## The evidence base

The review identified a number of key gaps in our understanding of parent and carer-focused support:

- A clear understanding of the needs of fathers and minority ethnic parents.
- Comparisons across intervention types to determine relative effectiveness of different service offerings.
- Evidence of child outcomes, measured using standardised questionnaires so that results from different studies can be compared more easily, or reporting outcomes from the child's point of view.
- Studies reporting costs and evaluating programme effectiveness, so that high quality economic analysis can accurately assess the cost-effectiveness and cost-benefit of the different interventions.



## Research methods

Research literature was identified through systematic searches of relevant databases and websites, through recommendations from our Theme Advisory Group (a group of experts on policy, research and practice on families, parents and carers), and by considering studies cited in identified literature ('reference harvesting').

The review team used a 'best evidence' approach to select literature of the greatest relevance and quality to include in the review. A systematic approach was used to critically appraise the evidence.

The methods used attempt to reduce bias in the selection of literature and the information extracted from the evidence, to ensure that the review's findings are as objective as possible. Data contained within the data annexe was obtained by a combination of search methods but primarily via online access to known government publications and access to data published by the Office for National Statistics.

## Next steps

An updated version of this review is due to be published in spring 2011. This will include validated practice examples and views from children, young people, parents, carers and service providers.

C4EO reviews are available through the C4EO website on improving the safety, health and wellbeing of children through improving the physical and mental health of mothers, fathers and carers, and on improving children's outcomes by supporting parental and carer-couple relationships and reducing conflict within families including domestic violence. Local decision-makers and commissioners working in local authorities and children's services might also find it helpful to read the families, parents and carers Directors' Summary, which presents the key messages from all three reviews ([www.C4EO.org.uk](http://www.C4EO.org.uk)).

C4EO is using the main messages from the three reviews on the theme of Families, Parents and Carers to underpin its knowledge-sharing and capacity-building work with children's services, and through them the full range of professions and agencies working with parents and carers.



This review complements two other reviews in the area of supporting and engaging parents and carers in schools and communities:

- A current review for C4EO by the Institute of Education on what works in strengthening family wellbeing and community cohesion through the role of schools and extended services.
- A forthcoming review for the DfE by the Institute of Education on parental engagement in their children's learning, examining the impact of school-based initiatives that support and engage parents and carers in improving their children's learning outcomes.

Each review will bring together the best available evidence from research, data and local practice about improving outcomes for children and young people. Together, these reviews will create a comprehensive picture of 'what works' in supporting and engaging parents and carers of older children and will lead to a series of outputs including research summaries, learning tools, good practice guidance and materials, a series of training workshops and tailored support in local authorities.

C4EO is also undertaking some work to put a cost on the effective interventions local authorities deliver to children, young people and their families. The work includes the design of an outcomes-led model which can be applied to individual interventions. We are currently applying the model to a number of our local validated practice examples. Some of these are complete and can be found on the website. C4EO also offers tailored support to local areas to consider applying the model to local services.

## Research summaries

This summary is a concise and accessible overview of the key messages from the research review on this topic.

Please go to [www.C4EO.org.uk](http://www.C4EO.org.uk) to download full and in-depth versions.

## How can C4EO support your vision?

C4EO offers wide-ranging support, including:

- validated local practice
- knowledge events
- sector specialists and tailored support
- research and knowledge reviews including key messages from research.

Please go to [www.C4EO.org.uk](http://www.C4EO.org.uk) to access full information.