

On the right track

Learning from investment in Prevention
and Early Intervention in Ireland

Child Behaviour



ON THE
RIGHT
TRACK

Produced by



About this summary

This summary outlines learning from programmes which aimed to improve child behaviour outcomes. Programmes were delivered under the Prevention & Early Intervention Initiative. This summary identifies some of the features of effective programmes which are transferable to wider services dealing with children and young people. Key messages are based on findings from independent evaluations, but also draw from CES's experience of working with government and service providers in implementing a range of programmes and services for children and young people.

The final report **On the right track: Child behaviour (2016)** and this summary will be of interest to policy makers, service commissioners and providers, agencies and organisations involved in the delivery of services which work with parents to improve outcomes for children and young people.

To read all of the reports produced in the **On the right track** series, visit www.effectiveservices.org

On The Right Track

Child Behaviour

From 2004 to 2016, The Atlantic Philanthropies together with government and other organisations invested in 52 programmes and services aimed at improving outcomes for children across the island of Ireland. These programmes used prevention and early intervention approaches in various areas of children's lives, including learning, behaviour, health and development, parenting and inclusion. This investment was known as the Prevention and Early Intervention Initiative.

Organisations receiving funding under the initiative were required to evaluate the programmes they provided. Since 2008, CES has liaised with organisations delivering the programmes, to summarise learning from the experience of implementing individual programmes. Individual evaluations from each programme were used to inform a series of initial reports in six outcome areas which CES published in 2012 and 2013. This summary is based on an updated report produced by CES in 2016, which now includes findings from evaluations of fifteen programmes focused on children's behaviour.

Learning from the initiative has already been used to inform the design and delivery of new programmes in Ireland and Northern Ireland, including the Area Based Childhood (ABC) Programme, an initiative introduced by the Irish Government in 2013 which aims to improve outcomes for children living in disadvantaged areas and the Early Intervention Transformation Programme, an Executive Office programme which aims to transform mainstream services in Northern Ireland.

Introduction

When commissioning services

There is no one magic bullet that will improve outcomes for all children. Commissioners should consider the nature of the problem, the evidence for a particular approach, how it will fit with local needs and how it can be made sustainable.

Both universal and targeted programmes are effective in improving child behaviour. Targeted programmes may make larger gains for smaller groups of people, while universal programmes may make smaller gains for larger groups.

Resources and budget allocations need to reflect how a programme or service will be delivered. Investing in programme infrastructure, staff support, training and coaching and evaluation activities ensure that programmes are delivered well, consistently and that new approaches are sustainable.

Key Messages

When implementing services

Implementation is as important as the intervention itself. Staff will need training to implement a new programme or intervention. Coaching and mentoring can provide ongoing support to staff implementing a programme, but organisations need to plan to ensure that these supports are sustainable.

Giving a programme or intervention time to bed down is important, as the impact may not immediately be visible. Effective implementation of a new programme or initiative can take between 2 to 4 years.

When engaging with parents, professionals and children

Particular efforts are needed to engage and retain parents in programmes. Consulting with both parents and other service providers can help to engage parents and keep them involved.

Interventions and services which address children's behaviour across multiple settings (e.g. home, community and school) are more effective than those which focus on one aspect of children's lives. Interventions which involve all of the significant adults in their lives can have a lasting impact on them, their parents, teachers and future generations of children.

“I loved learning how to play again, learning how to allow my child to lead the play. I loved learning about the positive praise, the praise worked so well in this house. They showed us what way we can talk them around positively - how we can stop squabbling between siblings; stuff like that was really, really good.” Parent

“If children behave better, feel happier and are more confident, they will be more predisposed to learning”
School Principal

Children with behavioural difficulties are vulnerable to adverse experiences and poorer outcomes as they grow up. The cost implications for public services are significant, as child behavioural difficulties also have an impact on their families, communities and wider society. Services and programmes which prevent behavioural difficulties from developing, or which address them early can generate significant cost savings over time, and improve the lives of children and families affected.

If they are not addressed, the costs of child behaviour problems will be borne by a range of agencies and government departments at a future time. Investing in addressing child behaviour at an early stage can generate long term cost benefits for multiple departments and agencies. Approaches such as ‘pooled budgets’ can encourage departments to share the costs of this investment at an early stage.

**Child behaviour –
invest now or pay later?**

There are a number of programmes which have been demonstrated internationally to improve behavioural outcomes for children. Programmes delivered under the Prevention and Early Intervention Initiative included international programmes with an existing evidence base, some of which were adapted for delivery in particular communities. Programmes which drew on evidence of ‘what works’ were also developed and delivered.

They included both universal and targeted programmes, such as parenting programmes, family support programmes, classroom management training for teachers and mentoring programmes for young people. Programmes were mostly delivered in areas experiencing social disadvantage. Some programmes worked directly with children, some with their parents, while others worked with both parents and children.

Twelve of the programmes evaluated changes in behavioural outcomes using Randomised Controlled Trials (RCTs) whereby people are randomly selected to either receive an intervention or be part of a control group who do not. Two were evaluated using quasi-experimental

approaches which compare the outcomes of people who receive an intervention to a group who do not; assignment to the intervention and control group is not random. One programme was evaluated using a non-experimental design. This design incorporates quantitative and qualitative methods.

In general, programmes were shown to have a positive impact not only on children but also their parents, teachers and the professionals in their lives.

What programmes were delivered to address child behaviour?

“I hadn’t thought about how important it was to have a consistent routine, not just for her but for me as well.” Parent

“It made me more aware of what was going on for a child. It just makes you more aware of what the child wants and maybe that is why the child gets angry and aggressive. By the time I left, it was like I was getting a new child going home.” Parent

Of the fifteen programmes delivered under the Prevention and Early Intervention Initiative focusing on child behaviour, evaluations showed that five had a significant improvement on child behaviour, while seven programmes demonstrated positive trends. Two programmes demonstrated mixed findings, and one programme was discontinued following negative findings.

Findings from the evaluations suggest that programmes which improve child behaviour include the following five features:

- They are based on a clear theory of how they work
- They are consistent in their attention to programme guidelines, but are flexible in responding to local needs
- They address the multiple aspects of children’s lives (e.g. home, school, community)
- They are supported by consultation with the community and interagency work
- They use well trained practitioners, who have access to supports such as coaching and mentoring.

Five features of effective programmes

The evaluations also provide useful insights for service providers, commissioners and practitioners involved in planning and delivering programmes and services which address child behaviour.

1. Allow time to adapt existing programmes.

If a programme is being adapted for a particular area or community, then allowing time for consultation can help to ensure that it meets local needs and encourages participation. Staff confidence and skill in delivering the programme and being consistent with the programme were significant factors in generating positive results for existing programmes. Programmes which had a positive impact showed a good balance between meeting local needs and being consistent with the original programme.

2. While the impact of a programme may not be immediately visible, evaluation can help you to assess early on if you need to change your approach.

Evaluations can show different findings at different stages, for different children, depending on their age or stage of development. Both *Tús Maith* and

Preparing for Life showed significant differences for children at different stages of the evaluation. Evaluation can also indicate if a programme needs to be adapted. For example, *Preparing for Life* changed the frequency of meetings in response to feedback from parents, while the programme *Mate Tricks* was stopped following negative evaluation findings in relation to child behaviour.

3. Investing in interagency work takes time, but can pay off in the long term.

Programme providers identified increased collaboration between agencies, which they reported led to better planning and less duplication. Findings indicated that while interagency work was challenging, it was viewed as important given that the costs of not addressing behavioural difficulties are borne by a range of agencies and public services.

4. Engaging and retaining parents on programmes was highly effective, but more challenging than expected.

Providers used different strategies to reach parents, including the use of technology, arranging home visits, flexible timing of sessions, responding to parent's needs, making childcare available and encouraging good relationships between practitioners and participating parents. Interagency links were also important in supporting and recruiting parents. Some programmes developed relationships with health services, maternity hospitals and other service providers. Programmes which were effective generally used approaches with parents such as group discussions, individual support, and training in positive reinforcement, and positive behaviour modelling and practices.

5. Early intervention through targeted programmes can be effective for children with existing behavioural problems.

The most significant improvements in child behaviour emerged in programmes which intervened early by targeting parents whose children were already, or at risk of displaying challenging behaviour. Group dynamics are also important, when working directly with children with behavioural difficulties. Interventions targeting individual children can be more effective than those delivered in group settings.

6. Programmes targeting child behaviour can also benefit adults in their lives.

Teachers and parents reported improvements in how they managed children's behaviour as a result of their participation on programmes. These skills will benefit future generations of children.

What can we learn from the programmes which were implemented?

“He loved it. Generally it helped him, the different techniques for calming down because that is one of his main problems. You couldn't get him out of it, he didn't want to leave. It was very good for him - it taught him a lot.” Parent

The following table provides an overview of the programmes evaluated & the changes reported in behaviour outcomes in the evaluations. While the evaluation studies used a range of methods, this table shows the main evaluation approach relevant to this particular outcome area.

More details about the findings within individual evaluations are available in the longer report on Child Behaviour. The On the right track series is available on the CES website www.effectiveservices.org

	Who did the programme work with?	Age Range	Setting	Programme Duration	Change in Behaviour Outcome	Main Evaluation Approach
Preparing for Life (PFL) Northside Partnership	Parents of children in a disadvantaged area	0 to 5	Home	Monthly home visits & other supports from pregnancy to 5 years	Significant Improvement	Randomised Controlled Trial
Growing Child Programme Lifestart	Parents in the catchment area	0 to 5	Home	Monthly home visits from birth to 5 years	Positive Trend	Randomised Controlled Trial
Triple P Parenting Programme Midlands Area Parenting Partnership	Parents in the catchment area	0 to 7	Community	Various lengths & intensity depending on need	Significant Improvement	Quasi-Experimental
CDI Early Years Childhood Development Initiative (CDI)	Children & their families in a disadvantaged area	2 to 5	Early Years Settings	Various supports over 2 years	Positive Trend	Randomised Controlled Trial
Tús Maith Barnardos	Children in disadvantaged areas	3 to 5	Early Years Settings	1 year	Mixed findings	Quasi-Experimental
Incredible Years Parent & Child Training for Children with ADHD Archways	Children with symptoms of ADHD & their parents	3 to 7	School	Parents: 20 x 2 hr sessions Children 18 x 2 hr sessions	Positive Trend	Randomised Controlled Trial
Incredible Years Parent Training Programme Archways	Parents of children with emotional & behavioural difficulties	3 to 7	Community	2-2.5 hrs per week for 12-14 weeks	Significant Improvement	Randomised Controlled Trial
Incredible Years Teacher Classroom Management Programme Archways	Teachers & children in participating schools	4 to 7	School	6 days over 5 months	Positive Trend	Randomised Controlled Trial
Suite of Incredible Years Programmes youngballymun	Whole school approach with children, their parents & teachers	3 to 12	School	Delivered throughout the school year	Significant Improvement	Non-Experimental
Ready to Learn Barnardo's NI	All children in participating classes & their parents	4 to 8	School	3 x 1 hr weekly sessions after school over 3 school years	Mixed findings	Randomised Controlled Trial
Promoting Alternative Thinking Strategies (PATHS) Barnardo's NI	All children in participating schools	5 to 11	School	1-2 hrs per week, delivered over 3 years	Positive Trend	Randomised Controlled Trial
Mate Tricks Childhood Development Initiative (CDI)	Children referred to the programme	9 to 10	School	1.5 hr sessions twice a week plus parent & family sessions	Negative impact	Randomised Controlled Trial
Big Brothers Big Sisters Ireland Foróige	Young people referred to the programme	10 to 18	Community	1-2 hrs per week for at least a year	Positive Trend	Randomised Controlled Trial
Functional Family Therapy Archways	Young people with behavioural problems & their families	11 to 18	Home	16-30 sessions depending on need	Significant Improvement	Randomised Controlled Trial
Odyssey Parenting Your Teen Parenting NI	Parents self referred to the programme	11 to 18	Community	2 hrs per week for 8 weeks	Positive Trend	Randomised Controlled Trial

Changes in behaviour outcomes are presented as follows:

 **Significant Improvement**, if the evaluations reported a statistically significant improvement on one or more measures of child behaviour

 **Positive Trend**, if there was a positive result on one or more subscales of measures of child behaviour used, or improvements shown but not reaching statistical significance

 **Mixed findings**, if there were some positive & some mixed effects for measures of child behaviour

 **No Difference**, if there were no statistically significant effects observed for measures of child behaviour

 **Negative impact**, if there were one or more significant negative effects on one or more measures of child behaviour

 Home

 Early Years Settings

 School

 Community

©The Centre for Effective Services 2016

9 Harcourt Street, Dublin 2, Ireland.
+353 (0) 1 416 0500
office@effectiveservices.org

Forestview, Purdy's Lane, Belfast,
BT8 7AR, Northern Ireland.
+44 (0)2890 648 362
nioffice@effectiveservices.org

www.effectiveservices.org

Produced by

