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Meeting needs, making changes, improving outcomes

Supporting Children and their Families in Educational Achievement and Well-being through a High Quality Early Years Service

Policy Brief

This policy brief outlines ways in which we can support families in improving children's educational and well-being outcomes through Early Years services. The Childhood Development Initiative (CDI) implemented an Early Years programme to support and target families in Tallaght West whose children may face barriers to educational achievement and well-being. The programme was rigorously evaluated using a randomised controlled trial. The findings of the evaluation and recommendations for Early Years policy are presented here.



Key Points

- Quality Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) is linked with positive social and cognitive outcomes for children and this positive effect can persist well into later life. Disparities in outcomes are evident from a young age with children from disadvantaged backgrounds performing less well than their peers. This early gap in outcomes highlights the importance of intervening early in the child's life to tackle this inequity;
- CDI implemented an integrated two-year Early Years programme that combined the following elements: a flexible and broad-based curriculum operating within the principles of HighScope for 4 hours 15 minutes per day, five days a week; access to a dedicated speech and language therapist and specialist primary health care support; a dedicated Parent/Carer Facilitator and a parent support and education programme;
- An independent evaluation of the programme showed that children demonstrated improved attendance, behaviour and social skills, and improved speech and language prognosis on entry to school in comparison to children in a control group of services, most of which did not share key aspects of the integrated CDI *Early Years* programme. The provision of a parenting programme (Parents Plus Community Course) was found to have a positive effect on the home learning environment which is strongly linked to child outcomes;
- CDI strongly recommends implementing and maintaining key features of the training and organisational structure of the CDI *Early Years* programme in order to ensure a high quality setting. These include providing well-trained practitioners as part of a two year programme, supporting practitioners' non-contact planning and review hours and having a strong parental component which includes mentoring and support for engaging parents.



Background and Context

Research on the effectiveness of early childhood education and care (ECEC) has found a consistent link between high quality ECEC and positive child outcomes in a wide range of areas, including social and cognitive gains¹. These effects can persist into adult life² resulting in reduced crime, early school leaving and rates of unemployment. The quality of the home learning environment (HLE) has also been found to be important, with its influence being greater than that of parental education, socio-economic status, and income³.

Studies have shown that there is a significant gap in cognitive performance and educational attainment between children from disadvantaged backgrounds and more advantaged children at pre-school age⁴. Disparities in child cognitive, health and social-emotional outcomes are evident before the child is two⁵. This highlights the need for targeted provision of supports for children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Building on the development of Aistear: the Early Childhood Curriculum Framework and Síolta: The National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education, the development of the first ever Early Years strategy provides an opportunity to improve educational outcomes, enhance quality in ECEC programmes, and increase positive parental engagement in early childhood education and care. Several studies have demonstrated a positive return on investment from high quality ECEC with estimates as high as \$16 for every dollar invested⁶. The economic benefits of the implementation of quality ECEC have been highlighted in the development of the Early Years strategy:

[...] this Strategy will also play a significant part in Ireland's future economic planning. There is an increasing acceptance and focus internationally on the economic benefits accruing from investment in the early years. Longitudinal studies in the US, England, France and New Zealand cite returns to the economy of between three and ten times the original investment⁷.

The following section highlights findings from an independent evaluation of CDI *Early Years* programme which sought to improve outcomes for children in Tallaght West.

CDI Early Years Programme

CDI's *Early Years* programme was a two-year service which provided a flexible and broad-based curriculum operating within the principles of HighScope for 4 hours 15 minutes per day, five days a week. Minimum practitioner qualifications were required, the practitioner-child ratio was 1:5, and practitioners were provided with time for non-contact planning and to visit children's parents in their homes.

Children were provided with access to a dedicated speech and language therapist (SLT) and specialist primary health care support. Parents or carers had a dedicated Parent/Carer Facilitator (PCF) to help facilitate self-identified parenting needs and educational interests, and a parent education programme (Parents Plus Community Course) was provided to support parents in the positive parenting of their children. In contrast, most of the services in the control group were not informed by an overarching curriculum and did not have onsite access to an SLT, or PCF. The control services did not have a guaranteed two-year service and most ran for only three hours a day.



CDI Early Years Programme: Evaluation

The Centre for Social and Educational Research at the Dublin Institute of Technology, in collaboration with the Institute of Education at the University of London, conducted a randomised controlled trial evaluation of the Early Years programme. Key findings include:

- Children demonstrated improved attendance, behaviour and social skills, and improved speech and language prognosis on entry to school in comparison to children in a control group who did not have access to the same quality of service;
- There was a positive practitioner effect with the quality of activities planned and implemented in CDI's *Early Years* programme significantly better than in the control group;
- The more sessions of a parenting course that parents attended, the more beneficial the home learning environment (HLE), indicating a positive effect of the intervention parenting course (Parents Plus Community Course) on the quality of the HLE;
- The Parents Plus Community Course was identified as being well implemented and well-received by parents and practitioners. This is likely to be due to it being evidence-based and manualised, in addition to being supported by a well-trained and accessible mentor;
- The implementation of *Siolta*⁸ in services was supported by key implementation drivers, which included a longer working week (37 hours) to allow non-contact time; well-trained and engaged Early Years practitioners; low staff turnover; and managers who took ownership of the process.





Recommendations

The intervention improved the ability of those around the children to support their learning and development and to interact meaningfully with children whether in the home or the Early Years service. The programme was implemented and evaluated within a short time frame, and may yield greater gains in the long term.

Given these findings, CDI recommends:

- 1.** Delivering parent training as part of an integrated Early Years programme. This has a positive effect on the home learning environment and highlights the importance for parent training programmes of an evidence-based, manualised programme that is strongly supported by a well-trained and accessible mentor;
- 2.** Implementing and maintaining an integrated, high quality Early Years programme as outlined in this brief. Universal provision of high quality Early Years services should be implemented along with targeted supports for children in areas of disadvantage;
- 3.** Including a speech and language need awareness module in all Early Years practitioner training, and developing models of multi-agency delivery to roll out more on-site speech and language therapy;
- 4.** Taking into account the need for well-trained practitioners, and strong and engaged managers, in the mainstreaming of frameworks such as Siolta and Aistear.
- 5.** That all Government Departments continue to commit to using evidence to inform planning and service delivery and give serious consideration to the implications of the evaluation for professional training, service planning and integration.
- 6.** That all services for children are evaluated, and those services and models which have no demonstrable impact on outcomes for children are incrementally removed and replaced with evidence-based programmes.

For further details on the CDI *Early Years* evaluation report please see: Hayes, N., Siraj-Blatchford, I., Keegan, S., & Goulding, E. (2013). *Evaluation of the Early Years Programme of Tallaght West Childhood Development Initiative*. Dublin: Childhood Development Initiative (CDI).

For more details on the CDI *Early Years* programme please visit <http://twcdi.ie>.

References:

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