

# Executive Summary

## Background

The growing interest in early intervention as a policy issue reflects the widespread recognition that it is better to identify problems early and intervene effectively to prevent their escalation than to respond only when the difficulty has become so acute as to demand action. It is better for the individuals concerned, their families and society more broadly; it avoids a lot of personal suffering, reduces social problems and generally, it costs less than remedial action – so early intervention is nothing new. What has changed is that our knowledge and understanding of human development, especially in childhood, has grown to the point that we can now identify many more problems earlier; some we can even anticipate, or clearly predict a risk factor. Practice has also developed to enable us to intervene more effectively to address many of these problems. Such developments are continual, but we appear to have reached a tipping point where our knowledge and practice have progressed sufficiently to make the policy question not whether we should invest in early intervention, but how can we not do so?

To reflect its strategic importance, early intervention became the latest cross-cutting theme in the Centre for Excellence and Outcomes' (C4EO's) programme of work, with a joint call for evidence with ADCS (Association of Directors of Children's Services) to help build the knowledge base and support local areas in learning from each other about effective approaches. Over 100 submissions have been received (with more coming in), which have been subject to C4EO's validation process to assess their impact and their potential for replication in different contexts in other local areas. About a quarter of the submissions met C4EO's criteria for effective practice, and most of these are summarised in this publication.

C4EO, through its Expert Group on Early Intervention, also commissioned the Wave Trust to undertake a rapid review of international experience of early intervention. As with the local practice examples, evidence of effective practice from abroad has been distilled into case studies for inclusion in this publication. Running alongside both of these main sources of evidence are key findings and messages from academic research.

### **Definition of early intervention**

For the purposes of this practice guide, the following definition is used: "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. Early intervention may occur at any point in a child or young person's life".

## **Main findings**

The most striking message is that early intervention clearly works – when it is an appropriate intervention, applied well, following timely identification of a problem; and the earlier the better to secure maximum impact and greatest long term sustainability (both as early in the child’s life as possible and/or as soon as possible after a difficulty becomes apparent). The wealth of effective local, national and international practice showing evidence of improvements in outcomes and the quality of life for many children and families gives cause for optimism, and encouragement to replicate local innovations more widely. Indeed, some of the examples describe practice that has already spread widely (often internationally) from its local origins.

A clear need has been identified for more research into the effectiveness and the relative cost-effectiveness of early intervention strategies, but several characteristics emerge as common to a number of the successful examples described. These are reflected in five ‘golden threads’, which are described in chapter 2, and form the headings for the thematic chapters that follow. Where possible, these golden threads need to be taken together, when they constitute a coherent strategy for systemic change.

### **Five golden threads**

- The best start in life
- Language for life
- Engaging parents
- Smarter working, better services
- Knowledge is power

Energetic and visionary leadership, inspired by a strong sense of moral purpose, is critical. This needs to be underpinned by understanding the compelling economic and social case for early intervention, combined with well planned and robust commissioning arrangements.

The role of health services, children’s centres and schools in delivering and supporting effective early intervention cannot be underestimated – from early pregnancy and support for families with young children, throughout childhood and adolescence. If we are, as a nation, to ‘close the gap’ for vulnerable children, young people and their families, the active engagement of local health commissioners, providers and schools in both identifying need at the earliest opportunity and helping meet these needs is crucial.

The well-developed approaches of Sweden and the Netherlands, which lead both the UNICEF and OECD league tables for child well-being, warrant closer scrutiny. Given these two countries’ positions of strength and what we now know about the significant impact that parenting has on a child’s development, together with research on early brain development, in this country “what is needed is a whole society attitude shift to parenting akin to those achieved with seat belt wearing and drink driving. Instead of parenting being seen as a private matter which must not be invaded, it should be celebrated as a matter where achieving high standards is in everyone’s interest, and it is socially acceptable for everyone to recognise they are able to learn” (Wave Trust 2010).

Of all the potential areas for intervention, it is in the combination of early years development, including language and communication skills, and parenting support that the most significant impact could be made. The Coalition Government has already declared its commitment to supporting families, especially those with multiple problems, and refocusing resources

towards an increase in the number of health visitors. The potential benefits of extending this commitment to the development of a coherent, strategic approach to early parenting, early child development and successful language acquisition would be huge, for a relatively modest step. A good foundation could be achieved through relatively low cost public education and making best use of the National Year of Speech, Language and Communication planned for 2011.

## **The best start in life**

Far more is known now than even a few years ago about the extent to which a child's early development, including before birth, lays the foundation for their future life. But little of this knowledge is applied systematically to ensure that all children get off to the best start; too much is still left to what is often referred to as the 'accident of birth'.

Most parents are largely unaware of the conditions that promote early brain development and some members of the workforce know less than they might. Traditional, cross-generational support networks are often weaker than they were as a result of changes in society. So universal services, such as children's centres and schools, are more important in transmitting the knowledge and information to ensure a good early start – but many of the most vulnerable don't even make it to children's centres without significant encouragement.

### **Key messages:**

- There is now compelling evidence to show that what a child experiences during the early years (starting in the womb) lays down a foundation for the whole of their life, which needs to be reflected in policy and practice, both at a national and local level.
- Children's centres lie at the 'hub' of a continuum of support for children, families and communities with additional needs, but require an effective outreach strategy to ensure that interventions target and support the most vulnerable in the community.
- Despite the significant benefits of breastfeeding having been clearly illustrated, breastfeeding rates in England are among the lowest in Europe. Effective local initiatives, such as in Blackpool, are needed to achieve and sustain significant improvements.
- Complementary action is needed to dramatically increase the current low proportion of hospitals in England (less than one in 10) accredited under the Baby Friendly Hospital Initiative, a set of standards developed by UNICEF and the WHO (World Health Organisation) to promote breastfeeding.
- More needs to be done to promote the use of peer support: volunteers from the community (including local parents) who are trained to work alongside professionals, but whose similar life experiences bridge the 'approachability gap'.

## **Language for life**

The ability to communicate is an essential life skill which underpins a child's future development, but more children struggle than is commonly recognised. Yet awareness of the importance of language and communication skills and the creation of language rich environments for young children remains generally inadequate – not only with many parents,

but also amongst policy-makers, commissioners of services and service providers. The practice examples describe a range of approaches for improving this and it is encouraging that a high proportion of language difficulties can be remedied with the right support – though for some it appears that this needs to be done by the age of 5½,<sup>i</sup> and many early years staff and primary teachers report a lack of confidence in meeting these needs.

## Engaging parents

We know how important good parenting is to successful outcomes, from a child's early development through to them achieving independence – including the crucial acquisition of language and communication skills. But, again, our national approach to parenting support is far from systematic, with the inevitable consequence that many children and young people experience problems that are largely avoidable, and which blight their lives – and those of their parents and families – often escalating into more serious situations that may require expensive intervention.

Effective intervention with children depends not only on the *fact* of involving their parents, and sometimes wider family, but also on the *way* of doing so. The examples in this publication repeatedly demonstrate the importance of engaging parents in a collaborative approach, building on their strengths and taking account of their views and experiences. They highlight the need to recognise the problems that families themselves often face and to develop strategies that build confidence and capacity to enable parents to properly fulfil the crucial role they play. They illustrate the vital part that outreach work often plays in making contact with families who would otherwise miss out on services, but who can often be successfully drawn into both universal or specialist (targeted) provision.

A key feature of several examples is the use of peer support: volunteers from the community who are trained to work alongside professionals, but whose similar life experiences bridge the 'approachability gap' that often prevents the take up of support. To some extent, this is also a way of addressing an issue identified previously in the *Narrowing the Gap* guidance,<sup>ii</sup> that many professionals still lack confidence in working with parents, and receive inadequate training to help them. Most parents need support of some kind at some time, and 'normalising' parenting support would greatly widen the reach of the benefits it brings.

### Key messages:

- Parents are the most significant influence on children, and parenting has profound consequences for their future lives, so it is important to persuade parents that engaging in their child's development can make a difference, and to build positively on their existing strengths and actively involve them in decisions.
- Disadvantage is not a block to good parenting but low levels of literacy and numeracy and confidence are obstacles, and self-perception contributes to parents' motivation to change – so it is particularly important to persuade such parents to engage with support services by convincing them that they can bring real and lasting benefits to their children.
- As most parents need support of some kind at some time and effective parenting support does help improve parenting, systematic parenting support should be rolled out across the UK.
- A whole society attitude shift to parenting is needed: parenting should be celebrated as a matter where achieving high standards is in everyone's interest, and it is socially

acceptable for everyone to recognise they are able to learn, rather than being seen as a private matter which must not be invaded.

### **Smarter working, better services**

The quality of leadership will be key in determining both how far there is a shift of emphasis towards early intervention, and how effective it will be. There needs to be a clarity of purpose, and a determination to make improvements, *because it's the right thing to do*. Commissioning provides a robust, credible and objective way of making decisions about the use of scarce public resources so that they have maximum positive impact on the lives of children and families. Effective commissioning starts with a strategic understanding of how the whole system works and how the total resource is being used. A key to success is understanding that early intervention requires a reorientation of the system at all levels.

The importance of agencies working in partnership to meet the needs of children and families lies at the heart of recent changes in approach to service development and delivery. Many of the examples of effective early intervention arise explicitly from such practice, either in the form of multi-disciplinary teams working with children and families – often making use of the CAF (common assessment framework) to determine the action to be taken – or, in some cases, through one group of highly trained professionals supporting colleagues from other disciplines in the identification of need, facilitating a joint approach to resolving them. Staff in all settings need to have an increased understanding of the principles of early intervention, of how they can identify early difficulties, of how they should respond, and of the role of others. Some interventions, particularly those involving outreach or intensive support, require changes of practice to enable services to be offered out of 'normal' hours in order to meet families' needs. These often involve specialist staff working closely with colleagues from other agencies, with a lead professional or key worker providing consistent support.

The problems experienced by some children and families will respond to a single intervention, others will require longer term support; some will be complex and may even cross generations. It is, therefore, essential that a continuum of support is available with the capacity to meet specific needs at a particular time. Creating and sustaining such provision requires a high level of interagency collaboration, as well as good communication with families.

#### **Key messages:**

- When resources are scarce, and the workforce feels under pressure, there is a tendency to defend (or at least cling to) the *status quo* which can make innovation and change harder to implement; but it is only by doing things differently that better outcomes will be achieved. Energetic and visionary leadership, combined with effective joint commissioning, is therefore critical in delivering whole system change.
- Effective commissioning applies evidence of what works to improve outcomes for local people and will become increasingly important as budgets are constrained. It provides a robust, credible and objective way of making decisions about the use of scarce public resources so that they have maximum positive impact on the lives of children and families.
- As some children and families need ongoing support, while others may have their needs met sufficiently by an 'earlier' intervention to prevent later interventions, a continuum of services is needed to identify the most appropriate intervention to match specific needs at a particular point.<sup>iii</sup>

- Considerable progress has been made in inter-agency working, but there is still much more to do. Key characteristics of effective integrated working that need to be in place everywhere include having a shared vision, clear understanding of needs and identification of gaps, sharp focus on improving outcomes for children, young people and families, clear and consistent messages communicated to staff and families, and an underpinning integrated workforce development strategy. Time needs to be invested to build trust, strong relationships and, ultimately, to secure buy-in from all agencies.
- To overcome the inconsistencies and confusion about the CAF (Common Assessment Framework) process, it should be developed into *the* standardised tool for conducting assessments for children's additional needs, and for developing and agreeing on a process through which agencies work together to meet those needs.
- Evidence suggests that professionals in all kinds of settings may lack confidence and experience in working directly with parents and families, particularly if they are disadvantaged. Continuing investment in developing workforce skills and capacity is essential to effectively engage with parents.

## Knowledge is power

Many have observed that we frequently fail to make effective use of the data we already gather, let alone gather and use systematically what would help us to make real progress. Existing data, well used and interrogated, would often highlight needs earlier. And asking the right questions would often lead to more effective forms of intervention. The recent Ofsted review of Special Education Needs and Disability observed that, "What consistently worked well was rigorous monitoring of the progress of individual children and young people, with quick intervention and thorough evaluation of its impact" (p 6)<sup>iv</sup>. It is the progress, or lack of it, being made by children that often signifies the existence of a problem.

Whilst the practice examples in this publication illustrate data being used effectively, the international examples show how much we have to learn from other countries. It is vital that staff at all levels are able to recognise objectively the value of their work, and to both measure and question their practice against objective criteria assessing its impact.

### Key messages:

- Evidence suggests that the use of data is a systemic weakness. In short, if we cannot provide evidence to show that an intervention is having a positive impact, how can we justify funding it? Evidence should be used as an integral part of the process and as an aid to innovation. We can learn much from international experience in this area.
- International research suggests that the most successful programmes tend to share common characteristics: they target specific populations; they are intensive; they focus on behaviour; they include both parents and children; and they stay faithful to the programme.
- Effective local practice is characterised by clarity of purpose; interventions are informed by a comprehensive evidence base; there is a clear analysis of local needs, including feedback from children, families and practitioners; and, critically, there is a baseline to enable the intervention to be tracked at key stages following its implementation to measure impact on outcomes.
- Sufficient analytical capacity within children's services needs to be addressed as a workforce development priority (both nationally and locally).

## Where is it best to invest?

When resources are scarce, priorities must be clearly established, as it is particularly important to allocate them where there can be confidence of achieving significant impact and good value from the investment. Some of the examples described achieve impact through a targeted focus on specific areas of need across population groups, others target specific groups and achieve broader benefits. Both approaches can deliver excellent value.

### Key messages:

- The temptation to cut back on investment in early intervention in times of austerity needs to be resisted, for short term financial gains can lead to long term costs. The challenge is not, therefore, deciding whether to maintain spending on early intervention, but working out how to get better value out of the money already being invested.
- The powerful body of research (home and abroad) showing that what a child experiences during the early years (starting in the womb) lays the foundation for the whole of their life, makes a compelling case for prioritising investment in this area.
- In general, targeted approaches tend to be judged more cost effective than universal approaches. Yet there is little comparative evidence to determine which approach might be most 'cost effective'. The evidence suggests that it is unlikely to be a question of one or the other. What is needed is a range of interventions able to provide support at different levels of need.
- Spending should be prioritised on children's centres and early years (in particular breastfeeding initiatives and the Nurse Family Partnership); speech, language and communication needs; parenting programmes; targeted family support; and young people on the edge of care.
- Three of the recommended interventions – Nurse Family Partnership, Incredible Years and Multi-Systemic Therapy – are among the 11 'Blueprint' programmes identified by the Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence at the University of Colorado which meet high standards of effectiveness, as part of a review of 800 early intervention programmes.
- The OECD suggestion that expenditure on children should be regarded as if it were an *investment portfolio*, and be subjected to a continuous iterative process of evaluation, reallocation and further evaluation to ensure child well-being is actually improved, poses a formidable but necessary challenge to this nation. Learning from international experience in particular can be invaluable in helping us to move forward, though, ultimately, tough decisions need to be taken at a national and local level in the best interests of children, families and, indeed, the long-term prosperity of the country.

## Conclusion

This practice guide provides inspiration for action, at many levels. Families themselves, including their children, would doubtless be encouraged to discover the range of activities and interventions that are in use to address the needs and problems many of them experience. But as awareness grows of the successful efforts being made, so too will demand for their greater availability. This demand will also increase amongst practitioners, as recognition spreads that many of the families with whom they are involved could have been helped earlier, if better systems existed to identify problems before they escalated. The scale of intervention required would have been lower.

This presents policy-makers, locally and nationally, with some real challenges – particularly at a time when resources are significantly constrained. Ways must be found to enable the systematic development of earlier interventions, which will bring both social and financial benefits, without neglecting those already ‘in the system’.

This publication demonstrates what could be done by describing what already is being done in many, but not in all areas of the country. The challenge to be met is drawing together key elements into a strategic approach that will extend those possibilities. Bold action is urgently needed to bring this about.

## Areas for Action – for all those with responsibility for policy and practice

1. There is a need for more public information about the crucial importance of the early stages of child development. Official publications and pronouncements should emphasise far more directly how simple changes in how parents relate to their young children can bring permanent benefits.
2. There should be a major effort to increase breastfeeding rates, promoting the benefits to the baby, which go on into later life; emphasising the positive aspects for mothers, and countering negative perceptions.
3. Parents’ and professionals’ awareness of the importance of language skills needs to be more actively promoted. The forthcoming National Year of Speech, Language and Communication should be made a key focus, upon which further progress can be built. Existing health checks at age two should include a specific emphasis on language development, to detect early signs of possible delay.
4. Workforce development plans need to ensure that everyone working with children and families, especially disadvantaged groups, receive adequate training on language development, engaging and working with parents, and the value and uses of research and data (particularly to analyse need, for early identification).
5. Opportunities should be explored to make best use of skilled, but scarce, specialist staff (notably speech and language therapists) through training and support for other practitioners to ensure early identification of potential difficulties, offering more widespread and sustained support in meeting needs.
6. Opportunities should be created to promote the use of trained peer support (including local parents) working alongside professionals - to convey positive influences from their own experience and encourage local families full use of advice and practical help from local services and agencies.

7. Positive parenting should be publicly celebrated, alongside recognition that most parents need some support at some time. Systematic support should be encouraged nationally, but with particular emphasis on meeting the needs of the most disadvantaged. Parents should be engaged as early and as positively as possible, ideally before their babies are born, with helpful information from the outset about the importance of their role, and the local services available.
8. Further progress is needed to ensure that in every local area there is a continuum of support for the many families whose needs vary over time, with children's centres and schools at its heart. Children's centres should be strongly encouraged to develop effective outreach strategies to draw in isolated and 'hard to reach' families.
9. In order to consolidate use of the Common Assessment Framework (CAF), rapid progress should be made in making it the standard mechanism for conducting assessments and accessing additional support for both children and families.
10. Intervention programmes should be aligned to whole system change and have a clear purpose, be informed by a comprehensive evidence base and analysis of local needs, and include baseline data to enable evaluation of impact at key stages.

#### **C4EO's next steps**

- The body of evidence in this report should contribute to the independent commission on early intervention set up by the Government and chaired by Graham Allen, MP.
- Continue to build a body of evidence of excellent local practice which is both (a) effective in closing the gap for vulnerable children, young people and their families and (b) cost effective.
- Working with ADCS and LGID (Local Governance Innovation & Development) continue to gather evidence from local areas which are redesigning services around whole system change, with early intervention at their heart.
- Undertake in depth studies of those local areas which seem to have reduced the demand for acute services (such as reduced rates of offending and re-offending, the proportion of children entering care), better understanding what is 'making the difference' in those localities.