

# This is where it starts

An overview



# 1. About the case studies

This report describes seven case studies of work with children and parents in the early years (pre-birth to eight years old). The case studies are based on in-depth interviews with those working with children and parents in the early years to uncover what professionals perceive supports positive outcomes, early intervention and prevention. The purpose of the case studies is to attempt to capture some of the experiential knowledge held by professionals working in the early years, to share this knowledge more widely across the sector and to provide inspiration to others. Examples are drawn from a range of initiatives across Scotland provided by statutory and third sector social and educational services:

- **Case study one:** Quarriers Family Centre, Ruchazie, Glasgow
- **Case study two:** Corsehill Nursery, Kilwinning, North Ayrshire Council
- **Case study three:** Castlemilk Family Learning Centre, Glasgow City Council
- **Case study four:** Midlothian Sure Start

- **Case study five:** The Dads Group, Douglas Family Support Centre, Dundee City Council
- **Case study six:** Change is a Must, Perth and Kinross Council
- **Case study seven:** Aberlour Bridges, Aberlour Child Care Trust, Glasgow.

Ten key learning points from the case studies:

- While therapeutic, relationship-based models of social work are not new, these case studies bring to life the ways in which such approaches are used by professionals to have a real impact on the lives of parents and children in need of support in the crucial early years
- The examples highlight a range of asset-based approaches, activities and attitudes that practitioners perceive as underpinning positive outcomes for children and parents
- The overarching theme is the importance of relationships with parents as a way to help build their capacity as parents
- Improving parenting capacity helps to improve the lives, experiences and outcomes for children. However, the case studies highlight that support to parents must go beyond focusing

exclusively on parenting skills and must help parents address their personal experiences and challenges.

- Positive relationships with parents and other agencies supporting them and their children are seen by professionals as key to early intervention and preventive practice
- Relationships with professionals are for some parents the only positive, stable relationship in their lives. Professionals seek to provide models of healthy relationships so that parents can develop these with their children.
- Professionals believe a key part of their role is to facilitate and foster peer support networks between parents and those in a parenting role. These networks act as a support outside the bounds of any service and have wider benefits for the community.
- The perceptions, lived experience and personal stories of professionals, parents and children can be a valuable form of evidence to uncover what makes a difference to the lives of people being supported by services
- Professionals are very keen to evidence the impact of support on parents and children, but this is often challenging due to limited resources including time, funding, confidence

and skills. This has implications for how professionals might be supported to build in evaluation measures to their day-to-day practice.

- Often evidence of positive outcomes for parents and children is effectively shared within a service, team or local practice community. However, knowledge about what is making a difference to the lives of people accessing support could be shared more widely with the social and health services community.

### Method: How were the case studies chosen?

An Early Years Seminar was held by the Association of Directors of Social Work (ADSW) on March 16th 2012 in Edinburgh. A number of examples from across Scotland of interventions in the early years were presented. Some parents attended and shared their experiences of working with professionals and the difference support had made to their lives and those of their children. IRISS supports the use of a range of different forms of evidence including published research but also, importantly, the views and experiences of people working across Scotland's social services and those of people who access

support. Therefore, from this event stemmed the idea for IRISS to follow up these examples, and others like them, to capture the experiences and views of professionals working in this area and share them more widely across the sector. A call was also put out to IRISS's Champions, a network of individuals from the social services workforce<sup>1</sup>, for other examples of interventions in this area which led to several of the case studies.

An in-depth interview and case study approach was adopted to capture practitioners' experience of the topic. Interviews were audio recorded and thematically analysed.

## 2. Early years social policy context in Scotland: 2008-2012

This section summarises some of the recent, key social policy initiatives related to early years.

The Early years framework (Scottish Government, 2008a) emphasises the crucial role the earliest years (defined

in the framework as pre-birth to eight years old) play in a child's life and their future. The framework underlines the importance of:

- Transformational change at local level
- Early intervention by moving from crisis management to prevention
- Support for parents to be the best parents that they can be for their children
- Ensuring that when parents and children need support and services that these are delivered in an integrated way
- Ensuring that we have a well-trained and well-supported workforce.

In the same year, *Getting it right for every child* (Scottish Government, 2008b), the national practice model for improving outcomes for all children and young people in Scotland, was published<sup>2</sup>. The model represented an integrated, holistic approach to supporting children and young people. Its key principles include:

- Putting the child at the centre
- Building on strengths and promoting resilience

1 <http://www.iriss.org.uk/project/champion-network>

2 For more on an outcomes-focused approach with children and young people see *Leading for outcomes: children and young people* (IRISS, 2012) freely available here: <http://www.iriss.org.uk/resources/leading-outcomes-children-and-young-people>

- Providing additional help that is appropriate, proportionate and timely
- Ensuring services work collaboratively and share information, where appropriate.

Closely related to the *Early years framework* is the *Curriculum for excellence* (Scottish Government, 2009) which focused on education from the age of three to 18. *Pre-birth to three: Positive outcomes for Scotland's children and families* (Learning and Teaching Scotland, 2010) further emphasised the importance of pregnancy and the first years of life in influencing children's development and future outcomes.

Professor Susan Deacon's report, *Joining the dots: A better start for Scotland's children*, was commissioned by Scottish Government and published in 2011. It presented a fresh, common-sense look at children's early years, why they matter and how they can be improved. Importantly, it argued against further evidence gathering and for 'creating a bias for action' whereby energy, time and resource is shifted 'from analysis to action and from process to people' (p8).

March 2012 saw the launch of the Early Years Taskforce, established to lead the development of the strategic direction for the Early Years Change Programme and to oversee the Early Years Change Fund. The Change Fund signifies a shift to preventative spend and early intervention, the financial argument for which had been well made<sup>3</sup>. Further, plans for the Early Years Collaborative have been set out by the Early Years Taskforce and the Scottish Government in consultation with partners from the public, private, and third sectors. The multi-agency Early Years Collaborative works on the basis that there is strong evidence about costs and outcomes of current practice, but much of this is not being used in daily work:

'The Collaborative will help organisations close that gap by creating a structure in which partners can easily learn from each other and from recognised experts in areas where they want to make improvements. Initially this will be a two-year learning system that brings together Community Planning Partnerships to seek improvement in the Early Years.'<sup>4</sup>

3 <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Research/by-topic/children-and-young-people>

4 <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/People/Young-People/Early-Years-and-Family/early-years-collaborative>

The Early Years Collaborative will make improvements in three proposed workstreams based on a family-centred, life-course approach:

- Pre-birth to one month
- One month to three years
- Three to five years.

The Children and Young People Bill, currently at the second consultation stage, proposes ‘a more rapid shift to the early years and early intervention’ (Scottish Government, 2012a p4) to improve the outcomes for the most vulnerable children and young people and emphasises the ‘crucial role that early learning and childcare can have’ (Scottish Government, 2012a, p5) in supporting healthy development in the early years of a child’s life. The ambition of Getting it right within the Children and young People’s Bill is to have a ‘named person’ for every child, one ‘child’s plan’ informed by a ‘core data set’ for every child shared by all agencies, across the spectrum from universal to targeted services.

Most recently, the launch of the National Parenting strategy in October 2012 announced a number of commitments, measures and investment to:

‘...champion the importance of parents to Scottish society as a whole; highlighting to parents the positive difference they can make to their children’s development, health and wellbeing; and strengthening the practical help and support available to them, including making sure it meets a wide range of needs and is accessible to all.’ (Scottish Government, 2012b, p5)

### 3. Evidence context

‘There is no shortage of words on pages about why children’s Early Years matter. In fact there are reams of material.’ (Deacon, 2011, p8)

‘I want to suggest something really radical: let us stop collecting evidence. We do not need any more evidence; we have all that we need. It may be that not everyone knows about it, but many of us do. It could be a matter of trust. We could trust the people that have the evidence to tell us the outcomes.’ (Dr Suzanne Zeedyk, School of Psychology, University of Dundee, Oral Evidence to the Scottish Parliament Finance Committee Preventative Spend Inquiry, 2nd November 2010)

A considerable evidence base exists about the early years and the impact of these on a child's social, emotional, mental and physical development. Much has been evidenced about the positive influence of warm, responsive parenting, healthy attachment, resilience and protective factors which help counteract adversity in children's lives. Equally, there is a large body of evidence about the negative impact factors like parental substance misuse, domestic abuse, poverty and neglect can have on children. Research also affirms that there is no better time for early intervention and prevention than in a child's early years. However, it can be a challenge to evidence the impact of early intervention and prevention. It may be that the benefit of an intervention will not be apparent until a child is older which highlights the need for longitudinal research studies. Key longitudinal studies include the Growing Up in Scotland Study (GUS), the Millennium Cohort Study and the Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) project.<sup>5</sup> GUS is a large-scale, cross-sectional study which provides 'information about how circumstances and experiences for children in Scotland are changing and

will also provide data about 'outcomes' for children and the factors that influence outcomes.'<sup>6</sup> GUS also aims to use data gathered to help monitor progress towards the visions set out in the *Early years framework*. The Millennium Cohort Study<sup>7</sup> follows the lives of a sample of 19,000 babies born in the UK in the year 2000-2001. The study aims to create a multi-purpose dataset that describes the diversity of backgrounds into which children are born in the beginning of the 21st century. Topics include child development, social stratification and family life in order to identify possible advantages and disadvantages that the children are facing. The Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) project focuses specifically on the effectiveness of early years education. It is a large scale, longitudinal study of the progress and development of 3,000 children in various types of pre-school education. Findings from this study indicate:

'the positive effects of high quality pre-school provision on children's intellectual and social behavioural development up to the end of Key Stage 1 in primary school. The

5 <http://eppe.ioe.ac.uk/eppe/eppeintro.htm>

6 <http://www.cfr.ac.uk/gus/allabout.html>

7 <http://www.cls.ioe.ac.uk/page.aspx?&sitesectionid=851&sitesectiontitle=Welcome+to+the+Millennium+Cohort+Study>

research indicates that pre-school can play an important part in combating social exclusion and promoting inclusion by offering disadvantaged children, in particular, a better start to primary school. The findings indicate pre-school has a positive impact on children's progress over and above important family influences. The quality of the pre-school setting experience as well as the quantity (more months but not necessarily more hours/day) are both influential.' (Sylva et al, 2004, p7)

In the spirit of Deacon and Zeedyk's comments, this report will not seek to summarise the extensive evidence base, but rather, will signpost to key evidence resources including:

- Evidence briefing: Early years and early intervention (Scottish Government, 2008c)
- Interventions for promoting early child development for health: An environmental scan with special reference to Scotland (Geddes et al, 2010)
- Early years knowledge review: Narrowing the gap in outcomes for young children through effective

practices in the early years (Coghlan et al, 2010)

- Early intervention: The next steps (Allen, 2011).

A wide range of resources including audio, film and evidence sources is freely available in the Early Years Collection, part of the Learning Exchange, IRISS's digital library.<sup>8</sup>

## 4. Discussion

What resonates through the case studies is that relationships are the key to improving lives in the early years - relationships between teams within and across agencies, between individual practitioners and parents and, crucially, between parents and their children. The key messages drawn from the case studies highlight a range of attitudes, approaches and activities that enable and support relationships. This section explores three key themes which cut across the case studies: relationships with parents, professional relationships and evidencing impact.

<sup>8</sup> <http://lx.iriss.org.uk/category/learning-exchange-collections/early-years>



## 4.1 Relationships with parents: asset-based approaches

‘Asset approaches recognise that individuals and communities are part of the solution, work with people rather than viewing them as passive recipients of services, and empower people to control their future.’ (Long Term Conditions Alliance Scotland<sup>9</sup>)

‘Personal relationships are critical in driving outcomes, trust and satisfaction with services... How they (staff) go about their day to day work can either empower and enrich lives, or treat people as problems, or as passive recipients.’ (Christie Commission, 2011, p37)

The case studies gathered in this report are examples of support to children and parents which is, at its core, person-centred, asset-based and hopeful. It is on this basis that strong relationships with parents can be developed. It is these relationships which are seen by professionals as the mechanism for supporting parents to improve their parenting capacity. ‘Parenting capacity’ refers to:

‘the ability of the main caregivers in a child’s life to understand and prioritise their child’s needs, not only in terms of physical care and protection, but also socially and emotionally by ensuring the child experiences warm relationships, secure attachment, opportunities for social relationships, communication and play, and in terms of appropriate cognitive stimulation and the provision of guidance and boundaries for the development of appropriate behaviour.’ (Department of Health, 2000, in Woolfson and King 2008, p8).

Changing parents’ behaviour and enhancing parenting capacity are thought to ‘be a highly likely outcome for impacting on children’s development in the longer term.’ (Woolfson and King, 2008, p4).

A commitment to building the capacity of individual parents underpins the asset-based approaches explored in the case studies. Parents are treated not just as the carers of their children, but as individuals with their own experiences, challenges and power to improve their own lives. The language used by professionals interviewed for these case studies reflected this positive approach to working with parents - they talked

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.alliance-scotland.org.uk/what-we-do/policy-and-campaigns/current-work/developing-asset-based-approaches/>

about liking the people they work with, of being proud of parents' and childrens' achievements and of seeing parents flourish with support that builds on their strengths. Parents are supported to address underlying issues in their lives which may be impacting on their parenting and are preventing them from providing a safe and stable environment for their children. Practitioners recognised that often there is important groundwork to be done with some parents before they are able to focus on their parenting. Adult Attachment Theory which underpins the 'Change is a Must' programme described in case study six is a good example of this focus on parent's experiences as a way to build their parenting capacity. The dads' personal experiences of play explored in case study five is another example.

Those interviewed demonstrated an appreciation that much of the lives of parents happen outside the centres and support groups in their wider families, homes and communities. The links developed between the family centre and the home explored in case study one are an example of this where practitioners were able to get a fuller picture of the child's life, meet extended family carers and identify barriers which might be

preventing parents attending the centre. One such home visit uncovered that there was a language barrier preventing one parent from attending the centre, an important discovery in light of evidence that supporting children and families whose first language is not English is vital to a child's early years (Coghlan et al, 2010).

Across the case studies there is recognition that many of the parents accessing support feel disempowered and stigmatised in their lives. Through the case studies practitioners were able to reflect on examples of ways in which they endeavour to put parents in the driving seat of the support they receive. Whether it is at a strategic level (case study four) or through gathering the views of parents to feed into the design of workshops and activities (case studies one, two and three) parents are given a voice. Practitioners say they see the difference it makes when parents feel a sense of empowerment, inclusion and ownership. The physical environments of the family centres in the case studies also invite inclusion through open doors, family rooms and communal spaces like kitchens so parents can make connections with each other and professionals. Related to this is the

recognition across the case studies that a crucial function of the centres, nurseries and groups is to help foster peer support. Peer support can help build the capacity of individuals but the benefits also extend into communities. For example, practitioners credited word of mouth between parents as an effective way of reaching more widely into the community and engaging with those in need of support and harder to reach groups (dads for example). Peer support is fostered through group work and workshops at the centres, as well as informally through shared spaces such as kitchens, family and play rooms. Several practitioners mentioned that the workshops and group work provide important opportunities for parents to support and challenge each other 'in a way practitioners can't do'. The interviews uncovered that practitioners who work in this area are skilled at wearing different hats - balancing statutory authority with empowering parents, being professionals who engage with parents on a personal level and providing support to parents whilst remaining child-centred. However, they recognise that there is an equality and shared experiences between peers which provides a powerful type of support that is different from those that professionals

can provide, not least because peer networks and friendships can continue in homes and communities.

The centres and support groups featured in these case studies are committed to learning for parents as well as children. One way they encourage parents to learn is by sharing evidence about child development. The benefits of doing this are seen as twofold - it demonstrates to parents a grounding for the interventions and support of services but also helps to raise awareness of the vital role parents have in their child's development. Practitioners also seek to provide positive models of behaviour and relationships that parents can learn from. The case studies highlight the importance of creating opportunities for practitioners and parents to work alongside each other to share activities which encourage, support and enrich a child's learning which parents can replicate in the home. This links to evidence of the importance of the 'home learning environment' and how it can be a protective factor:

'...developing strategies to help parents engage in their children's learning and development, as well as their own education is important. A positive

home learning environment (HLE) can help counter the effects of poverty on children's learning and development throughout the early years.' (Coghlan et al, 2010)

#### 4.2 Professional relationships

'Time and again good team working and a truly 'partnership' approach takes place on a very localised level - and is usually down to good local leadership, a willingness on the part of key people to work together...' (Deacon, 2011, p22)

The case studies agree that support that makes a positive difference to peoples' lives depends on good partnership working. This means having good links and sharing practice within agencies but also across other services, organisations and professionals. A collaborative approach means support can be better coordinated around the needs of parents and children and therefore, can be more person-centred. The case studies describe cultures where 'it's everyone's job' to support children and parents, and practitioners see their role as part of a wider network of support.

Another commonality between the case studies seems to be a leadership culture

which seeks to foster the personal and professional capacity of practitioners. Interviewees felt empowered and positive about the opportunities afforded them to learn new skills and of sharing new knowledge across their teams and with parents. Value is placed on qualifications and continued professional development. Sharing knowledge, reflection and self-evaluation are part of routine practice. Practitioners demonstrated both a keen awareness of the impact of support and a flexibility toward changing or adapting practice to better meet the needs of parents and children. A recent report by Education Scotland further highlighted the positive impact of a range of staff with early years specialist knowledge and relevant higher-level qualifications (Education Scotland, 2012).

#### 4.3 Evidencing impact

'Maybe it is time to stop searching for proxies to measure and just accept that we know what matters to us as human beings.' (Deacon, 2011, p24)

The impact of the support discussed in the case studies links to evidence gathered from both the Effective Provision of Pre-school Education (EPPE) project and the evaluation of

Sure Start in England.<sup>10</sup> Both studies have linked family centres and integrated childcare centres with improved outcomes for children, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. Further evidence of the effectiveness of the case study examples has been produced through external evaluations that have been carried out. Castlemilk Family Learning Centre (case study three) and Corseshill Primary School's Nursery (case study four) were both part of the *Evaluation of the extended pre-school provision for vulnerable two year olds pilot programme* (Woolfson and King, 2008). The Parenting and Complementary Therapies services provided by Midlothian Sure Start (case study four) were evaluated by CaskieCo in 2004. One of the team leaders involved in Perth and Kinross's Change is a Must Programme (case study six) undertook an evaluation as part of her MSc programme (Rioch, 2011) and Aberlour's Glasgow Bridges initiative (case study seven) was evaluated by a research fellow at the University of Stirling (Burgess, 2011). There's no question that these evaluations are highly valuable as a way to evidence the impact of some of the interventions highlighted in this report. However, these evaluations are

resource intensive in terms of researcher skills, time and funding, meaning they can be 'one-off' investigations into the impact of a service. What emerged from the case study interviews was that professionals were concerned about methods that could be used in-house for evidencing impact on an ongoing basis. There were similarities across the case studies in the attitudes of managers and practitioners to evidencing the impact of the support they provide. There was a general acknowledgment that evidencing impact was important and that they could do more in this area. However, there was a recognition that the distance travelled by some families can be very difficult to evidence given its incremental nature over time. Some interviewees also felt they lacked the in-house expertise and/or the resource (both time and staff) to undertake more formal evaluation measures. Some talked about plans to introduce tools which ask parents to rate their experience of support on a scale (eg an outcomes star model<sup>11</sup>) though were concerned that this can lead to a loss of 'the evidence in personal stories' (centre manager, case study one). Parent surveys were common as were children's diaries which staff complete based on their observation of a child's progress,

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.ness.bbk.ac.uk/> and <http://www.ness.bbk.ac.uk/impact/documents/DFE-RR220.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.outcomesstar.org.uk/>

likes, dislikes and behaviours. Other indicators interviewees suggested might point to the impact of support on parents and children included a reduction in behavioural problems and barriers to learning, lower exclusion rates and attainment statistics (case study two) or reduced numbers of children on the child protection register (case study three and four). Overall though what resonated through the case studies was that when it comes to the impact of support ‘seeing is believing’. Practitioners talked about the ‘remarkable’ changes they observed in parents and their children after receiving support and the value of feedback from parents: “it’s about people’s word... it’s about the parents saying “this is how it’s made a difference to us”” (centre manager, case study three). These sentiments are reflected in Deacon’s report which calls for placing ‘a greater value on personal testimony – and sheer common sense – in recognising what works and what matters to people’ (p23).

Increasingly, services are expected to evidence the impact of support on the personal outcomes of those they

work with. The case studies suggest that professionals need support and confidence to capture and make sense of evidence in flexible, cost-effective ways. Given the agreement across the examples of the value of evidencing impact using both quantitative and, importantly, qualitative methods, the model developed by the Centre for Excellence and Outcomes in Children and Young People’s Services (C4EO) may provide a useful framework within which to think about this further. Similarly to IRISS, C4EO recognises that ‘not all useful knowledge about what works and why is to be found in research reports and papers’<sup>12</sup> and so they have developed a model to gather local practice which has led to significantly improved outcomes for children, young people and their families. Examples of ‘validated local practice’, ‘promising practice’ and ‘emerging practice’ can be submitted by organisations to help share this knowledge more widely. A ‘how to’ guide has been developed to support organisations to determine whether the service, project or intervention provided are improving the lives of those for whom it is intended to help<sup>13</sup>.

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.c4eo.org.uk/themes/general/localpracticeexamples.aspx?themeid=10>

<sup>13</sup> [http://www.c4eo.org.uk/themes/files/C4EO\\_How\\_to\\_Guide\\_VLP\\_22\\_03\\_12.pdf](http://www.c4eo.org.uk/themes/files/C4EO_How_to_Guide_VLP_22_03_12.pdf)

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## Acknowledgements

Grateful thanks to those who helped develop the case studies described in this report including: Mandy Morrison and Christine Forbes (Quarriers Family Centre, Ruchazie); Frances Rodman (North Ayrshire Council); Linda Lesperance (Corsehill Primary School); Trisha Madden and Yvonne Bell (Castlemilk Family Learning Centre); Cheryl Brown (Midlothian Sure Start); Jacqui Hall and Kath Lunny (Douglas Community Centre, Dundee); Catriona Rioch (Perth and Kinross Council) and Trisha Hall (Aberlour Child Care Trust).

Thanks also to those who provided comments on the draft: Sarah Burton (Children in Scotland), Jess McCormack (NSPCC) and Fiona McDiarmid (Scottish Government).

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