



Family Support in Children's Centres

Summary

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Children's Centres

Sure Start Children's Centres are intended to transform children's services in England, with one in reach of every family by 2010 offering early education, childcare, health and family support services.

This paper highlights key findings from a new Family and Parenting Institute study of the planning and delivery of family support through children's centres, for practitioners and those who commission family services.

The full research report, **Family Support in Children's Centres**, is available with in depth analysis and 18 case studies; find out more at www.familyandparenting.org/publications

The study

The study summarised here explored the planning, commissioning and delivery of family support services in Sure Start children's centres developed from the fourth and fifth wave of Sure Start local programmes (SSLPs). Our aim was to explore promising practice in family support.

Family support in children's centres

We defined 'family support' as all services which aim to promote family wellbeing by improving relationships in families and improving standards of living. Children's centres were providing a wide range of such services: home visiting, parenting courses, drop-ins, support groups, family learning activities, adult education and employment support.

Knowing the community – planning services to match needs

Constructive engagement with parents who might use family support services was key to successful planning. Centres emphasised the importance of:

- starting consultation processes as early as possible
- using local community partners to access parents

- using a variety of techniques to engage different parents – such as face to face dialogue; questionnaires, focus groups, suggestion boxes
- asking parents about location, format and content of services
- involving parents on management boards, planning committees and, through their own groups, to plan and deliver some services
- training and preparation for parents and professionals to work together
- input being seen to be acted upon and input mechanisms developed which are reviewed regularly for effectiveness and acceptability.

Ongoing evaluation of services was described as an essential part of planning. Formal evaluation methods worked well sometimes, using staff or external agencies and input from parents' groups; and informal evaluation methods were also important, through feedback from centre users.

Staffing and staff training

Staff teams varied widely in terms of size, structure and professional backgrounds. All staff teams included nursery staff plus outreach and family support workers. Many had additional posts focusing on health, benefits, careers and other issues critical to family support. Some had dedicated staff targeting black and minority ethnic groups, fathers and/or teen parents but most centres struggled to match staff ethnic and gender profiles to their local communities. However this did not always appear to influence their success in reaching key groups.

Centres emphasised that:

- whole centre training for centre staff helped deliver a cohesive service
- 'corporate level' training across local agencies helped provide a common approach to working with families
- leadership matters – many centre managers were undertaking the National Professional Qualification in Integrated Centre Leadership.

“ You need to come together with some kind of joint vision or ethos... Different professions work very differently and have different expectations of... the kind of conditions they work within. And about the role of families and parents and this is a very different approach to mainstream you know.”

Many centres said that having a very experienced family support team leader made the difference:

“ We went for a quite high graded post... we felt it was so important to get this family support bit right.”

“And the rest of the staff feel much more supported. If they have got concerns they've got somebody there that really knows.”

Using people from the community to deliver family support, though often successful and requested by parents, required careful planning, long induction, a professional approach and good support.

Multi-agency working

Centres were working with a wide range of service providers: health, education, and social services, schools, and voluntary, community and independent organisations. Closest links were usually with schools. 'Involvement' meant referral pathways, co-location, co-delivery, reciprocal services, joint funding applications and community capacity-building.

“We actually link with the Somali community organisation and... we train them to deliver... and that way we can actually feed the information through them because they are trusted.”

Centres found that multi-agency working helped them to deliver effective family support:

“A family's needs can be supported very quickly... we have families with very complex, chaotic lifestyles who have accessed up to eight different support services within two days...”

The main challenges included:

- accessing information on families
- working with restructured and fragmented services
- managing diverse teams
- differences in professional cultures.

Recommendations for effective multi-agency working included:

- building extensive networks and links
- developing shared policy and procedural frameworks and goals
- joint preparation and training for multi-agency work
- finding ways of collaborating with other agencies in particular to enable centres to identify new families in the area without contravening data protection policies.

Midwifery and health visiting services were key to effective engagement with families – partly because of their universal reach to all local families:

“The midwifery services... are absolutely crucial... because that is when we get parents coming into the centre for their ante-natal care... they'll find out what's going on. And we'll get mums and dads coming. They'll come in to have their babies weighed... and then there's a whole range of courses and groups that we involve them in.”

Identifying, reaching and engaging parents

This study explored strategies to locate and engage new families.

We found that

- reaching parents, especially those that have been excluded from services, depends on effective home visiting strategies. Universal visits to parents right across the local community (often linked to supporting children's play at different stages of development – seen as less stigmatising than a focus on parenting per se) helped centres to identify families who needed more support. This approach was said to work for parents with multiple disadvantages which had tended to exclude them from services.

“The only way you are truly going to reach the hard-to-reach families is through home visiting and outreach. Local authorities... they think that you can just build these wonderful children's centres and people will pour through the door... it's relatively easy to get motivated parents in the door. But the ones you really want to see, you really need to work very hard... that's where you have to put the effort in. And it's costly. Costly in terms of staff apart from anything else.”

- access to 'hard-to-reach families' often depended upon presenting services as an entitlement and as aligned to familiar health services. Regular contact helped and so did an offer of respite childcare
- regular, informal contact, for example through drop-ins and baby cafes, helped build trust
- some centres benefited from dedicated staff and special programmes to attract BME families, fathers, teenagers and other groups of potentially excluded parents
- newsletters, flyers, local press and space in local publications all had their place in promoting services, **but**
- word of mouth was the most effective.

Current and future challenges

Children's centres are building on their learning about reaching disadvantaged and excluded families to adjust their family support services for the larger populations of local families they now need to serve. The key challenge for the delivery of effective family support is to find and engage the families who stand to gain most from effective family support, while managing catchment, operational and funding changes.

More about the study

The study was carried out in 2006 by Joanna Apps, Jenny Reynolds, Val Ashby, and Fatima Husain for the Family and Parenting Institute and the DfES. The aim was to gain insights into promising practice in the operational delivery of family support in children's centres, using a case study approach. Family support services examined were primarily home visiting, parenting programmes and courses, relationship support, adult education and family learning, employment training and support.

Eighteen of a sample of 28 fourth and fifth wave SSLPs agreed to take part in the study. Telephone interviews were carried out with centre programme managers and other staff with key roles in the planning and delivery of family support services. They explored planning, commissioning and delivery issues, along with an analysis of centre documentation on family support services, area demographics, and consultation and evaluation processes.

The full report is **Family Support in Sure Start Children's Centres: Planning, Commissioning and Delivery**. It is available at £14.50 plus p&p from the Family and Parenting Institute: for full ordering information visit www.familyandparenting.org/publications or telephone 01787 249 287.



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