

Supporting and strengthening families through provision of early help

A rapid review of evidence – summary report

By Amy Edwards, Roya Gharbi, Ava Berry, Robbie Duschinsky

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Foreword

Providing help to someone as early as possible is a natural human reaction. If a child we care about needs our help, we don't wait. We provide that help as soon as we can. The statutory guidance in Working Together just reinforces what we instinctively know: "providing early help is more effective in promoting the welfare of children than reacting later". Despite the logic, despite the guidance, and despite the huge rise in child protection proceedings and looked after children, we have so far failed to make the water-tight case for early help.

In practice, early help has become a description of the earliest part of the safeguarding system rather than a focused, preventative tier of support and intervention. There are widespread and significant reductions in resources and increasing and confusing thresholds to access support, as well as challenging historical messaging, such as 'Troubled Families', which can be perceived as placing the blame for challenges with families rather than acknowledging the broader context.

In order to enable this tier of dedicated practitioners to fulfil the ambitions of early help we must strengthen the training and support for this workforce including recognising, holding and managing risk. Building on learning from the pockets of good practice, where early conversations, strength-based practice, and effective, evidence-based interventions with families, lead to positive change, supporting families to build resilience and know where to find help.

This rapid review explores why the formal evidence for early help continues to be difficult to demonstrate and helps us to understand why, despite the clear logic, it may be unfair to expect a definitive case with clear links to improved outcomes

The lack of a common definition of early help, wide variation in the thresholds for accessing support between local areas and huge year-on-year cuts over the past decade have added to the instability of the services provided and the families who are able to access them. Building firm conclusions on such shifting sands is a hazardous business.

Furthermore, the very aims of early help, to empower families and communities to help themselves, do not lend themselves well to simple evaluation. The complexity of the factors at play mean that identifying a straight line between cause and effect is challenging. Attempting to prove that intervention prevented something else from happening, possibly years later, is several orders of magnitude more complex again.

If we fail to engage with these arguments, we will continue to make major policy and practice decisions on the basis of what has been easiest to measure, rather than what will make the biggest difference over the longer-term. Our research also points to emerging evidence that shows early help can make a difference on a population level, but we must give these new findings time to mature.

The Independent Review of Children's Social Care provides an immediate opportunity to clearly define early help; to set out the outcomes it seeks to achieve; and to make the case for rigorous evaluation based on a more nuanced understanding. It will then be for the Department for Education and the Treasury to make the leap required to properly support and resource it.

Caroline Coady – Assistant Director for Social Care – NCB

Matthew Dodd – Head of policy and Public Affairs – NCB

About the rapid review

In January 2021, the Government announced a review into children's social care. In response, the National Children's Bureau (NCB) sought to undertake a scoping review to explore the academic and grey literature to better understand the state of the evidence base in relation to the delivery and effectiveness of early help, and to make some recommendations for the review.



Introduction

The services that make up children's social care touch on the lives of a huge number of children. Cohort studies have found that one in five children were referred to children's social care before their fifth birthday¹. The government spends £7.9 billion on these services annually², yet councils are still reporting huge and growing overspends on children's social care, leaving many struggling to fulfil their statutory duties³.

Children's social care is a vital service for children and families, yet we have major gaps in our knowledge. Despite the cost-effectiveness of intervening early, the biggest gap is in our understanding of the delivery and effectiveness of early help.

The past decade has seen huge changes in the delivery of children's social care services:

- From 2010/11 to 2018/19, local authorities shifted funding away from early intervention with spending on early help services falling by 44%⁴
- Over the same period, there was a 29% increase in late intervention services (children in care, safeguarding and youth justice), and a record number of looked after children⁵.

Whilst we cannot yet draw a direct line between reductions in early help and the growth in child protection proceedings and care orders, it does not mean they are unrelated.

There is a growing body of evidence which suggests that sustained investment in early help and preventative services over time can be effective. We know that local authorities see the value of early help, and perceive it as central to their statutory mission of supporting families, but do not perceive that they have the resources to sustain it⁶.

In evaluating the links between early help and the prevention of child protection interventions, we are particularly hampered by the lack of common definitions and thresholds, as well as the complexity of the factors at play within the dynamics of family life⁷. However, if we fail to grapple with these complexities we risk making policy on the basis of what is easy to measure, rather than what will make the biggest difference over time.

Key findings

Problems defining 'early help'

- Early help itself, as understood both in practice and theory, has historically been used to refer to a wide range of different services and forms of implementation. Eligibility for early help varies significantly between local areas, and has also varied within local areas over time in response to tightening thresholds for statutory support⁸.
- In appraising evidence about the effectiveness of early help, a major challenge is the loose language frequently used to describe it. In particular, the terms 'early help', 'prevention', 'early intervention', and 'family support' are often used interchangeably, despite having distinct origins and meanings.

Early help is a form of service-provision prior to Section 17 involvement, used by Working Together to Safeguard Children, and implies a focus on intervention before a challenge facing a family escalates to the point where statutory services are required. Its philosophical basis is rooted in the 1971 reorganisation of personal social services based on recommendations from the Seebohm report, and later reaffirmed in the Children Act 1989. At their heart, was the idea that the "new local authority departments would be a community-based and family-orientated service which would be available to all".

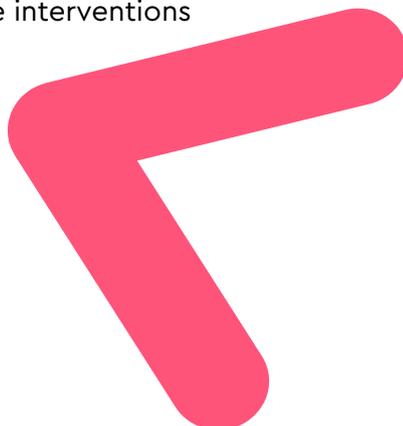
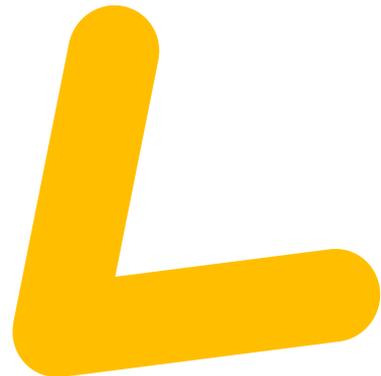
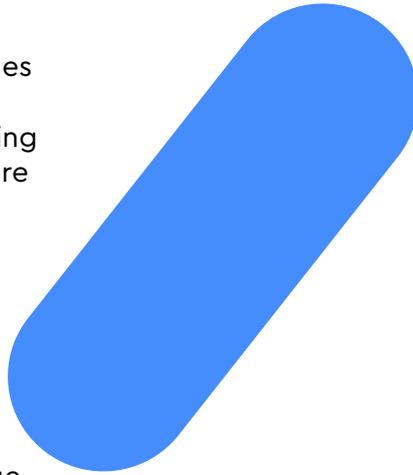
Prevention is a term similar to early help that is often used in public health policy; its use usually connotes more attention to proactive avoidance of potential problems than reactive assistance to alleviate problems that have already emerged. A preventative approach may emphasise reducing poverty or improving access to education, and such services may not therefore now always come under the remit of children's services despite having ramifications for children's social care.

Early intervention is a term that is often used interchangeably with 'early help', but has important differences in its historic development and associated evidence-base and approach. The history of research on early intervention is heavily informed by neuroscientific studies on the effects of neglect, attachment styles, and, later, Adverse Childhood Experiences, on the development of children's brains.

'Family support' is a term often used to refer to community- and family-based practical and relational support, with a strong focus on the social needs of families and how they are related to poverty and inequality.

Challenges evaluating early help

- The very nature of early help, which includes the strengthening of family resilience and community-based support, makes evaluating its impact several orders of magnitude more complicated than evaluating a formal and individual-focused intervention.
- Studies that evaluate the effects of short-term and individualised forms of support, with clearly defined and measurable outcomes, greatly outnumber studies that engage with long-term, community-led, and flexible forms of support with large numbers of envisaged outcomes.
- In particular, early help services which intervene on factors such as poverty and low-income – as principal causal determinants of abuse and neglect and other poor outcomes for children – are often at considerable risk because of the relative paucity of research studies that consider them and their limited compatibility with experimental evaluations.
- The risk is that we end up making policy decisions based on being driven by what is easy to measure. We risk rejecting approaches, not because they have been proved to be ineffective or because the principle is not sound, but because of the difficulties associated with designing studies to evaluate them.
- It is important to highlight that evaluations which focus on specific early help programmes do not include interventions which target wider issues affecting family life and that can prevent poor outcomes for children. International evidence has demonstrated that small increases in the incomes of families living in poverty have a measurable effect on rates of child abuse and neglect.⁹



The overall effectiveness of early help

- It has previously reported that they found no evidence of an association between spending on early help and children's services quality or child protection plan rates.¹⁰ However there were problems with the statistical methodology used to achieve these results.¹¹
- At a population level there is in fact a growing body of evidence by Webb and others indicating that sustained investment in early help and preventative services over time can be an effective mechanism for reducing rates of children in care and keeping children safely in their families.¹²
- Emerging evidence shows that increased spending on preventative services (including family support and early help) has a positive impact on:
 - Ofsted judgements;¹³
 - Numbers of Children in Need;¹⁴ and
 - Rates of 16–17 year olds starting periods in care.¹⁵
- If early help services are to become systemically effective – that is, effective when viewed a whole service and in relation to outcomes across children's social care, health, and education and not simply as the sum of evaluations of specific programmes – significant work needs to be done to define and clarify the outcomes that the offer is intended to deliver.

This rapid review sought to explore the evidence base behind early help and found a range of positive outcomes for children and families for a range of different interventions to support and strengthen families. Despite the difficulties evaluating early help, there is a growing case for funding and delivering these services. However, far more must be done to define and clarify the outcomes that the offer is intended to deliver.



Further challenges in delivery and evaluation of early help

Eligibility

The appropriate identification of families who may benefit from early help has been specifically highlighted as a key success factor in the effectiveness of those services. Early help is designed to intervene with lower-level support needs, yet there is wide variation in thresholds for accessing services.¹⁶ There is value in educating referral agencies about the appropriate referral thresholds for early help and what circumstances may more or less suit early help.

Capacity related challenges

Early help services have been particularly vulnerable to funding cuts over the past decade, falling by nearly a half at the national level.¹⁷ This instability affects both the services that are provided and thresholds for accessing services, further hampering the effectiveness of early help and the ability to track effectiveness over time.

Practice related challenges

The evidence shows challenges in service delivery for providing holistic early help in order to strengthen and support the entire family. Research found that both parents were included in the assessment and support plan only in a minority of cases, even where both parents were in contact with the child.¹⁸ Moreover, assessments or support plans did not include the voice of the child in nearly a third of cases. There was also concern that in some cases, assessment and support plans were overly focused on adults' needs and were not sufficiently child-focused. This focus on parental factors was also raised by another study which noted a lack of child-centred assessment and support plans.¹⁹



Conclusion

This rapid review sought to explore the evidence base behind early help and found a range of positive outcomes for children and families for a range of different interventions to support and strengthen families. Despite the difficulties evaluating early help, there is a growing case for funding and delivering these services. However, far more must be done to define and clarify the outcomes that the offer is intended to deliver.

Recommendations for Government

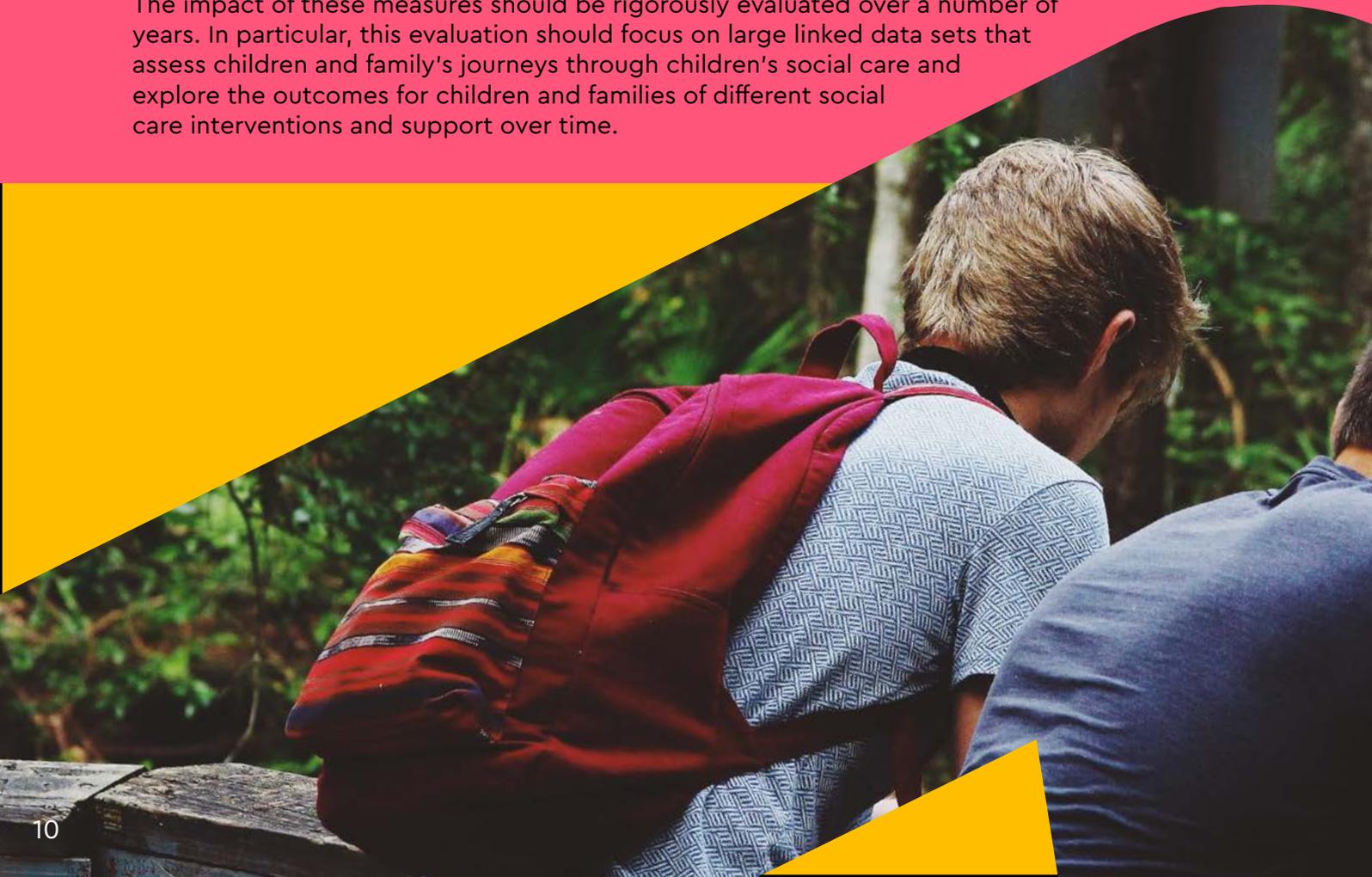
HM Government should introduce a legal duty on local authorities and statutory safeguarding partners to provide early help to children and families. This should encompass a broad definition of early help, including support to alleviate the impact of poverty.

The Department for Education should seek to reduce variation in thresholds for early help by providing clear guidance and training on applying eligibility criteria

HM Government should develop a national outcomes framework for early help services, building on the work of the Supporting Families programme. This framework should be co-produced with children and families.

HM Treasury should increase its funding in order to support implementation of this new duty, factoring in a local authority's level of deprivation and current rates of interventions.

The impact of these measures should be rigorously evaluated over a number of years. In particular, this evaluation should focus on large linked data sets that assess children and family's journeys through children's social care and explore the outcomes for children and families of different social care interventions and support over time.



Endnotes

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Endnotes (continued)

11 Webb, C. (Under review). In Defence of Ordinary Help: Estimating the effect of Early Help/Family Support Spending on Children in Need Rates in England using ALT-SR. Journal of Social Policy.

12 Bennett D.L., Webb C.J.R., Mason K.E., Schlüter D.K., Fahy K., Alexiou A., et al. (Under review). Funding for preventative Children's Services and rates of children becoming looked after: a natural experiment using longitudinal area-level data in England.

13 Webb, C., Bennett, D. L., Bywaters, P. (In preparation). Funding and deprivation as determinants of child welfare and protection services quality: A multilevel analysis of evaluations in England. Sheffield: The University of Sheffield.

14 Webb, C. (Under review). In Defence of Ordinary Help: Estimating the effect of Early Help/Family Support Spending on Children in Need Rates in England using ALT-SR. Journal of Social Policy.

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Let's work together: 020 7843 6000 | info@ncb.org.uk

London: 23 Mentmore Terrace, London, E8 3PN

Belfast: The NICVA Building, 61 Duncairn Gardens, BT15 2GB

