



Prevention & Early Intervention Network

Promoting positive outcomes for children,
families & communities

Submission to Department of Children and Youth Affairs on Improving the Lives of Children and Young People

JULY 2013

1. In your opinion, what are

a) The 3 best things and about life for children and young people in Ireland?

▪ Supportive parents and families

The approach to parenting and education is slowly changing in Ireland, and the majority of children and young people are receiving the care and support that they both need and are entitled to. The quality of parenting that a child receives impacts on their well being, development, and life opportunities, and for most children and young people the determining factor in the quality of their lives is their family.

▪ Safe and supportive Communities

Outside of the family, the community setting in which the child lives and experiences the world has a large impact on the well being and development of the child. Parents and young children are benefitting from the services of health and support centres, and from local facilities such as playgrounds. Many young people are enjoying more opportunities than ever to engage in a wide range of sports, arts and club activities through their communities. Such activities are important for children of all ages to develop healthy physical practices, friendships and lifelong skills. A recent evaluation of Foróige youth clubs, found that members developed in areas such as problem solving-cooperation; goal setting-planning; self regard, and community awareness-connectedness.¹ It is also positive that communities are caring more about listening to and respecting the views of young people, as exemplified by the current consideration being given to voting rights for 16 year olds, and by existing structures such as Dail na N'óg.

▪ High quality early years services and education provision

¹ Dr Brian McGrath (2011). An Exploratory Study of Youth Club Outcomes in Foróige Volunteer-Led Youth Clubs.

The majority of children are receiving early years and education services, and a range of supports and programmes for parents are already in place in Ireland which can be built on and further developed. It is crucial that early care and education services be of a high quality if they are to have the positive impact that research on child development has demonstrated.² Crèches, pre schools, primary schools and second level schools also enable children to learn and develop cognitive, social, and emotional skills, and need appropriate investment.

b) The 3 worst things about life for children and young people in Ireland?

Poverty

Poverty and disadvantage is an everyday reality for too many of Ireland's children and young people. Disadvantage is both a cause and a symptom of poor life outcomes, and structural reforms in child and family services are needed to prevent its effects being replicated through generations.

- Living in an environment where children's needs are not being met.
Children are still being exposed to violence and abuse (physical, emotional, sexual, substance, etc.) either in the home or in the community in which they live. The lack of early intervention and/or prevention measures to assist families and protect children is leaving children vulnerable to a host of negative outcomes that have a greater human and financial cost if the response is remedial and reactive.
- Inadequate prevention and early intervention services – services are disconnected, unequally available, and not provided early enough

A child- and family-centred approach to the delivery of preventative services remains lacking. Resources continue to be allocated largely on the basis of historical precedent rather than identified need and are often focused on crisis interventions, delivering activities and outputs rather than achieving better outcomes for children and families. This has led to a situation where children and young people do not have equal access to services (youth services, mental health services etc.) across the country, and where the necessary supports and structures do not exist to intervene early in cases of suspected family distress and abuse. Not enough attention is given to activating parent and child resources from the beginning of life onwards. In the fundamental and formative 0-3 years in particular, there is not enough awareness of the positive role families can play in supporting children's early learning. There is also limited professional expertise

² M. Burchinal et al. (2010) 'Threshold analysis of association between child care quality and child outcomes for low-income children in pre-kindergarten programmes', in *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, vol.25, issue 2. D. Lowe Vandell et al. (2010) 'Do effects of early child care extend to 15 years? Results from the NICHD study of early child care and youth development', in *Child Development*, vol.81, issue 3.

or evidence-based community-based provision for young children and their parents. This impacts most on families experiencing poverty and disadvantage.

2. What can be done so that children and young people are safe and protected?

By families

- Families need to be supported from early in the child's life, and throughout the life course

Whatever circumstances a child grows up in, it is the parents and families who are primarily responsible for ensuring that their child is safe and protected. Parents receive support in fulfilling this challenging role from a variety of sources - extended family, friends and peers, parent groups and programmes, schools and preschool settings, community organisations, and wider health services. Children with confident, capable, and well supported parents and families have the best chance of thriving. Research results from prevention and early intervention initiatives in Ireland (Mate Tricks CDI, Incredible Years and Write Minded youngballymun) have shown significant positive impact on outcomes for children when parents engage with supports.

- Parenting programmes, such as Incredible Years, Functional Family Therapy, and Triple P-Positive Parenting Programme,³ enable parents to be more confident, skilled, and knowledgeable about caring for children, with the result that their children will be at lower risk of becoming victims of child abuse and neglect. Interim research results from Triple P in Ireland have linked its programmes to a reduction in the prevalence of child maltreatment, and a reduction in the mental health problems in adults which are often at the root of familial problems. A Public Health parenting support strategy, as advocated by Longford Westmeath Parenting Partnership, anticipates that these results can be replicated at a national level, reaping population level benefits. Such a strategy aims to increase community access to quality evidence based parenting support programmes through a partnership model involving statutory, community and voluntary service providers.
- Parents at all levels on the continuum of need should be supported in their parenting role. The Centre for Effective Services (CES) has established a Special Interest Group on supporting parents, consisting of senior practitioners, programme managers, researchers, policy and decision makers from across the island. This group will further develop its role and contribute more significantly to the work of policy makers and practitioners by advocating, providing evidence, and assisting people to understand that the quality of parenting effects outcomes

³ Currently being delivered in Ireland through Longford Westmeath Parenting Partnership, where over 3000 parents have attended courses since September 2010.

for children and young people. The group will continue to identify, share and implement the key principles of effectiveness in the provision of all parenting support.

By communities

- Greater collaboration between health, education and community services, would mean that resources for parents and families are maximised, and there is less chance of children at risk falling through the net. In relation to the early years of a child's life (0-6 years) more collaboration between these sectors is needed to deliver evidence based and accessible prevention and early intervention services to improve parental competency. This is particularly relevant for vulnerable families, where the timely provision of services and supports before problems arise can have the most positive impact.
- To achieve the best outcomes from existing services, there is a need to develop mechanisms for integrated working between different professions, disciplines and organisations. A collective exploration of issues that are by their nature complex and multifaceted, together with an active engagement with research is the best way to ensure that solutions are based on evidence of what works. It also ensures that the responsibility for implementation is collectively held. Multi-disciplinary teams of stakeholders can ensure that services are integrated into what already exists, adding value, meeting gaps and building on strengths.
- Throughout childhood, we must ensure that the community is a safe environment for children to grow, develop, and engage in a variety of activities. All paid child-minders should be regulated to ensure consistency of child protection and quality assurance in all child-minding settings. Teenagers and young adults need to be given a voice that is heard and respected within their communities.
- The Children First guidelines should continue to be promoted and adhered to by all organisations and individuals working with children of all ages, who must also have access to Children First Training.

By Government

- The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child has emphasised in the strongest terms that child protection must begin with proactive prevention. A rights-based approach to child protection starts with prevention and builds children's capacity to protect themselves, enhances their understanding of their right to protection and promotes their participation in matters that affect them.
- There needs to be government level commitment to cross departmental, joined up political thinking in relation to the welfare and protection of children. The new

Child and Family Support Agency is the central mechanism for ensuring that this occurs, and for providing the catalyst for a fundamental shift in thinking resulting in systemic changes in behaviour and associated actions at government and service provision level.

- Services should be balanced between protecting children and supporting their parents and carers. This can be achieved by strengthening universal services and providing services to children and families at all levels along a continuum of need from early to late interventions, from children in need to children requiring specialist services.
- International evidence informs us that interagency collaboration is central to improvement and progress in the delivery of child protection and welfare services for children. Children's Services Committees (CSCs) are already well established (16 country wide) and have the potential to be the key mechanism through which interagency working manifests itself at local level. CSCs should be established in every county and local authority area.
- A children's workforce strategy should be developed which will involve all staff in all services working with children are trained and participate in joint interagency training across sectors
- In early years care and education the inspection system needs to be enhanced to ensure that it includes a comprehensive understanding of equality, including Síolta and Aistear.
- An Infant Mental Health strategy needs to be developed and implemented. It should designate Infant Mental Health as a core element of the Child Health Screening and Surveillance section of HSE and Health Promotion Unit, inform the Primary Care and community services, integrate mental health policy and practice across multiple levels of services in the community and statutory sector, and develop awareness of the issues surrounding infant mental health among the wider population.

3. What can be done so that children and young people can enjoy learning in all aspects of their lives?

By families

- There is abundant evidence to suggest that lessons learnt in the first three years of life can last a lifetime, and prepare an individual to progress physically, mentally, socially and emotionally at every stage of the life cycle – especially in becoming a good parent. Children spend the majority of their time at home in the care of their families: parents play a vital role in their children's learning and

development, and need to be supported with the skills necessary to develop their children's basic language and literacy.

- Parenting programmes have been shown to positively impact on levels of children's school readiness (in terms of social, emotional, and language competence), as well as improve parents' skills and knowledge as their child's primary educator (e.g. Triple P Positive Parenting).
- There a variety of ways in which families can be supported to help their children learn the skills needed to lead happy and successful lives. Examples of practical supports include home visiting programmes targeting disadvantaged families with young children (0-6) (e.g. Preparing for Life); high quality after school programmes for school going children, and targetted supports for families with teens who struggle with the transition to adulthood (e.g. Archways, MAP).

By communities

- Community-based initiatives have a significant role to play in building parental capacity as children's primary educator. A variety of Prevention and Early Intervention Initiatives in Ireland had proven success in working with community organisations such as Family Resource Centres, to engage parents in activating their children's learning.
- Community based initiatives have also a critical role to play in the provision of high quality early childhood education and care, effective high quality literacy and numeracy programmes, and targetted out of school remedial provision for teenagers and youth. A whole community approach to literacy and learning in which community organisaitons work collaboratively with schools and parents is the best way of promoting children's learning.
- Youth services promoting personal development, youth leadership, and youth entrepreneurship can further link with and complement school-based initiative and curricula. The provision of youth organisations that encourage civic engagement in communities is pivotal in enabling young people to realise their capacity to give back to, as well as receive from their communities. This engagement enables them to be seen as a valuable asset and important contributors. Therefore, continued investment in youth development projects, civic engagement initiatives and intergenerational projects which garner significant community spirit, sense of belonging and human capital in the longer term should be made.

By Government

- “Learning begets learning”. It is known that 90% of brain development has happened by the time a child is aged three years. Cost/benefit analysis in many countries including Ireland suggest that investment in early learning through high quality early childhood education and care, results in much higher returns than later remediation.
- Prevention and early intervention programmes are designed to assist children with the development of their social and learning skills primarily at an early stage of their lives.
- The government can assist child learning by supporting existing programmes that have been proven to promote children’s literacy skills, as well as social and emotional development.
- Research evaluations into programmes developed by organisations such as Archways, youngballymun, CDI, Preparing for Life, MCI Ireland, Triple P, and many more, have shown that investment in these areas is worthwhile.
- The Highscope curriculum and Síolta quality framework in early years settings should be supported, as should the introduction of the Parent Carer Facilitator role in early years centres to support improvements to the home learning environment and school readiness.

4. What can be done so that children and young people are healthy and active?

By families

- There is growing evidence that factors in the early years, including the in-utero period, maybe important determinants of the risk of later obesity and ill-health. Lifestyle habits are resistant to change and the 0-2 year period represents an important opportunity for the infant to start on a healthy trajectory.
- For young people to be healthy and active parents and families need to understand the importance of adequate nutrition and exercise. Throughout the childhood years there is a need for parent support and home activities that encourage children to be more active, eat more nutritious foods and spend less time in screen based activities. Parents also need to have the economic resources to buy nutritious foods and engage their children in activities – the healthier choice has to be the easier choice, and this is not the case in Ireland today.
- In terms of mental health, research has well established that early childhood experiences of secure attachment, age appropriate social and emotional development, and nurturing relationships are central to life long well being and mental health. As in all areas of a child’s development, parents and families need

to be supported to ensure that the foundations of lifelong health are securely laid from the first years of life.

By communities

- Communities have a central role in creating healthy and active children and youth, and need to be supported in this endeavour. They have the capacity to create environments and cultural practices that support children eating healthier foods and being active throughout each day.
- Youth projects, clubs and services as well as voluntary organisations such as the GAA and Foróige allow children and teenagers to get involved in physical activity and learn about the benefits of a healthy lifestyle.
- To encourage its youth to live active and healthy lives, the whole community must support and exemplify these values. Opportunities for all members of the community to become more active through activities such as community cycles, 5K races, access to parks and swimming pools, should be encouraged and promoted in every community.
- Community providers are also ideally placed to provide preventative services for parents and children. Some examples include:
 - parent and baby groups that support healthy early development, address parental isolation and anxiety, and promote parent-child interaction and play, attachment and bonding;
 - Information for parents on issues such as post natal depression and feeding; coping with stress and conflict
 - Awareness raising and capacity building on youth mental health.
 - A whole community approach to health and well-being such as Tallaght CDI's Safe and Healthy Place initiative effectively models an interagency collaborative response to addressing the needs of children and families.

By Government

- Provide more information for parents to help them change their own diet and activity habits for the benefits of their children and their own health
- Fund research to improve understanding of the factors that influence patterns of breastfeeding in Ireland
- For school going children provide increased sessions for physical activity and the development of fundamental movement skills throughout the school week. At second level, develop a school curriculum that includes cooking skills, menu planning and budgeting.
- Invest in youth sport, especially during the early teen years, which is a time when children are likely to disengage from activities.

- Invest in our youngest citizens by providing them with well maintained facilities for being active – play areas etc.
- Physical exercise should be further integrated and promoted within the school curricula. In addition to the physical benefits of exercise, neuroscience research indicates that the brain and the body need a break from continuous learning, to the extent that the brain functions better if proper breaks with exercise are taken.
- Mental health and emotional well being
Studies completed in a selection of disadvantage Dublin communities have revealed significant levels of emotional problems and depression in school-aged children (see for example Tallaght CDI's Healthy Schools study and Ballymun Needs Analysis). Experience in youngballymun has highlighted the value of implementing a whole-school approach to social and emotional development, placing clear focus of pro social behaviour and effective behaviour strategies across the school and builds strong links with parents. For younger families home visiting programmes delivered by practitioners skilled in supporting child social and emotional development such as Preparing for Life have proven effective

5. What do children and young people need to feel economically secure? By families

- Children need to live and grow up in households free from poverty. Child or family income support, parental education and employment policies should be developed to address this.
- The quality of parenting influences all aspects of a child's development, learning, educational outcomes, and general life prospects. This fact, together with the fact that "learning begets learning", and low educational attainment is associated with lower socio-economic circumstances in adult life, makes a compelling argument for universally available parenting programmes. Research from the UK shows a close link between children's cognitive development by the age of 3 and their educational qualifications as adults.⁴
- For teenagers their sense of security comes in the main from the environment that surrounds them. If their parents are in secure employment, they are likely to be experiencing a lower risk of economic deprivation and their basic need for security, food, clothes, accommodation are likely to be met. Having parents in employment also sets a good example to the young person of work ethic and the importance of independence in supporting themselves.

⁴ L. Feinstein (2003) 'Inequality in the Early Cognitive Development of British Children in the 1970 Cohort' in *Economica*, vol.70, pp.73-97.

By communities

- Housing policy should ensure that children and young people live in habitable, decent homes and are part of sustainable and continuously developing communities
- Community training and employment support should be adequate and relevant.
- High quality, affordable child care should be available in all communities
- Provide communities with further opportunities to promote business development, start-ups and create the landscape for opportunity.
- Continue to support youth services which engage youth in developing their business skills, leadership skills, technology skills, CV writing skills, committee skills all of which contribute to their capacity to do well in the work place.

By Government

- Promoting the economic security of children and young people necessitates effective school level supports to increase educational attainment and school retention.
- Extensive evidence demonstrates that prevention and early intervention initiatives can impact educational attainment significantly improve on children's trajectory. A number of forthcoming CDI, Preparing for Life and *youngballymun* evaluation reports will detail initiatives that have been effective in improving educational outcomes for children.
- Early school leavers are 3 to 4 times more likely to be unemployed, and are more likely to report poorer health, long-term illness and to experience anxiety and depression' (Barnardos 2009). The cost to the exchequer of this, particularly in the current climate, is clear. Smyth and McCoy (2009) estimate the annual costs to the State over the life of 1 early school leaver as – Welfare - €12,300, Lost Tax - €17,000, Lone Parent Welfare - €4,000. There is also greater expenditure on health. The EU Commission estimates 'the average gross cost over the lifetime of one 18 year old who does not complete post-primary school of approximately €350,000'.
- PEIN member Archways, run a Mentoring for Achievement Programme (MAP), which was driven by an awareness of the growing numbers of children within the south Dublin region who were experiencing difficulty in making the transition period from primary to secondary school. The programme has, in a series of evaluations, been proven to be effective in improving grades and attendance, decreasing substance abuse, and decreasing criminal behaviour.
- On leaving school children and young people should be supported and encouraged to engage in further education, employment or training, and should be adequately prepared and ready for employment. While education is the most assured route to economic security, it is not without cost for families, and access

to third level education in particular is now strongly linked to parental income. The Government must review the costs of third level education and assess the feasibility of a student loan system to replace the present registration and fees system.

- Ireland needs to develop a culture of entrepreneurship, where creativity and self sufficiency are encouraged.

6. What can be done so that children and young people have a say in decisions that affect their lives?

By families

- Young people should be involved in decisions that effect them. For this to happen in practice, families need to be empowered to trust in and involve their children and young people in decsions. Giving young people a voice in the family instills the belief in them that they have a right to a voice in the wider society. This in turn is key to creating active,engaged, and responsible citizens. The self-expression of a child within the famiy should be encouraged by its caregivers from the earliest stages of infancy.

By communities

- Each community should be required to involve young people in the decision making that occurs, as ultimately the community will be inherited by its youth. To do this schools and communities, and the services that engage with them, need to be empowered to seek and take on board the advice of their young people. Their involvement must not be tokenistic, but meaningful and impactful.
- Young people also need to be encouraged to advocate on behalf of each other. They shouldn't have to wait to be asked their opinion; instead a forum should be provided where they can express their views, have an impact and receive feedback.

By Government

- The government needs to place at the heart of its decisions how its decisions affect children and young people.
- It is important that the Government consult with young children (aged under 6) in developing the National Early Years Strategy, just as they have already done with school-age children in relation to the forthcoming national children's strategy. The fact that early care and education relates to young children – aged 0 to 6 – does not preclude their participation in consultation on policies that affect them.

7. What can be done to help children and young people behave positively and to be good citizens?

By families

- As with all areas of child development, effective parenting beginning in the child's earliest years is key to ensure that children and young people behave positively and are good citizens. Families and parents need to be supported to provide the appropriate environment for children to develop social and emotional life skills such as emotional self regulation, ability to defer gratification, sociability, motivation, attention, and self esteem.
- Parenting courses for parents of teenagers and additional family support during adolescence on a needs-led basis to enable parents to deal positively with their developing teenager as their young person pushes their boundaries and asserts their independence.

By communities

- Early years services have a key role to play in scaffolding children's development and presenting appropriate models of behaviour. The implementation of an evidence-based curriculum like High Scope provide valuable resources and tools to develop practitioners' skills to model and demonstrate problem solving, conflict resolution and emotional regulation strategies to young children. For example, research on CDI's Early Years initiative found that, as a result of the High Scope training, pre-school children are now managing their own conflict resolution without the need for adult intervention.
- Ensure there is equity of access to services for young people to engage in positive activities which develop their pro-social behaviour and reduce anti-social behaviour.
- Ensure the better use of school premises by the community and seen as a resource within the community for youth and community activities. Better linkages between schools and community services including improved integrated service provision and the ability to pick up on young people in need earlier.
- The existence of positive role models and an actively involved youth should be seen as an important asset in each community, and ways to harness community spirit should be enhanced for all members.
- The protective function of communities should be acknowledged. The adage 'a whole community raises a child' ought to be born in mind - whether it relates to the power of the community to protect a child from risk taking behaviour, or whether the community itself is a risk factor for the developing adolescent which

can result or encourage them to embark on a path of violence, aggression, public order offences etc.

- Continued and enhanced support for services for young people that enable them to be involved in their community in a positive way e.g. youth clubs, projects, GAA, football, rugby, dance, art, etc

By Government

- Adverse childhood environments explain a substantial part of the problems of schools, skills and crime.
- Tackling seemingly intractable social issues such as anti-social behaviour and early school leaving requires a shift in thinking that moves away from policy decisions targeting *symptoms* to evidence-informed, longer-term approaches that address *root causes*.
- Research indicates enormous cost-benefits of Prevention and Early Intervention Programmes due to consequential savings from reduced use of health and social services, reductions in crime, as well as lowering unemployment due to improved second and third level educational attainment. Early intervention can be more cost effective and later intervention can be expensive and less effective, causing hardship and suffering for children, families and communities. Investments throughout the life of a young person are complementary and effective.

8. What can be done to help young people move confidently into adulthood?

By Government

- Rather than providing reactive help after problems arise, it has been shown that intervening early to foster in children and young people the hard and soft skills important for success in life has the potential to break the cycle of disadvantage, unemployment and poverty and facilitate a smooth transition into successful adulthood. Such skills include:
 - Emotional self regulation
 - Ability to defer gratification
 - Sociability
 - Motivation
 - Conscientiousness
 - Attention
 - Self esteem.
- We know from research that it is more effective and more cost-efficient to provide support early on, rather than later. Prevention and early intervention

approaches have proven their effectiveness and have been used in many countries all over the world for generations. Savings made using this approach can be reinvested into child and youth services that support education, skills, and entry into the job market.

- However, intervention needs to occur at all stages of the lives of young people, and it is crucial to fully transition through key educational stages, from home to pre-school, pre-school to primary school, primary school to secondary school and secondary school to college.

Further Comments

The Prevention and Early Intervention Network is a network of evidence-based practice, advocacy and research organisations funded through the Atlantic Philanthropies Disadvantaged Children and Youth Programme.

PEI Network Member Organisations

1. Archways
2. Barnardos
3. Centre for Effective Services
4. Child and Family research Centre, NUIG
5. Childhood Development Initiative (CDI)
6. Children's Rights Alliance
7. EPIC
8. Foróige
9. Headstrong
10. Inspire Ireland
11. Irish Penal Reform Trust
12. Irish Youth Foundation
13. ISPCC
14. Lifestart
15. Longford and Westmeath Parenting Programme

16. MCI Ireland (Mayo Children's Initiative)
17. National Women's Council of Ireland
18. Pobal (NEYAI)
19. Preparing for Life, Northside Partnership
20. Rialto Youth (Rialto Learning Community)
21. Youth Civic Action Initiative
22. Spunout.ie
23. Start Strong
24. Supporting Social Inclusion and Regeneration in Limerick
25. youngballymun