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Changing Directions

for Children with Challenging
Behaviour and their Families:
Evaluation of CHILDREN 1ST
Directions Projects

Changing Directions for Children with Challenging Behaviour and their Families: Evaluation of CHILDREN 1ST's Directions Projects

Executive Summary

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Introduction

The Directions Projects were set up by CHILDREN 1ST under the Scottish Executive's Youth Crime Prevention Programme in 2003 to provide early intervention services to children aged 7-12 years and their families within North Ayrshire, South Ayrshire and Glasgow Pollok.

The aims of the projects were to help children address difficulties including challenging behaviour and, in some cases, possible offending behaviour. The projects have worked in partnership with their local councils and are located in purpose designed centres.

The projects have helped children and families by:

- providing mainly group work and some brief individual work for children aged 7 to 12 years who have challenging antisocial behaviour (later amended to include younger children from 5 in response to local need). The aim has been to help them address difficulties, including possible or actual offending behaviour, which undermine their ability to achieve their personal or educational potential and to maintain them in their own family, school and community.
- supporting, assisting and advising parents who have difficulty in providing appropriate parental care and control.
- working with schools to address the needs of children in difficulty and at risk of exclusion.

Children and families have been able to refer themselves to the projects or be referred by agencies. Referrals have only been accepted if the child and family are in agreement and meet the referral criteria. The aim of work undertaken is outlined in a working agreement that is completed after an assessment period. This agreement is signed by all involved and reviewed as appropriate.

Evaluating the projects

The aim of the evaluation has been to look at both the *process* and *impact* of the work of the projects. This has included evaluating the outcomes of the interventions chosen, especially the effectiveness of the Webster-Stratton group work programme in helping children and families change their behaviour (Webster-Stratton 1992). We have also looked at the part played by the staff and the milieu of the projects in creating an environment to facilitate change.

The following questions have been included in the evaluation.

To what extent have the projects:

- decreased children's behaviour and emotional problems at home and at school;
- increased parents' skills to manage the behaviour of their children;
- decreased parents' stress;
- provided a programme to which parents are committed, demonstrated by their attendance and self evaluation of its content;
- provided a programme with which children have engaged and where they can talk about what worked and did not work for them;
- provided a programme which is seen as effective by other professional stakeholders, including social work, education, the police and schools.

Methodology

We have adopted a developmental approach to evaluation that includes a mixture of evaluation methodologies (Everitt and Hardiker 1996; Lurie and Clifford 2005). In recognition of the challenge of evaluating complex family support projects, we have taken a broad definition of evidence and an iterative approach that allows for assessment of the development of the project over time (Stradling and MacNeil 2007). We support the increasing interest in including in evaluation, exploration of the processes of intervention and their meaning to children and families who use the services as well as measuring change at the beginning and end of specific interventions in a more traditional way. We firmly agree with Seaman et al (2005) that evaluation should draw on participants' own definitions and priorities, recognising their multiple experiences. We also think that evaluation of centre based interventions should strive to capture the idea that 'there is "something" in centre practice which is greater than the sum of the parts' (Warren 1997) and which may facilitate energy between the parts 'to interconnect creatively' (Warren-Adamson 2006, p.178).

Our evaluation has therefore included:

- Standardised measures of children's strengths and difficulties and parents' daily hassles;
- Analysis of referral data;
- Self-evaluation of the programme by parents and children;
- Focus groups with parents;
- Site visits and interviews with staff and advisory groups.

Key findings

Structure

The three projects have been located in the heart of their communities and have become locally accepted. The location and milieu of the project premises have played a significant part in the impact of the projects. The premises were commissioned to be bright, hospitable, and well-equipped. They have included large meeting rooms with comfortable sofas, kitchens where food can be prepared and a variety of other child and parent friendly spaces.

The staff team has come from multidisciplinary backgrounds, with varying degrees of experience, which has added a richness of personnel. Managers have taken a 'transformational leadership' approach (Pine and Healy 2007) which has helped to provide a participatory model for staff and gain respect from families.

The project staff have built an excellent network of relationships with local agencies, especially schools. This has helped facilitate appropriate referrals and has served to increase the standing of the projects in the community.

Process

In the first year, managers were presented with the challenges of developing a team and training a diverse staff group. Initially, interventions concentrated on short programmes and individual work with children. After seeking a review of evidence about effective programmes for the target group, a management decision was taken to use the Webster-Stratton Incredible Years programmes with children and their parents (Webster- Stratton 1992) and staff were trained accordingly. These programmes have been running sequentially, on average three times a year. The projects are all now offering structured group work programmes lasting from 14 to 17 weeks as the core of their interventions.

Engaging and retaining parents' participation in the programmes has involved experimentation in different ways of working. More preparation has been needed with some parents before they were ready for structured group work.

The projects have also responded sensitively to families' need for follow up after the programmes have ended and have offered an imaginative range of individual and group interventions to reinforce their learning and help families with the changes they were trying to achieve. A major finding has been the value of a dynamic approach to reinforcing children and families' learning. Another important feature has been the fact that each child and parent has a dedicated project worker. In addition, the increased use of carefully selected volunteers has been a feature of the development of the projects.

As projects have become better known, there have been tensions about wanting to respond to a wider group of children in need and problems of straying from referral criteria that have led to success. Requests have also been made for the projects to take children into the programme at a younger age in order to address parent/child difficulties before they become too entrenched.

Adaptation has been throughout a feature of the projects. The limitations of the Webster-Stratton Dino School programme for older children led to creative programmes being developed for that age group, and engagement with other agencies and activities for the children. Opportunistically, creches have been used effectively to undertake some appropriate behavioural work with toddlers and siblings not participating in Dino School. The staff have modelled the values of service user participation and empowerment at the heart of the projects, for example, involving children and parents in the selection of staff when vacancies have occurred.

Outcomes

We looked at changes in the behaviour and wellbeing of 88 children who completed the Webster-Stratton programme over the three sites, using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire at the beginning and end of intervention (Department of Health, Cox and Bentovim 2000). In the general population, around 10% of children might be expected to score behaviour and emotional problems at a higher level than would be expected in a community. In our sample, at the start of the programme, on all the Strengths and Difficulties dimensions, there were more than 10% of children who had a higher than might be expected score. The most extreme was the conduct problems dimension where only 5 children were within the general population range and 76 children (86%) were scoring at a high level.

At the end of the intervention, overall there was a reduction of severity on all the dimensions but, as might be expected with a group of children whose behaviour had been challenging for some time, many children stayed at the same point throughout. In spite of this, there was an observable trend towards improvements on most of the dimensions. The improvement in conduct was most marked; no children became worse, 76% remained the same but 24% improved. There were some variations

across the three sites, which seemed to relate to the levels of complexity and severity of problems with which families were grappling.

We also measured the levels of stress parents of the 88 children were experiencing with their children using the Parenting Hassles Scales (Department of Health, Cox and Bentovim 2000). 94 parents participated. Just under two thirds of parents were showing a level of stress that would not cause concern. Given the circumstances in which many families were living and the multiple challenges they were facing, this was a very positive finding. The remaining third of parents showed a high level of stress at the beginning of the programme. By the end of the programme, 21% overall showed a reduction on their levels of stress. Only 3% showed an increase in stress over the period. Again there was variation across the sites and the greatest level of reduction of parental stress was in Glasgow Pollok.

Both children and parents evaluated the programme with positive results. The majority of children thought the programme was 'OK' or better. Most (over 90%) liked their group leaders 'a lot'.

Children described how their behaviour at home had changed, including, for example, learning to play games without fighting, sharing, being more obedient, doing their school work, eating meals and keeping their rooms tidy. Children felt their parents had responded to the improvement in their behaviour by helping them and praising them. Children had learnt a number of strategies for managing their behaviour:

I put my head under the pillow when I am angry.

I apologise and share

I play game cube without fighting

I eat all my dinner and do my schoolwork.

The parents identified specific ways in which the programme had helped their parenting and the areas that remained challenging. Group discussions and rehearsing new skills were helpful but putting the skills into practice at home was hard. A number of parenting behaviours had to be unlearned, such as ignoring bad behaviour. Other areas of new skills included learning to play with children, giving praise and rewards, and reflecting back to children. Helping with homework was new to some parents and engaging with the school was a challenge for others. In addition, a very important feature of the experience for parents was having time with other adults away from children ('no wee hands tugging, shouting at you all the time') and being pampered with cups of tea and food.

It taught me how to praise your weans.

My child is such a changed little boy. I feel a lot better and he is obviously a happier and better boy inside. Thank you so much for getting my life made a lot easier

Coming to the project was 'your wee time even though you were learning something'.

Workers make you feel at the same level, raise your spirits – 'it's like a wee family place'.

What has contributed to making the changes for children and families?

Location and ethos

The first significant factor which set the tone for the projects was their location and the environment they created. Each project was sited in an accessible location, in non-stigmatising premises, in the centre of local communities. Limited space was used creatively for several purposes, including group work, individual sessions and as a pleasant base for families and staff, as the photographs illustrate. The bright décor and the ethos spelt out a warm welcome to both children and parents.

Staff recognised the important part a nurturing environment played in helping parents respond to what the projects had to offer. The provision of simple hospitality by way of food and something to drink became highly symbolic. This kind of nurture tangibly demonstrated to parents that they were valued. These were parents who were living in stressful circumstances, some worn down by enduring poverty and multiple disadvantage. Children also felt stimulated and nurtured. Involving children in play gave them messages this was a fun place, while also setting the scene and rules for group interaction.

Staffing

Staff attitudes and behaviour played their part in the success of the projects. They made people feel respected and equal but combined this with offering expertise and advice. They took a consciously authoritative approach, spelling out and modelling behaviour expected of children and parents. The presence of male and female staff was important in demonstrating that positive parenting was not limited by gender.

Carefully selected volunteers were incorporated into projects in helping to run crèches and take on other supportive tasks, which allowed the projects to diversify their activities and approaches.

The role of managers

Important contributors to the success of the projects were the managers. Managers played a fundamental role both in setting up and leading the projects. The management was characterised by a transformational leadership approach. Managers shared a common vision about the overall aims of the projects. They worked together to bring staff on board, convert them to the common aims and processes, thus building confidence but not stifling creativity. The participatory approach of the service managers, who were operationally involved in delivering the services, gained the respect of staff. Equally, the service managers' ability to manage the boundaries with other agencies and negotiate a respected place for Directions within local communities contributed to the development of the projects. It is noteworthy that there has been a low turnover of staff in the first four years.

Establishing the projects within their communities

The effectiveness of the projects has been dependent on how they have been perceived by agencies in the community. Local agencies respected the projects because they knew what the projects were offering and who they could help. The clarity and application of referral criteria were critical in this respect.

It has been evident that, where the Directions Projects have been located in areas that have a strategic approach to the planning and provision of family support services, the projects have been able to flourish. (This also has applied to the provision of a range of adult care services for parents, such as mental health and substance abuse services, but there was less evidence available to make judgements about whether a strategic approach existed in this respect).

It has been more difficult for the projects to be located in areas where there is a limited range of family support services either in the statutory or voluntary sectors or where other key agencies are in a state of constant reorganisation and upheaval. However, even in these circumstances, in one site where the service manager assertively made links with individual schools, the reputation of the project was established and it became perceived by other agencies as an important service provider. Another contributory factor to establishing the project was the active links that were made with local services such as the Fire Service and Police to increase the community awareness of older children. This had the impact of increasing the services' understanding of the work of the project.

The effectiveness of the interventions

Finding a well-evidenced core programme was at the heart of the success of the Directions Projects. Using a well-tested and validated intervention gave a clear structured work programme to both children and parents. However, the programme on its own would have been much less successful than it was if there had not been a dedicated member of staff working with each family.

This played an important part in developing relationships of trust, sometimes for the first time between families and service-providers, and acting as a catalyst for change. Similarly, important were the supplementary services that were offered, both to prepare children and families for the core group work programme and to offer outreach and follow up services. In respect of this, a major lesson learnt was that the projects recognised the context and individual needs of the families to whom they were offering services. Many of their families were challenged by multiple issues and adversity. There was also a sense of assessing and playing to the strengths of individuals.

They translated this recognition into practice in several ways. This included helping parents and children prepare for participating in the core programme. Staff then helped sustain them through the programme in a variety of ways such as outreach, transport and home-visiting. Further, and significantly, they adapted the programme, whilst still retaining its integrity, to work at the pace of parents who had serious problems of literacy or whose lives were so challenged that they could not fully embrace all the lessons of the programme at one time. Parents were invited back to undertake a further programme if they were unable to complete it the first time at one go, or simply wanted to repeat the programme to consolidate their learning.

Often the literature identifies those who drop out as having in some way failed (for example Scott et al 2001). The Directions Projects felt this approach was unethical and inappropriate but they also recognised that some families were not ready to participate or continue their engagement. They developed positive ways of allowing children and parents to disengage from programmes. Where parents stopped attending the core programme, and thus children were not able to continue, staff were sensitive to the needs of the children and found ways for them to complete the programme or found alternative ways of supporting them elsewhere within the Directions Projects. This prevented children from feeling they or their parents had failed. This is a critical learning point in terms of using targeted structured programmes with very vulnerable children and families.

Creating and sustaining a learning organisation

A significant factor in the overall development and success of the Directions Projects has been the creation of the culture of a learning organisation. It is difficult to capture completely the creativity and responsiveness of staff to the needs of the children and families. Providing a dedicated worker for each family, adapting the programmes to older and younger children, developing wrap around services to support parents to attend and the quality of interactions with staff reported by children and families, along with the evaluation team's observations of the interactions, ethos and outcomes of the Directions Projects are all evidence of the dynamic nature of the projects. The staff's ability to adapt and grow in confidence was underpinned by training and being open to new information. This they then used to enhance participation and partnership with the families. The action research model of the evaluation team contributed to this. The staff became partners in the

evaluation using the standardised tools in their day-to-day practice to assess the needs of children and families.

In spite of the success of the Directions Projects, there has to be a note of caution about the fragility of the current situation. There is a myth that early intervention through supporting families requires low intensity services. These projects demonstrate how complex and skilled such work is if it is to help families change. In a short time, the projects have had a considerable impact. However, inevitably, the present staff will move on over time and there must be concerns about the stability of funding. The tangible inputs over which organisations have some control, namely continuity of funding and appointing high quality staff, need to be safeguarded in order to allow the projects to grow and flourish. The potential for partnership with schools and with some targeted groups of hard-to-help children already offers some exciting ways forward.

Understanding the synergy in the Directions Projects

These projects are complex systems of 'contingencies and connections' between the various parts (Agar 2004, p.414). In this respect, complexity theory may have something to offer in understanding the processes and outcomes of the projects. There is evidence that the projects have been able to build on themselves and that changes can happen with surprising speed, given the right conditions. They demonstrate that 'a small input can bring about a large output, if the input occurs at the right time and the right place' (Warren et al 1998, p.364). In a relatively short time, these projects have established themselves and have had a clear impact on the lives of the children and families who have crossed their thresholds. They have also had an impact on the communities they are serving.

The projects have grown out of the initial aims and have achieved the desired outcomes of helping children with challenging behaviour and their families. The way they developed allowed for changes and innovations along the way. The manner in which they have reached their achievements reflects that outlined by Loeb, quoted in Lightburn and Sessions (2006, p.542):

A patchwork, partially constructed vision may strike exactly the balance between humility and boldness that's needed in these unpredictable times....we may proceed best, as Mary Catherine Bateson writes, "by improvisation, discovering the shape of our creation along the way rather than pursuing a vision defined". So long as we stay open to new information, learning as we go, not allowing ourselves to be distracted by the search for absolute certainty, we can continue to work towards goals we can feel proud of.

The Directions Projects can be justly proud of their achievements.

Have the Directions projects contributed to preventing youth crime?

Although this is the central question posed by this evaluation, it is difficult to provide an answer in such direct terms. We will not know without tracking children over several years. If we ask ‘Have the Directions Projects changed the behaviour of children away from what we know indicates a tendency for youth crime?’ the answer is then a clear yes. What the projects have demonstrated is that that even the most vulnerable children and their parents can change their behaviour, given the help they need, when and how they need it. The projects have shown that a structured group work programme can be effective but for families of this level of vulnerability, it needs to be supported by dedicated workers with families and by wrap around services over a sustained period. To expect children and families who came to the project with so many problems to turn those around in a matter of weeks is unrealistic. What the projects have done is to start them along the road to change.

They also revealed that to sustain that change will demand longer term connections with some families and they will continue to need the support of services. It was clear that however much a programme can help children and families in the immediate term, unless there is a holistic approach which also tackles the environments and dangerous communities in which these children live, and the enduring poverty which impoverishes their lives, success will always be partial. Above all, the Directions Projects provide a clear message that the earlier children can be helped the better the chances of success. The Directions Projects fit well with the Scottish Government’s *Getting it right for every child* initiative. The value of a targeted family support service, providing early intervention, using well-evidenced programmes, located within a multi-agency arena and working with individual communities, may be one of the most effective ways to help Scotland’s most vulnerable children and their families.

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