
EARLY SUPPORT: AN EVALUATION OF PHASE 3 OF EARLY SUPPORT

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Introduction

The Early Support (ES) programme represents the translation into practice of key DfES/DH joint policy guidance on improving multi-professional services and enhancing child and family outcomes for disabled children from birth to three years. Phase 3 of its implementation involving 46 Pathfinders throughout England was the focus of the evaluation study.

Aims of the research

- To assess the extent to which ES has improved inter-agency working between children's services, both in terms of planning and delivery.
- To assess the outcomes of ES in terms of: engagement of families of disabled babies and children 0-3 years, access to services and timeliness of intervention; the impact on children and families; and the impact on professionals.
- To assess the effective use of resources in relation to ES.

Key findings

- Overall, Early Support is a very successful programme (as measured by positive developments in multi-agency planning and delivery at strategic and operational levels; improvements in the appropriateness and responsiveness of multi-professional practice; and as recognised by parents themselves). As one parent commented:
"It's helped me achieve that little boy what I've got now. That little star that's here now."

Scope and nature of benefit

- The nature of ES benefit for families varied considerably, with a third of those engaged (N = 1009) benefiting from the condition-specific information materials only without any other form of provision. For others, around half of the number of families recorded benefited from a key worker service within ES (N=1589).

- Pathfinders operating in mixed urban/rural settings had a higher average number of families benefiting from ES than those in either urban or rural settings. Also, the average number of families benefiting increased as the degree of complexity of agency relationships increased, i.e. where there were more agencies and cross-agency boundary services involved, then more families tended to become involved in ES-related activity.
- The extent to which ES should be regarded as a universal and/or targeted provision was a problem. Pathfinders varied in the extent to which they operated clear eligibility criteria for a service. In some cases a distinction was made between 'full' ES (i.e. including key worker provision) and 'second tier' ES (which may be only ES materials provision, and/or referral to a particular agency). The key struggle lies in ensuring equal and universal access whilst grappling with the realities of different and targeted provision within finite resources. Crucial issues that are largely unresolved in the implementation of ES and differ between Pathfinders include:
 - Clarity over eligibility criteria;
 - The decision-making process about the type of service provision that should be offered to families;
 - How transparent these decisions are from families' perspectives.
- A key driver for change was the ES philosophy as much as the specifics of ES working practices. In some cases, this enabled Pathfinders to leave behind previous structures of ineffective joint working. In other Pathfinders the shared understanding allowed current effective structures of joint working to be reinforced and enhanced.
- There was no overall pattern of agency reluctance to become involved in ES; however, where a particular professional or agency was absent, the knock-on effects were serious in the view of both professionals and parents. Absentees' roles were misconstrued, ill-defined and seen to frustrate, for parents, the otherwise beneficial effects of a co-ordinated approach.
- Voluntary sector involvement in ES was patchy and largely underdeveloped. Where there was significant involvement key benefits were the provision of hitherto unknown services and the flexibility in specialist provision where statutory agencies were more constrained.
- From professionals' perspectives co-location did not emerge as a significant driver for improved inter-agency working, while from parents' perspectives it had clearly identified benefits in terms of ease, practicality and flexibility of provision to meet identified needs quickly (where it was working well). However, some parents experienced a dislocated service even when delivered from within a single location such as a Children's Centre. This effect was largely a result of not all professionals involved with them and the Children's Centre being aware of or signed up to ES.

Multi-agency practice

- Pathfinders demonstrated improvement in multi-agency working and significantly improved practice in the domains of: agencies co-operating to plan, manage and develop service effectively; the co-ordination of ongoing support for families; making straightforward and smooth the processes of referral, identification and initial assessment.
- Some recurring difficulties continued to undermine enhanced multi-agency working: access to information across agencies, incompatible computer systems, differences in contractual and human resources arrangements, additional workloads resulting from ES involvement.
- For those parents whose experience of ES included multi-agency assessment/review and key working, there were clear advantages to enhanced inter-agency working through the ES model. These were: reduced sense of burden resulting from otherwise having to co-ordinate services themselves; confidence engendered through the routine and predictable ways in which they knew professionals planned together; greater accountability and increased opportunities for parents to become involved in decision making about their child's future. For these parents the benefits of ES extended to the whole family:

"What this [ES] basically is, the way [the key worker] sort of put it to us, is that it's a wrap-around care for us the family and that is exactly how it's actually becoming."

Key working

- The implementation or extension of key working was a fundamental component of the majority of ES Pathfinder projects. From professionals' perspectives, the key worker role was largely valued for its effects in delivering more co-ordinated, service-effective, and family sensitive provision. From parents' perspectives, benefits were described in terms of both practicalities and emotional support, with one often being closely related to the other.
- Key difficulties for families in key worker provision were: lack of transparency over who could have one and why; delays in their allocation; lack of co-ordination in when key workers were introduced and ES materials were introduced; anxiety about withdrawal of key worker service after the child's third birthday ('post-3'). From professionals' perspectives, key difficulties were largely resource-driven and in particular the perceived knock-on effects in terms of work load for non-designated key workers.
- Overall the provision of a key worker service as part of a Pathfinder's ES project reduced the mean number of families benefiting from ES in the locality; however, for those Pathfinders with a key working service who rated themselves as having an 'established' or 'exceptional' service on other markers of inter-agency and effective family working, the mean number of families benefiting was nonetheless relatively high.

Working with diversity

- Working with diversity remained a key challenge for Pathfinders and whilst practice over time had improved significantly, over two thirds still considered their practice to be only 'emerging' or 'partly in place'. Pathfinder status in previous phases of ES had no significant influence.

- Access for non-English users to ES materials remains a crucial concern. The problem is not so much that material is not available in their preferred language, but that the fact that it is not means that parents have a different relationship with the materials and resources, e.g. there is less scope for independent use, personalised record keeping, and individualised reference. The mediated nature of access potentially undermines key ES principles of parent empowerment and supported independence within the professional/ parent processes. Although some Pathfinders were beginning to think about how to tackle these issues, we were very concerned that others did not recognise that there might be a problem, persisting in a view that everyone got the same sort of service and that difficulties in access did not create differential effects because they could be overcome with the use of interpreters.

Sustainability and extension

- A key distinguishing feature between Pathfinders was the extent to which they had embedded their ES project within other national child care developments that were impacting locally. Well-embedded Pathfinders were more likely to be able to offer sustainable ES provision, were more likely to be having an impact in extending the ES model to post-3 provision; were more likely to offer a more extended key working services to more families.
- The relevance of ES principles and working practices for post-3 provision was very clearly identified. There was significant concern amongst professionals and parents alike that ES did not cover the whole of the preschool period. Extension into post-3 services was in its infancy in many areas. Even in the most developed Pathfinders, difficulties were being experienced when the role relationships and inter-agency working practices that had been developed through ES met with organisational barriers in their transposition post-3, as some agency responsibilities were different in the context of school transition planning.

The ES information materials

- How families came to access ES materials varied enormously, with Pathfinders exerting varying degrees of structure and control on the process,

whilst some families in effect self-accessed via the internet.

- For parents and professionals alike there were concerns over: the timing of the provision of information and support materials; the importance of materials being linked to a person or service; enabling flexibility of use to suit individual styles and needs; access for those who did not use English as a first/preferred language, or who had literacy difficulties; materials serving to highlight where gaps in provision existed locally, thus creating parental stress and frustration.
- Condition-specific information materials were highly praised, as was the background information file (particularly the section on welfare benefits). The Family File met with more mixed responses from parents, which was largely reflective of variation in parents' individual preferences in information use and preferred style of engagement with services. For example, some needed confidence to use it in the first place, while for others it was its existence that engendered that confidence.

Economic considerations

- A full economic evaluation based on observed data was not possible since there was no clear comparator for ES. However, the ES services were mainly additional to and not replacements of existing services in their locality. An exploratory economic evaluation was conducted to estimate whether the benefits delivered by ES were worth the additional extra costs of ES.
- If decision-makers consider the value of additional families benefiting from any aspect of ES for two years, to be more than £2000, then the results suggest that ES is likely to be cost effective compared to no ES (in more than 50% of cases). This is based on the assumption that the costs and benefits of ES are additional to the costs and benefits that would have occurred if ES Pathfinder projects had not been implemented.

Some implications for the implementation of ES on a national basis

- Whilst it is important to recognise and work with ES as a very particular initiative with its own tools, approach and working practice, sustainability will not derive from treating it as a discrete programme to be delivered purely within its own boundaries.
- In implementing ES locally, it is vital to position it strategically and plan for its operational delivery firmly within the new and changing childcare service structures. This embedding should occur right from the start and encompass strategic, financial and workforce planning (e.g. joint funded posts). In making such a suggestion we are, however, mindful of the dangers of mainstreaming a specialist initiative, leading to a marginalisation of its focus and expertise.
- Finite resources (be that finance or skills), stage of development of ES working, and local arrangements for embedding within other initiatives will all conspire to create eligibility criteria for receipt/ delivery of different kinds of ES service. The extent to which such eligibility criteria are explicit/ implicit, planned for, or remain a puzzle, are major issues for the implementation of ES in local circumstances. Without clearly planned and implemented support/ guidance/ training on this issue to local authorities new to ES, then both service providers and service users are at risk of confusion, dissatisfaction and concern over equitable service access. This point is particularly important in relation to key working if provision is to avoid being ad hoc and patchy between and within local authorities.
- The positive benefits from parents' perspectives of the range of ES materials has direct implications for the endorsement, continuance, updating and extension of this provision. We would strongly suggest that this is not a resource to be lost but will require a continued (be it smaller scale) investment to maintain its quality and effectiveness. Failure to revise and expand the range of materials for parent and professional would undermine the benefits of the initial considerable investment.

There is a clear need to develop a strategic

approach to access that encompasses far more than simply translation. An approach that looks holistically at the experience of parents for whom access to services is likely to be in part mediated access (through interpreters) and how it is possible to build the implications of that into both professional training and parent support to get the best out of ES resources.

- Unresolved issues of day to day co-ordination between agencies/ services (e.g. incompatible IT systems) pose a significant threat to the considerable gains in multi-agency working practice that are otherwise achievable and significantly beneficial for families.
- The total investment cost in ES is high if ES is not continued beyond the current funding. However, as the number of years ES continues increases, and the number of families served increases, the investment cost per family of ES decreases.
- If resources are available to support the implementation and maintenance of ES, it may be necessary to roll out ES in phases, targeting specific areas, authorities or populations. To those ends, the results of the economic evaluation indicate that there may be benefits in efficiency if areas with one or more of the following characteristics are prioritized for early investment:
 - The local authority demonstrates medium 'impact' and low 'extent' in relation to ES (NB - these are specific measures that were developed for the evaluation based on results of two short questionnaires. 'Impact' refers to baseline markers of quality provision pre-ES; and 'extent' to expectations of change/improvement).
 - The local authority has straightforward relationships with other agencies in the child care arena. This is because although the number of families benefiting from ES increased as the complexity of relations with other agencies increased, the cost per Pathfinder and per family also increased.
 - The local authority is introducing key worker services for the first time.

- The local population is mixed in terms of urban and rural setting and characteristics

A note on research methods

This research study consisted of 5 linked studies, utilising a mixture of secondary data analysis, quantitative and qualitative methods. Some of the data collection involved all 46 Pathfinders in phase 3, while others involved a structured sample of 10 for in-depth work. Additionally, 27 families participated. The five studies were: taxonomy of Pathfinders; service level impact and outcomes; cost effectiveness; family study; child outcomes study. The evaluation ran from July 2004 to March 2006.

Additional Information

Copies of the full report (RR798) - priced £4.95 - are available by writing to DfES Publications, PO Box 5050, Sherwood Park, Annesley, Nottingham NG15 0DJ.

Cheques should be made payable to "DfES Priced Publications".

Copies of this Research Brief (RB798) are available free of charge from the above address (tel: 0845 60 222 60). Research Briefs and Research Reports can also be accessed at www.dfes.gov.uk/research/

Further information about this research can be obtained from Ian Beadle, 6S10, DfES, Sanctuary Buildings, Great Smith Street, London SW1P 3BT.

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