

**Do parenting interventions aimed at improving the behaviour, school readiness and cognitive development of young children also have an effect on health outcomes?**

**FACTSHEET**

**Based on a literature review by the Institute for Public Health in Ireland for the Equity Action project [pdf complete review](#)**

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This factsheet summarises the main findings of a literature review which looked at interventions with parents of young children (aged 8 and under) aimed at improving children's behaviour, school readiness and cognitive development, and the possible effect such interventions may have on improving health outcomes.

The review aims to provide robust evidence to inform policy-makers who are planning or implementing interventions or services aimed at empowering parents to make positive improvements in their children's lives with regard to school readiness/behaviour and cognitive development. These improvements are likely to have positive impacts on a child's health, and health equity repercussions across the life course.

**Health effects of parenting interventions**

- Children with behavioural issues, internalising disorders (for example, anxiety, depression or withdrawal), or externalising disorders (such as aggression), or who are identified at an early age as being at risk of developing such a disorder later in life, can benefit from early years interventions. The best way to target children in the early years is through interventions involving their parents.
- Children from disadvantaged backgrounds may be more likely to develop these disorders due to the effects of their social and economic context. Focussing attention entirely on the parent cannot be a substitute for addressing broader social and economic inequalities.
- Evidence suggests that all children, and in particular children who are at risk of developing these disorders, benefit from parental interventions. However, the evidence for the benefit of parenting interventions in cases where a child may have learning difficulties is less convincing.
- The literature consistently identified short- to medium-term positive effects of parenting interventions. These included: increasing parental self-efficacy and family harmony, reducing parental depression; reducing dysfunctional parenting styles; improving children's behaviour; achieving developmental goals; and improved learning capabilities. In addition, other children in the family can benefit from greater parental self-efficacy and family harmony.

**Delivery of and conditions for parenting interventions**

- Locating parenting interventions within existing services helps to improve accessibility and avoid stigma, and also improves cost-effectiveness. Both group formats and one-to-one sessions are effective in different





programmes. The use of new technologies offers considerable potential both for delivering interventions and obtaining feedback.

- Progressive universalism – where all families receive some support, but there is more intensive support for those most at risk – may be the most cost-effective and practical way of developing early years interventions across populations. Differing levels of intensity may be needed to ensure appropriate interventions for different needs, and in particular to target children who may be at risk of health inequity.
- Interventions may need to provide multiple ‘refresher’ interventions for parents and children, to maintain positive outcomes in the longer term.
- The method of monitoring and evaluating effectiveness should be at the individual family level, with a focus on reaching developmental and behavioural goals.
- Many parenting interventions can be transferred to other countries, provided there is sensitivity to local conditions.

### **Main conclusions**

- Intersectoral action across social, health and educational care has the potential to reduce health inequalities, through a holistic approach, by reducing inequalities in early years experiences, with positive impacts across these domains. Such intersectoral working could lead to many potential gains – not only short- to medium-term gains, but also cost-effective gains in the longer term across the life course.
- There is also potential for cumulative gains from parenting interventions: other children in the family benefit from improved parenting styles; and parents, children and the extended family benefit from reduced parental stress and improved mental health.
- The most important achievement of parenting interventions may be improvements in resilience, self-efficacy and wellbeing.
- Much of the research literature demonstrates positive outcomes. However there are methodological shortcomings such as small sample sizes, lack of control groups, self-reporting and lack of longer-term follow-up. Longitudinal research with robust sample sizes is required. However, researchers in this area have expressed reservations about the relevance of randomised controlled trials for interventions of this nature.

#### **For more information**

*Interventions with parents of young children aimed at improving children’s behaviour, school readiness and cognitive development, and the possible effect of those interventions on health outcomes: A literature review*

Produced by the Institute of Public Health in Ireland, for the Equity Action project.

Available from: [www.equityaction-project.eu](http://www.equityaction-project.eu)

