



Prevention & Early Intervention in  
Children & Young People's Services  
Children's Learning

## Key Messages

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Children's learning begins before birth. It should be supported in different ways depending on the age of the child, their individual needs and circumstances.

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Promoting a love of learning from an early age as well as focusing on specific skills such as literacy and numeracy will help to improve life-long outcomes.

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Learning is not the sole responsibility of schools. It also involves home, day care, pre-school, primary and post primary schools and communities. Transitions between these need to be prepared for in advance.

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Parents are a key influence on children's learning. They need to provide healthy, stimulating environments, particularly during the early years, as well as supporting children's more formal learning experiences in school.

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Experiencing quality early years settings improves children's outcomes. Support for implementing quality frameworks and professional development for staff on how to interact with children (particularly toddlers) can be beneficial.

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Integrating new approaches into schools takes time and sustained effort. Successful strategies include providing ongoing support, focusing approaches to fit with the curriculum and professional development for teachers.

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Working with teachers and professionals in day care to develop skills and new approaches can benefit the first group of children who experience the changes as well as subsequent cohorts of children. This may increase return on initial investment.

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Analysing cost-benefits over time is useful for interventions delivered in education settings where initial costs for delivery may be incurred by one Department and long term cost savings accrued by another.

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For over a decade, a group of organisations has been running more than 52 prevention and early intervention programmes throughout the island of Ireland. This Initiative funded by The Atlantic Philanthropies, sometimes in conjunction with Government and other organisations supports diverse services working to influence a wide range of outcomes for children. 'Children's Learning' is the fourth report in the series 'Prevention and Early Intervention in Children and Young People's Services' produced by the Centre for Effective Services. This briefing paper provides a summary of the key learning from ten programmes that have been evaluated. It contains 8 key messages and 11 recommendations.

## Why is this issue important?

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Poor educational attainment (particularly with respect to literacy) is linked to a number of poorer outcomes through adult life such as unemployment, lower income, and poorer mental and physical health. Learning is not the sole responsibility of schools. From birth, children experience a range of learning environments including home, day care, school and the wider community. As children grow they experience several key transitions which can include from home life to day care, preschool or nursery school, primary or junior school and then later to secondary school, college and possibly further education. Each can involve a different approach to learning, education and care. Some children cope well with these transitions but others can struggle.

Children who grow up in caring and responsive environments that encourage learning from birth arrive at school with core skills and competencies that schools can build on. 'School unreadiness' is expensive and children who fall behind their peers at this early stage will find it difficult to catch up later. When families, schools, communities and practitioners are connected and equipped with the skills and resources to support children's learning, this can improve outcomes.

## Key Recommendations

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### Engaging parents to improve child outcomes

Parents play a critical role in supporting their children's learning. While many are very engaged with their children's learning, some parents may need encouragement and help with how best to do this. They may not know what approaches are being used in schools, or they may have negative attitudes towards school or poor personal experiences of education which influence their children's outcomes.

The Prevention and Early Intervention Initiative showed that it can be challenging to engage some parents. Beneficial strategies include showing parents developmentally appropriate and fun activities to do with their children, and designing services to be accessible to parents. For example, playing with children, reading stories, taking them to the library and talking to them about what they are doing in school can all be helpful.

1. Actively encourage parents to support the work being done directly with their children. A variety of strategies will need to be used depending on individual needs and circumstances.
  2. Locating services for parents within school settings can improve accessibility and strengthen connections between the school, home and community.
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## What the participants said

“I can see it, you can see it, in his grammar, his writing and his reading. He has started reading out stories and all, he would never have done that before.” **Parent**

“We have so much fun with all the items and it shows how spending so little can result in great play.” **Parent**

“He picks things up far quicker if I play a game with him rather than sitting him down and trying to teach him.” **Parent**

“Including parents and involving parents in their children’s work – anything like that can change the parent’s attitudes towards school – they see the value of learning and education.” **School Principal**

## Improving practice in Early Years settings

Existing evidence shows that integrating childcare and education in high-quality pre-school provision can positively influence children’s cognitive and behavioural outcomes. Outcomes can also be improved by having a well qualified staff who work with both children and family members.

Local learning highlighted ways to successfully improve the quality of early years settings and encourage stimulating learning experiences for young children:

- Recognise that children, even of the same age, vary as individuals in terms of their abilities and what interests them. Activities should take account of this, particularly with younger children so that learning experiences are fun and engaging.
- Assess organisational readiness at the start of the process (including current service provision and fit against the programme, buy-in at all levels from senior management to individual practitioners, staffing skills and experience and available resources).
- Use experienced individuals to support implementation of existing quality frameworks and programmes. These individuals should provide insight, motivation, training, problem solving and feedback on progress.
- Offer quality training and create learning networks of practitioners to share experiences and good practice.

3. There should be sufficient flexibility to tailor activities to the age, ability and interests of individual children, particularly with younger ages.

4. Ongoing support is needed to create and sustain change in early years settings particularly when implementing quality frameworks.

5. Capacity building to support the early years workforce should include quality training as well as sharing examples of best practice in peer learning communities.

## What the participants said

“The children loved doing the activities. We introduced new words and the children...to this day, still do the activity, by themselves—doing the actions and using words we introduced.” **Early Years professional**

“We had a watered down version of preschool before. Now it is much more at their level and activities which they are engaging in and developing.” **Early Years professional**

## Delivering Interventions in Schools

Some children cope well with starting school but others can struggle. The Prevention and Early Intervention Initiative shows how this can be prepared for in advance by increasing links, and using complementary approaches between home, early years settings and school.

There were also several programmes delivered in the school setting, either during normal class time or in afterschool classes. These included supporting skills such as reading and building healthy relationships. Programmes varied as to whether they employed their own staff to deliver the programmes or operated through teachers. Programmes delivered during the school day made clear links to the existing curriculum. Afterschool programmes complemented the work being done in school with a range of interactive, fun activities rather than repeating the activities of the school day.

Integrating new approaches into schools took time and sustained effort. It was helped by:

- Actively involving the school in the selection or design of the programme.
- Providing ongoing coaching and support.
- Balancing the need to have clear, developmentally appropriate lesson plans with some flexibility so teachers could use their professional judgement in tailoring delivery to their particular class.
- Ringfencing staff time for training and resource preparation.

One also needs to plan how effects can be sustained for participants over time to avoid inputs being an ‘add-on’ rather than fully integrated into the children’s ongoing learning experience. This may include using a ‘whole school approach’ where there is a consistency in experiences across multiple year groups, incorporating changes into school’s policies and procedures and using follow-up or booster sessions to sustain benefits over time.

6. Deciding how best to integrate an approach into a school is crucial, for example, whether to deliver as an after-school or extracurricular activity, integrate into the mainstream curriculum, or adopt a whole school approach.
7. There should be a planned and integrated approach to working with schools that takes account of future sustainability, as well as how to retain and further build on improved outcomes.
8. Programmes should clarify how the programme links to the national curriculum, provide a sequential and integrated skills curriculum, and establish learning goals and monitoring procedures.
9. The professional development of teachers and staff within schools should be supported through coordinated quality training pathways, ongoing support and peer learning networks.

## What the participants said

“I have a whole different outlook on teaching... I find it easier—that probably has an effect on the children. I enjoy teaching, so they enjoy it more.” **Primary School Teacher**

“If children behave better, feel happier and are more confident, they will be more predisposed to learning. Children are happier, teachers are happier attendance has improved, and our end of Key stage results are much improved.” **School Principal**

“It is really helping to prepare children for secondary school and has been a huge success.” **Primary School Teacher**

“You really need to do the training in order to fully appreciate the programme and if the energy is coming from the school principal, it would be more successful.” **School Principal**

## Evaluating the Work

Several programmes showed positive impact on children's learning environments as well as improvements in abilities. It will be important to measure whether these short-term benefits can be sustained over time.

Sometimes parents and practitioners perceived that the programme had positive effects on children's outcomes that were not always found by the evaluations. This highlights the importance of comparisons with children not taking part in a programme to show its true impact, as well as ensuring that the right outcomes are being meaningfully measured.

The local learning also showed the importance of undertaking outcomes evaluations on programmes that have had a chance to 'bed-down' and become established. Some organisations used the learning from the evaluations to further improve the delivery of the programmes (such as changing the frequency of sessions, refining the training for practitioners and focusing programme content).

Working with teachers and early years professionals to develop skills can improve outcomes for the first group of children who experience the changes. Many teachers taking part in the programmes reported that they planned to continue using the new methods with the next year of children. This may yield a greater return on the initial investment.

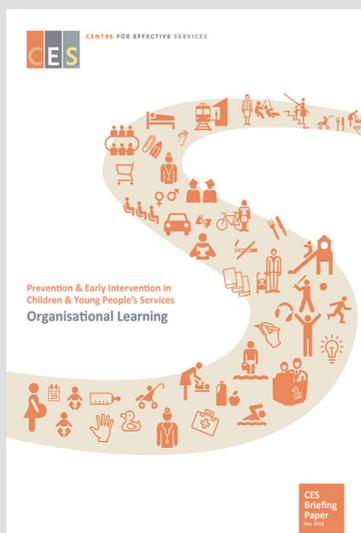
Studies should incorporate a cost-effective element, including the true costs for setting up and delivering the service (such as training, resources and the costs of ongoing delivery). Collecting information about possible cost-benefits over time may also be useful for interventions delivered in an education setting where the initial costs for delivery may be incurred by the Department of Education, but the long term cost savings accrued by another Department such as those responsible for Employment or Justice.

10. Programmes should clearly specify the outcomes they expect to change and when these changes will occur. Evaluations should assess these at the appropriate times using meaningful measures
11. Primary schools may need support to shoulder the full costs of interventions given that in purely economic terms the costs may outweigh the immediate economic benefits. There may need to be targeted top-up funding from other Departments.

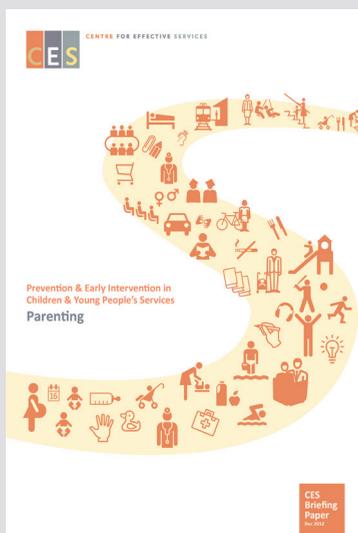
## Further information on the Learning from this Initiative

For more than a decade, The Atlantic Philanthropies, sometimes in conjunction with Government and other organisations, has invested over €96m in agencies and community groups running 52 prevention and early intervention programmes throughout the island of Ireland. A condition of funding required the organisations to rigorously evaluate the effectiveness of their work. This is the first in a series of reports on children's learning and subsequent reports will be issued as more evaluations are completed between now and 2015.

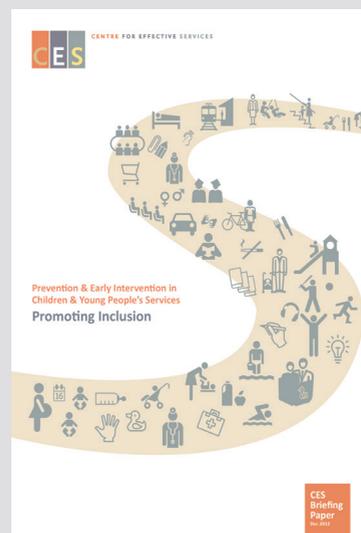
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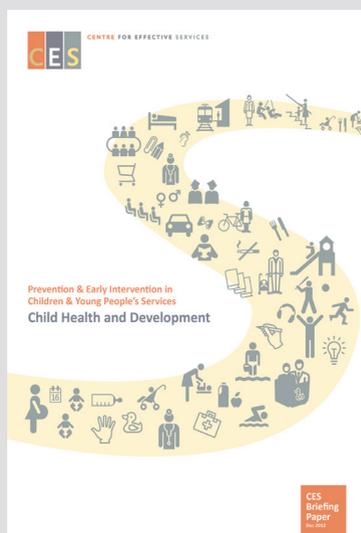
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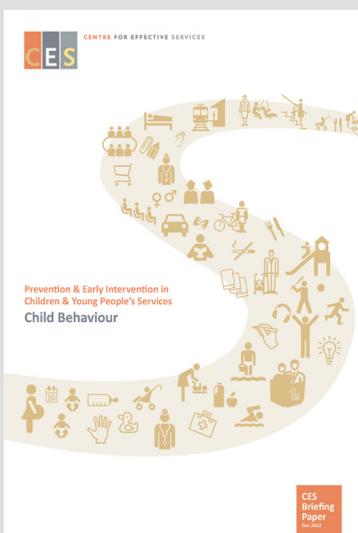
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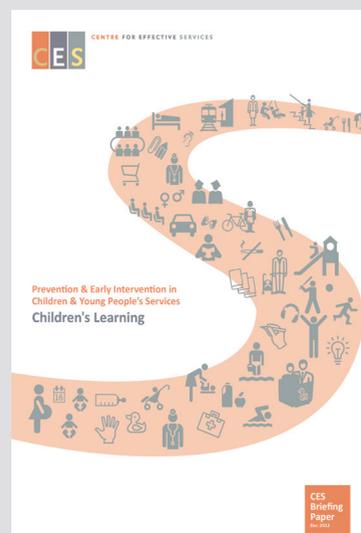
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Children's Learning

For more information contact  
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To download the full report Prevention & Early Intervention in Children & Young People's Services: Children's Learning  
visit [www.effectiveservices.org/prevention/learning](http://www.effectiveservices.org/prevention/learning)

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# Summary of evaluations from this Initiative so far

