

Supplementary Evaluation Report

Just Play Programme

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Executive Summary

The programme takes an innovative approach to early intervention aiming to break the cycle of offending within families.

The project has demonstrated the ability to engage with vulnerable families who face complex challenges. Its ability to engage fathers has been particularly significant.

The key strengths of the project are its flexibility, its ability to engage families and its exclusive focus on families with a history of crime or anti-social behaviour.

The key challenge facing the project is balancing the evaluation needs of the project with the delivery of support to families to ensure that the project can fully demonstrate its impact over both the short and medium term.

Introduction

This report sets out the results of a supplementary evaluation of the Just Play Programme run by Angus Council and Tayside Police (now Police Scotland). The project is based in Arbroath where it has delivered activities since March 2012. It now also delivers activities in Forfar, Brechin, Kirriemuir and Montrose.

Just Play is funded by the Cashback for Communities programme. Cashback for Communities uses the proceeds of crime, recovered through court proceedings, to fund a range of programmes primarily focused on activities for young people at risk of turning to crime and anti-social behaviour. Just Play is unusual in that it is one of only two projects in the programme with a focus on early years.

Methodology

This supplementary evaluation has involved a review of materials produced by the project and of the interim evaluation conducted by Angus Council Educational Psychology Service together with an interview with the Just Play Coordinator and a group interview with the three educational psychologists who have been involved in the evaluation. The case notes for the families involved in the Arbroath service have been reviewed to obtain statistical information and to identify evidence of the impact of the project. A sample of these has been mapped against the main project outcomes. A list of materials reviewed is enclosed at Annex A.

This report focuses on the delivery of the service in Arbroath, as it is there that the project has been running the longest and where is most information available. The figures quoted were gathered in September 2013.

The Project

The Just Play project offers one-to-one, group and drop-in sessions to families with children under the age of three, whose parents have a history of offending behaviour or where there is criminal activity within the family.

The initial session can be held at the family's home or at the Just Play venue. This induction session allows families to find out more about the programme and to agree what involvement they will have. The project tries to ensure consent forms are signed by both parents. Typically families initially attend weekly or fortnightly one-to-one focus play sessions, and may then join group sessions, like the Dad's club or the summer programme, or may attend a drop in session. In Arbroath, drop-in sessions are held once a week, as is the Dad's club. Sessions are typically an hour to an hour and a half long, and integrate information about child development. Staff also model behaviour so that parents can learn different ways to play and interact with their children.

Most activities in Arbroath are held at the Just Play venue but one-to-one focus play sessions can sometimes be held in the family home, or at local parks and other community resources. The holiday programmes involve opportunities for families to visit different locations, including the local pond, police station, parks, and the community allotment. Older siblings are included in the holiday programme to provide an opportunity for family sessions and advice on play activities suitable for the whole family.

The Just Play venue offers a welcoming space for families with a large hall where there is space for children to run around as well as to take part in arts activities and play with water. At the front of the building is a comfortable area with seating and space for toys and play. The project has exclusive use of these facilities during the day.

The project incorporates awareness raising on health and child development issues into the sessions. The Connected Baby DVD is used to raise awareness of child development and how babies communicate. Video Interaction Guidance sessions are used to help parents with communication and interaction.

The project began taking referrals in March 2012 in Arbroath. Social workers and health visitors provide the bulk of the referrals, although there have been referrals from the education department and from mental health services as well as self-referrals. The project provides regular updates to referral agencies.

The project approach is very flexible with parents able to choose what activities they participate in. Parents choose the frequency of their sessions and whether to take part on one-to-one or group activities. Some families have also chosen to have a combined session with another family. If a parent is ill on the day of their session, they will be offered a session on a different day, or the worker may suggest holding a session at the family's home. The project encourages healthy eating and encourages families to try different foods. Families are also made aware of the range of family activities in the area (focusing on those that are free). The project offers additional support to meet particular needs, for example one mother who was concerned about her child's safety near roads was offered practical support in developing her child's awareness and road-crossing skills. Two families have been able to hold supervised contact sessions at the Just Play centre.

Overall, the project has 5 full-time and 2 part-time staff with staff covering staff holidays in other areas. 2 full-time staff and 2 volunteers run the Arbroath project. The volunteers help with the drop-in sessions.

There are 23 families registered in Arbroath, 8 in Forfar, 5 in Brechin, 6 in Kirriemuir and 3 in Montrose. All centres have drop in groups once a week usually for two to two and a half hours. There are also Dads' groups in Arbroath, Kirriemuir and Montrose, with 3 attending in Arbroath, 2 in Kirriemuir and 1 in Montrose.

A typical pattern for a family referred to the project involves an induction session, a series of weekly or fortnightly one-to-one sessions with the family lasting several months with the family becoming involved in group activities and latterly relying only on the drop-in service or Dads' group rather than one-to-one sessions. Families may remain with the service with the option to attend drop-in sessions until their child is three or sometimes four.

The Participants

Referrals to the project are restricted to families where there has been involvement in criminal behaviour. It is targeted at parents with children under the age of three. Many of the parents are young and in many of the families there is a history of domestic violence. Substance abuse is also common and some parents experience physical or mental illness.

Some families find it difficult to engage with the service and may not take up the referral or attend only the induction or one or two sessions. Of the 17 referrals in Arbroath whose cases are now closed, four families did not engage at all, four only attended one session, eight attended two to seven sessions and one attended 59 sessions. Of the short-term participants (two to seven sessions), two engaged but moved away from the area and one started nursery. Twenty-

five families are currently active in Arbroath and there is a steady stream of new referrals.

Of the twenty-five families currently involved in Arbroath, some have recently been referred whereas others have been involved with the service for up to 18 months. Four of the families have not yet had any meaningful engagement with the project. Of the 21 families who have engaged with the service, in 13 of the families both parents have taken part in project activities. Sometimes, the two parents take part separately, but the ability to engage fathers is one of the striking features of the project. Extended family may also take part with three families having a grandmother involved and one where an aunt is involved.

Families may be referred pre-birth and a number are referred when their child is a baby. In other cases, the family is referred when the child is a toddler and perhaps displays challenging behaviour.

Project evaluation

Self evaluation

The project uses a range of evaluation tools, some developed for the project, others drawn from tools that are currently used in the local authority. A detailed logic model sets out the anticipated short, medium and long-term outcomes. The evaluation action plan matches each of the short-term outcomes to two or three indicators and identifies how information will be gathered. The key evaluation tools are pre- and post-intervention questionnaires and Wellbeing Webs. The pre-intervention questionnaires are administered during the first two or three sessions along with the initial Wellbeing Web. A second Wellbeing Web is administered with the family after about four months and a third one after the one-to-one sessions have come to an end. There have sometimes been difficulties administering these tools as they have proven to be time consuming. The project has occasionally been able to take advantage of recently conducted Wellbeing Webs from other agencies instead of the initial web to save duplication.

The project has also conducted a survey of Just Play partners and practitioners. 43 professionals have responded to the survey about perceptions of the project and the results have been summarised using charts.

The project has a comment book for parents to use and some parents have also used journals to track their experience. The project has also collected video feedback using VOXUR.

Project staff members record each of their contacts with the family or other professionals in case notes held in Microsoft Excel. For each family, this sets out

the date of each contact and a description of the activity that took place together with some observations.

Interim evaluation report

The Educational Psychology Service at Angus Council completed an interim evaluation report in May 2013. The report pulls together some of the key research that informs the project by showing the importance of play to early child development, and the key role of parents in playing with their young children. The report also analyses the data available from the five families who had completed post-intervention questionnaires by that point and draws on the Wellbeing Webs that those families completed.

The data drawn from the questionnaires does not demonstrate a significant change in the pre- and post- responses and illustrates some of the difficulties of using parental self-evaluation of skills and knowledge as it can be very difficult for parents at the start of a programme to give themselves a low rating on what is effectively a judgment on their parenting skills. This is particularly an issue for this group of parents, many of whom have social work involvement, some of whom have involvement with the children's hearings system and some of whom have had other children taken into care.

The data from the Wellbeing Web also has limitations. Given that the tool is being used for children who are under three, it is based on parental perception rather than input from the child and so the scaling has some of the same limitations as the questionnaires. For this age group, it is perhaps more useful as a tool to prompt discussion about areas that the parents wish to focus on, and it has been successful in this regard. The team has also been able to draw on some of the parental comments to enhance case studies.

The team propose to conduct a final evaluation after the end of the pilot phase of the project in March 2014 when all the data on participants is available. They are also analysing the case notes to try to map them against project outcomes, and have identified that there are some issues about the different ways that the case notes are written up. As a result, a case note checklist has been developed to ensure consistency. This now captures key information about parent/child interaction, parental confidence and family engagement in the community.

This final report will provide richer data about the impact of the project and the Educational Psychology team plan to go over the case notes with project staff to ensure that the team are not applying their own interpretation to the information recorded. This will ensure that there is more detailed evidence of impact.

Recommendations

Some of the challenges and areas where the programme, and particularly the evaluation, might be developed are set out below.

Case notes

The Educational Psychology team has identified variations in information that is recorded in case notes. Standardisation would allow easier mapping to indicators and outcomes. The case notes would benefit from a standard form for entering dates of pre and post questionnaires and Wellbeing Webs, so that gaps can easily be identified. If columns were added for each key indicator for which the case notes contribute evidence, staff could add information as they went along that they considered to demonstrate progress. This would also allow a quick review to check where families are not making the progress expected.

Capturing information against indicators like this would also allow that information to be mapped both against project outcome and against the broader Cashback programme outcomes.

Triangulation of data

It would be helpful to conduct a further survey of those who have referred clients focused on what difference they have seen in the specific families they have referred. This may help identify more significant changes than those captured in the questionnaire and Wellbeing Web data.

It would also be useful to capture information from the police about any changes they have noticed in the families involved.

Case studies

The case studies are useful to illustrate the different needs of different families as well as illustrating the different backgrounds and complexities of the families taking part in the project. It would be worth developing further case studies and focusing as much as possible on what has been achieved and what changes the family has experienced to date rather than on future plans, which may be aspirational. It would also be useful to carry out a follow up on the families in the existing case studies to explore whether they have managed to sustain the changes they achieved in the programme.

Referral routes

The referral routes in Arbroath appear to be strong and the project is at capacity but there is work to be done to develop the referral routes in other areas, particularly in Montrose. There is some very positive work building partnerships with other voluntary organisations and with the prisons that have the potential to identify those who are most likely to benefit from the project.

Collecting child focused information

The existing evaluation focuses very much on the parents, but it may be possible to capture more striking changes in the children, particularly where they are

behind in their developmental milestones when they join the programme. It would be worth considering whether there is a way to capture whether they are meeting their expected developmental milestones by the time they finish working with the project. It might be useful to liaise with the Early Years Collaborative in Angus to find out what data they are collecting on children as there is a focus on development milestones in two out of three of their stretch aims. Collecting the same data would help with benchmarking against other projects.

There is potential to use the case notes to capture specific information about changes in the children's behaviour in a systematic way, and the development of the case note checklist assists with this.

Collection of long term data

The project seeks to make long-term changes and it would therefore be useful to be able track data over the longer term through schools. Given the Council's role in the project and the key role of the educational psychology team, it would be useful to explore how this might be done.

Achievement of Outcomes

The programme has identified six key outcomes from the Cashback logic model:

- Increased participation in positive activity.
- Increased participation by difficult to engage and equalities groups.
- Increased involvement in structured pro-social and healthy activities.
- Greater confidence and self esteem among participants
- Participants demonstrate new skills and positive changes in behaviour
- Participants develop positive peer networks and relationships.

The extent to which there is evidence to demonstrate progress towards these outcomes is set out below.

Increased participation in positive activity

By engaging with the project, families increase their participation in positive activity. The project has collected positive comments in the comments book and in journals from parents that demonstrate increased participation in a wide range of activities, many of which are new to the families. Feedback from parents found in the journals and in the case notes also indicate that this participation in play and other activities changes behaviour in the home.

Most families increase their participation in the project from the one-to-one focus play sessions. Many become involved in the group activities through the

holiday programmes, drop-in sessions and organised groups. In doing so they engage with other community facilities including the college, the library and parks. As a result of these activities, families build links with other community resources.

There is strong evidence in the case notes of parents developing greater confidence in playing with their children, understanding the benefit of this and spending more time playing with their children at home.

Increased participation by difficult to engage and equalities groups.

The project specifically targets difficult to engage groups. The referral information collected by the project highlights the range of challenges facing the families who are referred. The project has been successful working with families where there is domestic violence, including during periods in which the family circumstances have changed with one of the parents moving out of the house. The case notes demonstrate the extent to which the project has been successful in maintaining engagement with families as they go through challenging events. Even where families are not able to engage with the project for a period of time due to other events, they often later reengage with the project.

The project has been very successful in engaging fathers. Of the active cases in Arbroath in late 2013 where the father was involved in the children's lives, he had some involvement with the project in all but one case. It is common for fathers to be involved in the project even where the parents are estranged, and in two cases fathers choose to use the project for supervised contact with their children. Having skilled male staff to run fathers' groups has contributed to the ability to engage fathers. Feedback from fathers indicate that they value this.

One Lithuanian family has accessed the project and the project has been able to overcome language difficulties to ensure they can engage.

Increased involvement in structured pro-social and healthy activities.

Increased involvement is demonstrated both by the families' increased engagement in project activities, such as the holiday programmes and groups, and by new engagement in other activities. Example of success include a mother choosing to join a cooking group at a local college and children joining mainstream services, such as playgroups and nurseries.

Greater confidence and self esteem among participants

Many of the participants who initially come to focus play sessions on a one-to-one basis develop the confidence to attend groups. A number demonstrate increased confidence in talking to the staff and to other parents. Some parents rarely leave the house when they join the project and through their participation become more confident going out in the community.

Participants demonstrate new skills and positive changes in behaviour

Most participants demonstrate changes in the way they play with their children. There is also evidence of parents increased reading to their children. There is extensive evidence of new skills being used at home, including play, reading, singing and arts and crafts.

The case notes contain evidence of families being more comfortable with showing physical affection such as hugs. Parents also demonstrate increased awareness of their child's safety and there are a number of examples of families where parents demonstrate significant improvements in their ability to respond to their child's challenging behaviour.

Participants develop positive peer networks and relationships.

Many participants arrive at the project feeling isolated. Involvement in groups allows them to build peer relationships and many continue to attend these group activities after their one-to-one sessions end. There is evidence in the case notes that families enjoy sharing their successes with staff and other group members.

The holiday programmes allow families to take part in activities as a whole family and has helped families build relationships with other families.

Conclusion

The project is demonstrating significant progress against each of the six key outcomes.

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Annex A

List of materials reviewed

Case notes for Arbroath project up to September 2013.
Interim evaluation report.
Initial research proposal.
Family comments book from Arbroath project.
Sample of parents' journals.
Leaflets produced for the project.
Evaluation Action Plan.
Summary of partner and practitioner evaluation.