Strengthening communities: delivering family and learning support services in partnership with schools.

'I didn’t realise that talking to your child about anything and everything helps them learn. It would do your kids so much good if you just did a running commentary on life!'

(Parent)
No.10
Policy and practice briefing

Tullycarnet Family Project

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Introduction

Education is one of the most important factors in a child’s development, promoting well-being, providing life-skills, fostering citizenship and preparing for future employment. As such, education can combat future unemployment and social disadvantage.

The ‘Extended Schools’ concept is outlined as a significant means in which to achieve the framework of outcomes in the ‘Ten Year Strategy for Children and Young People in Northern Ireland’ (OFMDFM, 2006). It complements other strategies and initiatives, including:

- Anti-Poverty and Social Inclusion Strategy
- Early Years Strategy
- Neighbourhood Renewal Strategy
- Sure Start.

Education extends beyond academic learning and the formal classroom setting. In order to develop their full potential, children need opportunities for play-based learning, a variety of extra-curricular activities and positive engagement with parents, family members, friends and communities. A child’s education begins when it is born, with parents being the most influential educators. The social and emotional skills learned between birth and the age of five-years affects subsequent performance in both the school and workplace (Heckman & Masterov, 2004).

Not everyone with children is naturally confident in their role as a parent and educator, perhaps lacking the necessary life skills to parent their children effectively. This may be compounded by inter-personal problems, a poor experience of education, low self-esteem, poor mental health and poverty.

Full-service extended schools can broaden children’s educational opportunities and improve family life, breaking cycles of emotional disadvantage, deprivation and under-achievement.

About this briefing

The Extended Schools agenda has been developed and established in England and Wales. However, in Northern Ireland, funding cuts for the Extended Schools programme in 2008 have significantly limited the potential of these services to positively impact on disadvantaged communities.

Barnardo’s Northern Ireland has considerable experience of delivering preventative and support services in schools in deprived areas. This briefing describes how Barnardo’s extended school services can improve educational attainment, family relationships and community cohesion, with the central focus being on the Tullycarnet Family Project in east Belfast. It highlights how extended schools can work effectively beyond the minimal action of lengthening the school day with traditional-style breakfast and after-school clubs.

What is a full-service extended school?

A full-service extended school works in partnership with communities and other agencies to provide services and activities inside and outside traditional school hours to help meet the needs and aspirations of its pupils, their families and the wider community. There is no single model of an extended school, however, it is possible to identify a shared understanding of it as a school which:

- views working with its pupils, families and community as essential in raising the standard of pupils’ achievement
- builds partnerships with neighbouring schools, the further education sector and other organisations
- strengthens families and communities through opportunities for lifelong learning and personal development
- uses its accommodation flexibly for the good of learners and the community.

The services offered can be any which help children reach their potential and improve their life chances, including:
high quality childcare available 8am-6pm all year round
- a variety of learning and leisure activities such as homework clubs, study support, breakfast/after-school clubs, adult and peer mentoring and youth clubs
- parent support
- targeted specialist health and other support services
- family and community access to adult learning.

What are the benefits?

There is evidence that the first set of extended schools in England targeted disadvantaged children leading to improvements in their self-esteem, motivation, behaviour, attendance, engagement in learning and educational attainment (Cummings, C et al 2005; 2006; Chamberlain, T et al 2006; Obsted, 2006). They narrowed the achievement gap for the most disadvantaged children and in some cases even eliminated it. There was also a reduction in exclusion rates and teachers were more able to focus on teaching and learning. GCSE and Key Stage 2 results in the first wave of full-service extended schools improved at twice the national average rate between 2005-2006. Extended schools can also lead to improved mental and physical health, as well as stronger community relations and greater access by children and families to a range of health and social services.

Policy context

England

‘Extended Schools Prospectus’ 2005 (DCSF) and follow-up document ‘Building on Experience’ 2007 links extended schools provisions to ‘The Every Child Matters’ agenda in regards to raising standards and ensuring that children are healthy, stay safe, enjoy and achieve, make a positive contribution and achieve economic well-being. By 2010 the government wants to see all primary schools guarantee childcare provision between 8am and 6pm all year and also work with a range of local agencies to help children and families access extended services. It also wants all secondary schools, including special schools, to become ‘full-service’ extended schools, of which almost half are well on their way to doing so. In partnership with voluntary, private and independent providers, there are currently over 5,000 schools offering the full range of services. Funding will be increased over the next three years to support the co-ordination and sustainability of extended services, and to enable schools to offer at least two hours of free extended activities a week to the most disadvantaged children.

Northern Ireland

There are 110,000 children in Northern Ireland living in relative income poverty (Households Below Average Income, 2005/06). The negative impacts of poverty on educational attainment and health have been well documented (Magadi & Middleton, 2007; McLaughlin & Monteith, 2006). There is a strong correlation between social disadvantage and educational outcomes. For example, as little as 23 per cent of pupils from the most deprived areas achieve five or more GCSEs at A*- C, compared to 64 per cent across Northern Ireland (OFMDFM Committee, 2008).

The Project

Funding was initially made available to over one-third of all schools in Northern Ireland, aimed mainly at those whose pupils are disadvantaged, marginalised or with the most limited access to current services. However, services have not since been mainstreamed and funding has been cut in 2008, resulting in extended schools budgets being completely removed or on average cut by fifty per cent across Education and Library Boards, and in one instance by as much as two-thirds.

Tullycarnet Family Project

The Family Project is based in Tullycarnet Primary School in the Tullycarnet housing estate on the outskirts of east Belfast. With a population in the region of 2,500, of which one quarter is under 16 years old, the area experiences high levels of social and educational disadvantage. Compared with the Northern Ireland average of 64 per cent, only 31 per cent of pupils who live here leave school with 5 or more GCSE’s at Grade C and above, with only 28 per cent continuing on to further education and as little as 8 per cent into higher education. (Northern Ireland Multiple Deprivation Measure, 2005).

The Project was set up to intervene early in helping pre-school children be better prepared for school and to support parents to be more actively involved in their children’s education. While the initial intention of the school was that the project should be strongly educational in its focus, it became apparent that the work also needed to acknowledge and respond to parent’s needs for personal development, family support and parenting skills training. The Project has evolved to provide appropriate services that effectively address these issues and meet the needs of the wider community.
Barnardo’s Northern Ireland has now worked in partnership with the school for more than 10 years. The Barnardo’s Anti-Poverty Programme was influential in the foundation of the Family Project and the ongoing work is still very much grounded in its principles of participation, partnership, multi-dimensionality and with a child-focused approach.

**Funding and accommodation**

Initially located in two classrooms, the Family Project has since expanded into a whole wing of the school and is open every day during and after school hours. It shares access with the school to the gym, outdoor play areas, computer suite, library and a cookery room. In addition to local women who work and volunteer at the Project, there are eight part-time members of staff employed across the various services.

The Family Project receives funding from:

- Barnardo’s Northern Ireland
- Big Lottery Fund
- East Belfast Sure Start
- Healthy Tullycarnet Partnership
- Department of Education Extended Schools Fund.

Funding cuts have resulted in a 50% reduction in funding to the Family Project through the **Extended Schools Fund in 2008. Unless this shortfall can be recovered elsewhere, the potential impact on the Project, and therefore the local community, is the loss of staff providing invaluable family support services.**

**Tullycarnet Family Project Services**

Tullycarnet Family Project works with the school, parents, children and a range of statutory, voluntary and community agencies towards the following outcomes:

- Parents and children’s sense of wellbeing will improve
- Children will be better prepared for school and will achieve in school
- Parents will be more confident in their role as parents and educators
- Parents and children’s participation in school and community life will increase.

These are achieved through the following range of services:

**Family Support**

**Pre-school family support:**
Aware that a number of parents in the community have particular experience of the impact of poverty, domestic violence or depression, but are less likely to access any support services, the project was extended to offer home-based visits. The outreach programme works to enhance the personal development of isolated and vulnerable parents, improve their parenting skills and encourage greater participation in the community.

Parents of pre-school children are referred to the service by Health Visitors or GPs’ and a Family Support Worker visits them at home to discuss with parents what support is required. Parenting advice can be provided on issues such as behaviour management, establishing sleep patterns and weaning, or parents can be signposted to other services such as counselling.

Children can have sessions in Bubbles créche to provide respite for parents. Home-based play sessions help encourage parents to engage in play and promote children’s learning. Staff bring a range of games, toys and learning activities and parents can borrow toys and books to continue learning through play at home.

**School-based family support:**
Many primary age children referred to this service by school are having a negative educational experience for a variety of different reasons. They generally display a range of challenging needs and behaviours at home and/or at school and support is provided to them and their families.

**Case Study – Sandra and Ben**

Sandra is a young mum with a 2-year-old toddler, Ben. Her Health Visitor had concerns about Sandra’s ability to manage her son and referred her to the Family Project. Sandra recognised that she felt very little affection for her son as his behaviour was so difficult to manage. A Family Support Worker discussed the ways in which Sandra felt she was managing well, to enable her to build on these strengths and believe in her capacity to parent effectively. She received respite when Ben was given two sessions per week in the créche. During home play sessions, the Family Support Worker showed Sandra the types of play appropriate for Ben’s age. Sandra was unaware that Ben loved to scribble and paint. They had never completed jigsaws together or built with construction blocks, all of which Ben thoroughly enjoyed. Sandra began to understand the value of books and time spent together talking about things they had seen or done. On a visit to the swimming pool, Sandra said that for the first time she felt she could say she loved Ben.
**Case Study – Davey**

Davey is an ex-prisoner and was keen to reconnect with his two daughters aged 7 and 10. He heard about the ‘Active Dads’ group at the Family Project from one of his friends and thought this would be a good opportunity to have some fun time with them. The other dads made him feel very welcome and Davey was able to make good friendships with some of the other men in the group. Davey said after a trip to ten-pin bowling ‘It’s good to give their mum a break and the girls are able to have some time with me instead’. ‘Active Dads’ has given him and his daughters many new opportunities and the chance to do things together. Influenced by the positive experiences he has had with them through this group, Davey has also bought games to play with the girls at home, something he had never done before.

Using a solution-focused approach, support plans are developed and implemented with the family and progress made is assessed after interventions are offered. The range of support available includes individual therapeutic work with children at school, with a focus on personal and social development; a behaviour management programme; a free place at after school club; support with school/homework; parenting classes; and parent support groups.

‘Active Dads’: Forty men are registered with this group and on average fifteen male carers come along to the monthly session in the evening with their primary school-aged children. Dads and children participate in literacy projects, for example, visiting a local football club and writing match reports together. They also take part in a broad range of activities including bowling, swimming and science and wildlife workshops.

‘I really enjoyed going out with my boys on my own with ‘Active Dads’, I wouldn’t normally do that but the Family Worker encouraged me to go for it’ – (Father).

- **Learning Support**

  - **Preparation for school:** The Family Project offers a range of activities to help children entering Primary One get the best start to their school life, including a six-week course or information sessions for parents and activity packs for children.

  - **Homework and after-school groups:** Children in P4-7 complete homework and engage in literacy and numeracy activities. They also learn and have fun with structured activities such as cooking, sports, games, crafts and drama. Parents can attend the P1-3 after-school group to take part in activities and games with the children.

    - ‘The star chart we made in club really helped with their behaviour at home’ – (Mum, P1-3 after-school group).

    - ‘Having observed the homework club, I have seen positive, responsible and well-motivated attitudes to homeworks’ – (Teacher).

  - **Transfer club:** The aim of this group is to support P6 children in preparing for the transfer test.

    - **Transition support:** Work is carried out with P7 pupils and their families to prepare for the transition between primary and post-primary school education.

  - **Confidence club:** Children are referred by the school to this club which takes place as part of the after-schools programmes. It promotes positive self-image, develops emotional literacy and equips children with social skills.

- **Links Women’s Group**

  Links Women’s Group grew out of a small group of women meeting in the Family Project in 1996 and now operates on an independent basis. They provide a broad range of personal development courses and vocational training in order to improve the quality of life for women and children in the Tullycarnet area.

- **Bubbles Creche**

  While children under five-years attend the creche during weekday mornings, many parents attend a variety of vocational courses with the view to gaining a qualification, learning new skills and enhancing employment prospects. The creche is also available for parents who are receiving family support services. The creche follows the High/Scope approach which is a valuable tool in helping combat poverty and promoting social inclusion in the most disadvantaged communities.

- **Health and Well-being**

  The Family Project is part of an area-wide partnership to improve health and well-being. It achieves positive health outcomes through various activities including health information sessions, healthy eating and emotional wellbeing programmes.

    - **‘Booster’ club:** This twelve-week programme aims to help children have a more positive experience of school. It works simultaneously with children, parents and teachers to build children’s confidence and improve behaviour.

- **High/Scope**

  The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study published its research spanning 40 years in which the measured benefits of the programme are highly significant (Schweinhart et al, 2005). This long term study shows the effects of a high quality early years care and education programme with three and four-year-old children and their parents on low income. At age forty, adults who had participated in the High/Scope...
programme were shown to have higher earnings, be more likely to stay in employment, have higher academic achievement and to have committed fewer crimes.

A model of good practice

As demonstrated in Tullycarnet Family Project, a strategic, joined-up approach at a local level, including the availability of school premises has many benefits for schools and members of the community. Services are designed based on research and methods of good practice, and evolve and adapt to meet the needs of users. The result is the delivery of high quality services and positive outcomes for children and families in terms of educational attainment, parenting, health and well-being.

Key outcomes:

- Teachers report that children attending after-school homework and learning groups produce homework to a higher standard.
- Children have increased emotional stability and confidence in speaking out in class.
- Improvement in pupil attendance, attitudes and behaviour in school.
- Children are better prepared for Primary One and for the transition to post-primary education.
- Significant increase in parental participation in the school.
- Improved protection for vulnerable children and families at risk.
- Improved parenting skills and increased positive engagement between parents and children.
- Raised self-esteem for parents and children.
- Reduced isolation and greater participation of adults in community life.
- Increased numbers of women returning to employment and achieving qualifications.

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

- Department of Education should increase and mainstream funding for the Extended Schools programme.
- Departments for Education and Health and Social Services should develop extended schools programmes and community based family support on an outreach basis to help the most vulnerable and isolated families.
- The extended schools agenda should be expanded to include access to high-quality, early years programmes and pre-school provision.
- Department of Education should enable school estates to be fully utilised inside and outside school hours including evenings, weekends and holidays.
- Department of Employment and Learning must ensure workforce reform is integrated into extended services to enable the recruitment, training and development of appropriate professional staff.
- Schools and statutory services should work with the voluntary and community sector to develop early intervention programmes for children and young people with behavioural, emotional and health needs who are at risk of poor outcomes.
- Department of Health and Social Services should ensure that family support services are located and delivered in conjunction with communities and with an anti-poverty approach.
- Departments for Health and Social Services, Education and Employment and Learning must urgently address the current lack of childcare places and provide good quality childcare to enable parents, especially lone parents, to return to work.

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Sure Start www.surestart.gov.uk/aboutsurestart/help/contacts/northernireland/

August 2008

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Barnardo’s Registered Charity Nos. 216250 and SC037605

112727/10