

Evaluation of wRaparound in Ireland for Children and families



Supporting parents in the earliest years

First follow-up report

Prepared by the ENRICH Research Programme Team
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Key Messages

Early infancy is important

Early infancy is a time of crucial development. The parent-infant relationship at this time is key. Sensitive, supportive and stimulating parenting is an important protective factor in child development and helps to foster positive social, emotional and psychological development and well-being

Supports for parents are a public health priority

Parents' mental health is important. Parents who are parenting under pressure may use more harsh parenting techniques. On the other hand, parents who are confident in their parenting role tend to experience easier transitions to parenthood, positive mental health and greater use of more positive parenting practices.

Group-based early parenting supports can help

Research exploring the effectiveness of a group-based early parenting programme in improving parent outcomes was conducted in Irish, urban, community settings. Parents who attended the Parent and Baby/Up to 2 programme reported greater confidence in their parenting abilities. There was also a positive effect of the programme on the home environment, particularly regular reading in the home.



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Background

Introduction

The ENRICH (Evaluation of wRaparound in Ireland for CHildren and families) research programme is a 5-year multi-component research programme designed to help promote child health and family wellbeing through the development, implementation and evaluation of wraparound-inspired models of service delivery.

A key aim of this research programme is to identify how best we can address the health and social care needs of young families. This involves a long-term evaluation of the effectiveness of community-based early parenting supports, including a complex, group-based, wraparound-inspired intervention (the Parent and Baby/up to 2 programme). The Parent and Baby/Up to 2 programme offers a range of services and supports for parents and their infants from birth to two years of age. These services can include the Incredible Years Parent and Baby and Toddler Programmes, Baby Massage, First Aid, Play and Weaning supports. This programme was developed by Archways in collaboration with Public Health Nursing (PHN) and community-based services and is currently being rolled out in parts of Clondalkin in Dublin West and Drogheda and Dundalk, Co. Louth.

Parenting in the earliest years

The birth of a child can represent a period of particular vulnerability for the family system as a whole and can be associated with increased risk of stress, anxiety and depression. Positive experiences of parenting in early infancy may help to bolster parental self-confidence and encourage the acquisition of more effective parenting skills, whilst also protecting against depressive symptoms, stress and anxiety. Positive parental adjustment during this vulnerable period can also contribute to the development of positive parent-child relationships, thereby providing a sound basis for healthy child behavioural and socioemotional development into the future (Nelson, Kushlev & Lyubomirsky, 2014).

The importance of early parenting supports

There has been growing commitment in Ireland to investing in high-quality child and family services (DCYA, 2013). Evidence indicates that high quality early parenting interventions, which can include home-visiting, group-based or centre-based provisions, can help to improve parent and child development outcomes. Evidence also suggests that early intervention can contribute to better outcomes later in life including higher educational achievement, better occupational status, reduced reliance on welfare and better mental and physical health outcomes (Campbell et al., 2014). Early intervention and prevention programmes have also been found to be more cost effective than later interventions, helping to generate substantial social and economic benefits to wider society (Heckman et al., 2010).

Examining the benefits of early parenting supports

Study aims and objectives

The early experiences of new parents and their infants are crucial to child developmental outcomes. In the ENRICH research programme we explored some of the key issues which are important to parents during early infancy including: parent and infant health and wellbeing, as well as the support available to parents and how these impact on the experiences of parenting, parents perceptions of the parenting role and their infant's development.



The specific aims of the study are to:

- Inform the development and testing of a wraparound-inspired programme, the Parent and Baby/Up to 2 programme
- Assess the extent to which the Parent and Baby/Up to 2 programme leads to positive outcomes for parents and infants

Study design

This research involved a naturalistic, controlled study design within which we evaluated the effectiveness of the Parent and Baby/Up to 2 programme using 'services as usual' as a benchmark for comparison.

Two groups of parents were recruited to the study.

Group 1: Parents who received the Parent and Baby/Up to 2 programme .

The Parent and Baby/Up to 2 programme involves a range of group-based supports for parents and their infants from births to 2 years of age (Box 1).

The programme aims to build parenting knowledge and skills through a combination of group-discussions, videos, role play and practical demonstrations and modelling.

Group 2: Parents who received services as usual.

Usual services involve: a home visit from a PHN after birth; a 2-week and 6-week check-up with a GP/hospital service; and regular developmental check-ups with a PHN (at 3, 7 and 24 months) and free vaccinations. GP care for children under the age of 6 is also free in the Republic of Ireland.

All parents who took part in the study were free to take part in any additional available community-based services and supports, such as breastfeeding support groups/services or mother and baby/toddler groups.



Conducting the study

Participants were recruited through public health nursing services. Data was collected from parents at baseline, when infants were aged approximately 2 months, and at follow-up, when infants were approximately 8 months old. At follow-up, parents in the Parent and Baby/Up to 2 group had received the first set of programme supports (15 sessions). Additional supports will also be offered to these parents at a later time point. Parents in the usual services group were recruited from locations or at times where the Parent and Baby/Up to 2 programme is not currently available.

Data collection

- A range of assessments was used to explore a number of important issues for parents and infants in the earliest years. These are described in brief below:
- The background of families their health and wellbeing were assessed using a *Profile Questionnaire* (PQ)
 - Parents' belief in their abilities as parents and their confidence in the parenting role were examined using the *Parenting Sense of Competence Scale* (PSOC)
 - Maternal depressive symptoms were assessed using the *Patient Health Questionnaire-9* (PHQ-9)
 - Perceptions of the parent-infant bond was examined using a subscale of the *Maternal Postnatal Attachment Scale* (MPAS)
 - A snapshot of the parent's understanding of their child's temperament and their developmental progress was gathered using the *Infant Characteristics Questionnaire* (ICQ) and the *Ages and Stages Questionnaires* (ASQ)
 - The *Home Observation for Measurement of the Environment* (HOME) was used to observe cognitive stimulation and emotional support in the home using a range of open-ended questions and observations.

Box 1: The Parent and Baby/Up to 2 programme

Services and supports offered to parent and infants as part of the Parent and Baby/Up to 2 programme include:

- The Incredible Years Parent and Baby and Toddler Programmes;
- Baby Massage;
- Paediatric First Aid,
- Play and Talk supports; and
- Weaning/healthy eating workshops.

The programme is delivered in health clinics or community centres and is facilitated by PHNs, family support workers or other community-based practitioners in a coordinated manner.

The programme aims to build parenting knowledge and skills through a combination of:

- group-discussions
- videos
- role play
- practical demonstrations
- and modelling.

Improvements in parent-infant relationships are targeted through the promotion of sensitive, responsive parenting and parents are encouraged to use play and communication techniques to promote positive infant wellbeing.

This programme was developed by Archways in collaboration with Public Health Nursing and community-based services and is currently being rolled out in parts of Clondalkin in Dublin West and Drogheda and Dundalk, Co. Louth.

The implementation of the programme is currently funded through the Area-based Childhood (ABC) scheme.

Results

Participant characteristics

In total, 190 mothers and their infants were recruited to the study: 106 parents who received the Parent and Baby/Up to 2 programme; and 84 who received services as usual. At follow-up, 12 parents dropped out of the study. The characteristics of parents who took part are shown in *Table 1*.

Table 1: Participant characteristics (Figures are numbers (%) unless otherwise stated)

	Parent and Baby/ Up to 2 programme group	Services as Usual group
Lone parent	23 (24)	16 (20)
Ethnic minority	17 (18)	18 (22)
First-time mother	67 (70)	31 (39)
Mean age of mother (SD)	31.6 (6)	31.9 (5)
Mean age of infant in months (SD)	1.8 (1)	2.1 (1)
No (%) of boys	53 (55)	39 (48)
Unemployed	20 (21)	15 (19)
Low income	33 (35)	24 (30)

Parents who received the Parent and Baby/Up to 2 programme were significantly more likely to be first time mothers.

Infants in the services as usual group were, on average, older than those who were in the Parent and Baby/Up to 2 programme group.

Key findings

At baseline and at follow-up, parents generally reported good health for themselves and their infants, and most were coping well in the transition to parenthood, reporting high levels of parenting confidence, low levels of depression and positive parent-infant relationships.

Change over time

- Between baseline and follow-up, parents who received the Parent and Baby/Up to 2 programme showed significant gains on measures of parenting confidence, perceived quality of attachment, and on observed cognitive stimulation in the home. Within this group of parents, the numbers who reported regularly reading to their infants (>3 per week) increased significantly from 29% at baseline to 65% at follow-up (Figure 1).
- Parents who received services as usual also demonstrated significant increases in cognitive stimulation in the home, as well as emotional support.
- Parent-reported infant scores in the area of communication, fine-motor skills, problem solving and personal-social development showed improvement between baseline and follow-up for both groups.
- Gross-motor development scores decreased over time for both groups.



Results

Differences between the groups

Statistical analyses were conducted to examine if there were any significant differences at follow-up between those who were in the Parent and Baby/Up to 2 group (n=97) and those who were in the services as usual group (n=81), controlling for important factors like baseline scores, maternal parity and infant age.

- There were no significant differences at follow-up between the two groups on measures of parenting attitudes, parent wellbeing or the home environment, although children in the services as usual group were faring better on parent-reported measures of development. This may be due to infants in the service as usual group being slightly older than those in the Parent and Baby/Up to 2 group.

Further analyses involving a comparison of a subgroup of parents who attended at least 7 sessions of the Parent and Baby/Up to 2 programme (n=67) to parents who received services as usual, but who did not receive any other supports such as baby massage (n=58), were also conducted.

- Statistically significant differences in favour of those who received the Parent and Baby/Up to 2 programme were found on measures of parenting sense of competence (Figure 2).
- There was also a positive effect of the Parent and Baby/Up to 2 programme on emotional support and cognitive stimulation in the home (Figure 3).
- There were no differences between the two sub-groups on measures of child temperament or development.

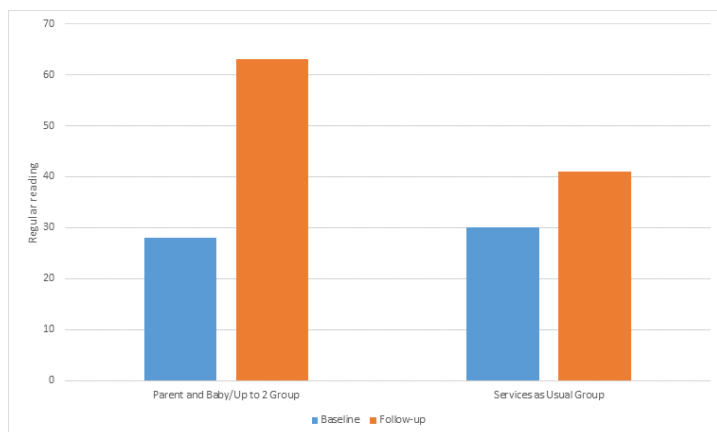


Fig. 1: Percentage of parents regularly reading to their infants at baseline and follow-up

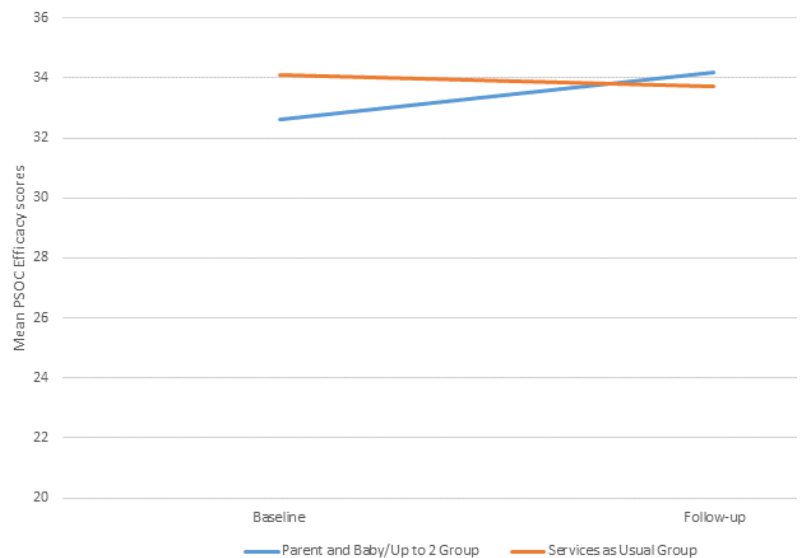


Fig. 2: PSOC Efficacy scores for the Parent and Baby/Up to 2 programme group and the services as usual group at baseline and follow-up

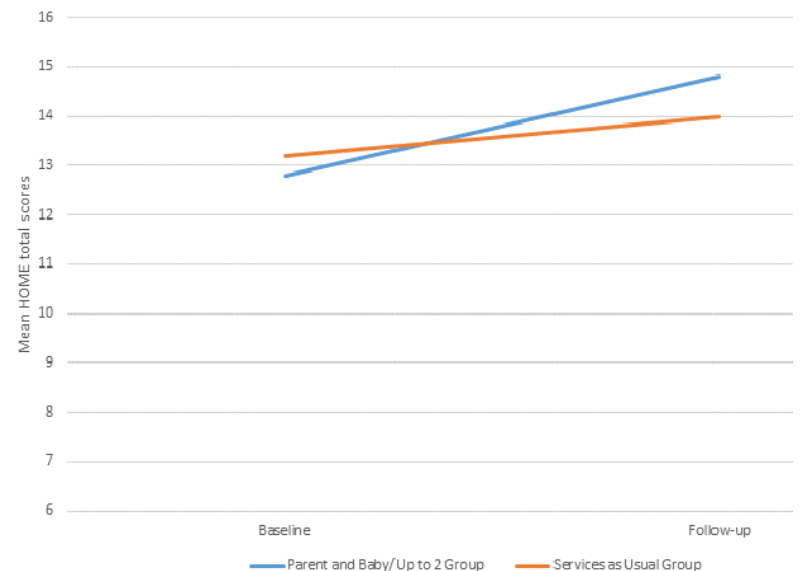


Fig. 3: HOME scores for the Parent and Baby/Up to 2 programme group and the services as usual group at baseline and follow-up

Conclusion

Overall, the baseline and follow-up findings indicate high levels of parenting confidence and positive mental health adjustment, as well as nurturing parent-infant bonding relationships and home environments.

At this early stage of the research, there is tentative evidence to suggest that the Parent and Baby/Up to 2 programme can benefit parents by promoting an increased sense of efficacy and helping to further improve the perceived parent-infant bonding relationship. These findings are important, because parents who have more positive beliefs regarding their own parenting capabilities have been found to demonstrate more sensitive and responsive parenting behaviours. Moreover, positive parenting and parents' ability to establish positive-parent child relationships, is a crucial protective factor in the lives of children (Jones & Prinz, 2005; Walker et al., 2013).

The results reported here also support the potential benefits of the Parent and Baby/Up to 2 programme for enhancing cognitive stimulation, particularly reading, in the home environment. Previous research has found that the presence of reading in the home when the infant is 8 months old is linked to later language development (Karrass & Braungard-Rieker, 2005).

Parent reports in this study indicate that, on average, their infants appear to be developing on schedule. At follow-up, infants in the service as usual group were faring better on measures of communication, problem solving and fine-motor development, but these differences may be attributable to the differences in infant age between the two groups. Infancy is a period of rapid behavioural change and development may occur in leaps; thus, small differences in age may make a considerable difference to developmental abilities.

Summary and future research

This study is one of a small number exploring the impact of group-based supports on parent and infant health and wellbeing in the earliest years. The findings reported here pertain to the early outcomes of an ongoing research programme. Further assessments are ongoing and these longer time frames will provide additional insights into how parents and infants are faring over time.

Implications of the findings for parents, practitioners & policy makers

- Early infancy is a critical period of development. Experiences during the earliest years play an important role in health and well-being across the lifespan
- Parents' ability to cope with the demands of parenting stresses, to provide appropriate learning opportunities and to build nurturing relationships with their infants, are all vitally important in shaping positive infant health and wellbeing outcomes.
- Effective support for parents and families during the crucial first two years of a child's life, is a key public health priority, but there have been few studies to date examine the effectiveness of group-based early parenting supports.
- The findings of this study suggest that group-based early parenting supports delivered in community settings can help to promote parents' sense of competence and their perceptions of their relationships with the infants, as well as supporting early learning in the home.

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