



EARLY
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FOUNDATION

SUMMARY

Evaluating early help

A guide to evaluation of complex local early help systems

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About EIF

The Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) is an independent charity established in 2013 to champion and support the use of effective early intervention to improve the lives of children and young people at risk of experiencing poor outcomes.

Effective early intervention works to prevent problems occurring, or to tackle them head-on when they do, before problems get worse. It also helps to foster a whole set of personal strengths and skills that prepare a child for adult life.

EIF is a research charity, focused on promoting and enabling an evidence-based approach to early intervention. Our work focuses on the developmental issues that can arise during a child's life, from birth to the age of 18, including their physical, cognitive, behavioural and social and emotional development. As a result, our work covers a wide range of policy and service areas, including health, education, families and policing.

SUMMARY

To read the full report, please visit:
<https://www.eif.org.uk/resource/evaluating-early-help-a-guide-to-evaluation-of-complex-local-early-help-systems>

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Foreword

Nationally, there is ongoing debate about the extent to which early help makes a difference to children's outcomes.

This is an important question, but one that currently we cannot answer robustly enough. As this report finds, there is a lack of good-quality evidence about the impact of local early help systems on outcomes for children and families. There are a range of early intervention programmes which have been shown to improve outcomes for the children who receive them. However, during the course of this study and in the wider work of EIF, we have not found evaluations of the impact of early help offers that we would consider to be robust. In many ways, this is not surprising. Generating good-quality evidence of impact, particularly of systems involving a range of agencies and services, is difficult. It takes time, and requires capacity, resources and capability, all of which are in short supply in local services.

But this lack of evidence matters. It matters locally because it makes it difficult to know which approaches are most promising, or which features of integrated early help models might make the most difference. Time and resources may be wasted constantly adapting and re-designing services rather than evaluating, learning and improving based on solid learning and evidence.

It also matters because this lack of data on the impact of early help services makes it difficult to make the case for investment in early help both locally and nationally.

An absence of evidence doesn't mean something *doesn't work*. It means *we don't know*.

This is not a good place to be. As local authorities try to find savings, there is a real danger that early help services are cut, not because they don't work, but because we haven't been able to test whether they do.

We need to build capacity to use and generate evidence in children's services. This means equipping those delivering early help with the skills and resources required to measure the impact of their services and, in turn, to generate good-quality evidence. Routine use of this evidence should become part of 'business as usual', informing decisions in local authorities and other commissioning bodies. Improving management information and tightening up objectives and measurement should be something all areas aim to do as part of their continuous improvement plans.

This guide seeks to make an initial contribution to improving the evaluation of early help by setting out some principles that could help places to make progress on evaluating local services. It is aimed at managers and commissioners, and describes how they can make services both easier to evaluate and more evidence-based.

Local authorities have a vital role to play in taking this forward, but they cannot do it alone, particularly in the current financial climate. Action is also needed centrally, at a national level, to put in place the support local areas need to apply these principles, so that they can develop and implement systems to robustly evaluate their early help arrangements. This is a priority if we are to make some much-needed progress in filling this gap in the evidence base for early intervention in the UK.

Donna Molloy

Director of Policy and Practice, Early Intervention Foundation

March 2019

Summary

About evaluation

Many types of evidence make a useful contribution to understanding families and the services they receive. But only **impact evaluations** can verify whether a service works, and tell us how much difference it makes, relative to not receiving the service at all. Impact evaluations need quantitative data, though they can also involve qualitative methods.

The best impact evaluations, which can draw causal links between services and family outcomes, involve randomising which families receive or don't receive services. Due to its complexity, early help is difficult – but not impossible – to evaluate in this way.

About this guide

This guide is about how to evaluate the complex systems that make up local early help offers, which may involve many partners and multiple programmes and services. This is not easy, but the examples in this guide show that it is possible. This is an emerging area, which no local authority has yet fully worked out. The six principles set out in this guide can help managers and commissioners to find out what difference they are making for families, as part of the smooth running of evidence-based, continuously improving services.

Principle 1: Know where you are starting from

You need a good understanding of local families if you are to evaluate the services they receive. Involve your partners so that you can set out the whole system and understand how all local activities contribute to outcomes. Your **needs assessment** should go beyond describing needs at a point in time to consider pathways of needs – how needs change over time for different families, strengths (such as strong relationships), and patterns of service use. You also need to understand the inputs, activities, outputs and outcomes of your local offer, and the assumptions and external factors on which these depend, as part of a **logic model**. One way to build your understanding is through **system mapping** of relationships and pathways. Consider making changes to data systems in order to track families and capture links between services.

Principle 2: Prioritise outcomes to evaluate

Set the scope of your evaluation by defining where the boundaries of your early help system lie. You and your partners in the early help system should only evaluate **the outcomes for which you are accountable**. Many local areas have broad aims, such as better outcomes, improved user experience, and cost savings. **Clearly defined aims** give you something concrete to evaluate. Your aims should be realistic, and you should limit yourself to a **manageable number of aims**.

Principle 3: Embed evaluation in commissioning and practice

See evaluation as part of commissioning, not as a one-off activity. Invest in evidence capacity as part of continuing professional development: **upskill staff** on how to understand, interpret, and gather data for evaluations. Demonstrate leadership by using evidence, and **grow an evidence culture** across the system. Prioritise **investment in evaluation** as part of commissioning. One rule of thumb is to assign at least 10% of a programme's budget to evaluation.

Principle 4: Use high-quality measures

Exploit existing sources of routinely collected data on outcomes, and only gather data yourself where these sources are not available. If you do gather your own data, use measures that have been carefully developed by experts. **Measures should be valid and reliable**, relevant and responsive; reasonable in terms of length, simplicity and accessibility; allow you to **track distance travelled** or progress; and broad enough for use with a range of families. Consider upgrading data systems and changing working practices to introduce a shared ID, such as a unique pupil number or NHS number, for all partners to use.

Principle 5: Make comparisons

Collect data from families both **before and immediately after** they receive support from early help services. Then **follow up** to see whether changes are sustained. Make strenuous efforts to follow up with as many families as possible: even if they drop out of receiving services, they can still contribute data to the evaluation. Carry out **statistical testing** on whether the difference between the 'before' and 'after' data is significant, or if it is likely to have been due to chance. Going further, recruit or statistically construct an appropriate comparison ('control') group who do not receive early help, ideally through randomisation.

Principle 6: Follow through

Be **open and transparent** by publishing your findings, and acknowledge the limits of the data and analysis. If your methods do not allow you to make causal claims, do not make them. Provide enough detail to allow someone elsewhere to replicate your findings. Plan to develop and improve the quality of your evidence and evaluations over time, to increase the robustness of your findings. **Act on your findings**, implementing the recommendations made in your evaluation reports. The large number of influencing factors and massive complexity within an early help system means that large sample sizes are needed to distinguish real improvements from random changes. **Be patient**: wait for the number of cases to build up and for long-term outcomes to emerge.