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Partnership with Parents
= Success
A Case Study



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Parental Involvement



Overview

The achievement of better outcomes for children can only be fully realised when parents are actively involved in all decisions made about their child. Parents need to feel that their voice is heard and valued.

Start Right Limerick works through multi-agency collaboration and considers parents as key partners in that process. From the very early days of the project (August 2011) it was clear that any effective partnership with parents was going to be quite a task, and would have to be planned sensitively and appropriately. As residents of a Limerick Regeneration area, parents on the Southside have participated in many research studies, community consultations and public meetings. Yet, they felt that there has been little change in their daily lives and questioned the point of ongoing engagement. In one of the first meetings with a group of young mothers, one woman explained: *'You come in here and you ask us questions about what we want. We tell you and what happens? Nothing...absolutely nothing! I'm blue in the face from telling people what my [five year-old] daughter needs to help her...but nobody is listening and nobody is helping us, that much is for sure.'*

This case study documents how Start Right's work with parents took this as its starting point and focused on meeting people where they are. It highlights the importance of meaningful engagement by and with parents, and documents how services on the Southside were supported to respond accordingly. Ultimately, this case study demonstrates that when parents are empowered to feel confident and competent in their parenting role, the realisation of better outcomes for young children is much closer.

Background and context

*“Talk with me, not at, speak my language, plan with we
not for me, believe in me, don’t judge me;
see me, not just my problems”*

O’Dálaigh, (1996)

Start Right’s initial engagement with parents on the Southside was very much an informal process that took two forms:

- 1 Meeting them in Early Years services and the Sunnyside Afterschool Club during drop-off and pick-up times and
- 2 Partnership with the Southill Family Resource Centre’s Children’s Services Coordinator, who works intensively with local families in a support capacity.

Parents consistently reported a lack of information and involvement in decisions and processes that impacted on the lives of both themselves and their children. They also felt unaware of what services were available to them. As one parent pointed out:

“I never knew that all these services were available, it’s great like that they are there but I don’t know the half of what goes on or what’s on offer for my children or me for that matter” [Kelly- Mother].

Following a discussion with another parent about her child’s preschool experience, she echoed that sense of a lack of information and communication between herself and her childcare provider:

“I don’t know why he can’t go out at playtime with his friends. I only knew he was kept away from the other children and wasn’t allowed out in the yard with them when he told me himself. I’m thinking of taking him out of their next year anyway.. that’s not right they didn’t even tell me” [Mary- Mother].

The ongoing feelings that parents expressed when asked about their role in their child’s life outside of the home were those of being excluded and uninformed. They felt that they were being perceived by services as being uninterested when, in reality, those services were making little or no effort to involve them.

Why involve parents?

Parents and professionals working in partnership benefits children. The essence of partnership is respectful listening and sharing of information between parents and practitioners about children's learning and development at home, and at an early childhood care and education (ECCE) service. Partnership involves responsibility on both sides. It became increasingly apparent as Start Right and the Family Resource Centre (FRC) began to engage with parents that such partnership was not in place. They embarked on a series of consultations which would set the context for activating the voice of parents and identifying training, structures and fora that would involve parents in decision-making processes and service provision. Many service providers acknowledged that parental engagement was a missing element in their work:

“There is a wealth of expertise and experiences that parents possess that we need to tap into if we are to create any type of meaningful changeand what’s more, parents are ready, willing and able to give it if they are given the time, support and guidance to do so” [Aideen- Service provider].

What is parental involvement?

Most children have two main educators in their lives – their parents and their Early Years practitioner / teacher. Parents are the primary educators until the child attends an early years setting or starts school and they remain a major influence on their children's learning throughout school and beyond. Services, schools and parents all, therefore, have crucial roles to play. As one parent [Kelly] stated:

“I’ll do any programme if it helps her [daughter], if it helps her I’ll do once I know about it”.

There is no universal agreement on what parental involvement is; it can take many forms, from involvement at the school (i.e. helping in the classroom or during lunch breaks) through to reading to the child at home, teaching songs or nursery rhymes and assisting with homework. This can be categorised into two broad strands:

1 Parent's involvement in the life of the early years setting / school

2 Their involvement in support of the individual child at home



Why is parental involvement important?

Parental involvement with children from an early age has been found to equate to better outcomes, particularly in terms of cognitive development.



“What parents do is more important than who they are or their level of income for children’s early development”

More than just a nice idea

The willingness of a service or agency to engage with parents has to be based on more than just goodwill or particular personality type of a staff member. There are legal obligations to do so.

Article 42.1 of the Irish Constitution identifies parents as primary educators:

“The State acknowledges that the primary and natural educator of the child is the family and guarantees to respect the inalienable right and duty of parents to provide, according to their means, for the religious and moral, intellectual, physical and social education of their children.”

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child was ratified by Ireland in 1992. The Convention acknowledges the primary role parents and the family have in the care and protection of children as well as the role the State has in helping them to carry out these duties. In particular, Article 5 of the Convention states:

“State Parties shall respect the responsibilities, rights and duties of parents or, where applicable, the members of extended family or community as provided for by local custom, legal guardians or other persons legally responsible for the child”.



Parental engagement matters

Parental engagement matters because it directly influences outcomes for children. It offers the following:

Benefits for the child:

Children tend to achieve more, regardless of ethnic or racial background, socioeconomic status, or parent's education level

Children generally achieve better grades, test scores, and attendance

Children consistently complete their homework

Children have better self-esteem, are more self-disciplined, and show higher aspirations and motivation toward school

Children's positive attitude about school results in improved behaviour in school and less suspension for disciplinary reasons

Fewer children are being placed in special education and remedial classes

Children from diverse cultural backgrounds tend to do better when parents and professionals work together to bridge the gap between the culture at home and the culture in school

Junior and senior infant pupils whose parents remain involved usually make better transitions and are less likely to drop out of school.

Benefits for parents:

Parents increase their interaction and discussion with their children and are more responsive and sensitive to their child's social, emotional, and intellectual developmental needs

Parents are more confident in their parenting and decision-making skills

As parents gain more knowledge of child development, there is more use of affection and positive reinforcement and less punishment with their children

Parents have a better understanding of service providers' roles in their child's development

When parents are aware of what their children are learning, they are more likely to help when they are requested by teachers to become more involved in their children's learning activities at home

Parents' perceptions of the school are improved and there are stronger ties and commitment to the school

Parents are more aware of policies that affect their children's education when they are invited by the school to be part of the decision-making process around such policies.

Listening to what parents have to say

From September 2011 Start Right initiated a number of parental consultations to learn more about parents' opinions, requests and needs in relation to supporting them in their parenting role. These consultations generally took the form of small group meetings (6 to 8 people) in the Parent's Room of a local primary school or coffee mornings in the local community centre café, and were co-facilitated with the FRC's Children's Services Coordinator. By January 2102, 8 such consultations had taken place, with 107 parents.

Throughout those consultations parents reported:

1

Not having information on how services operate and how the system works, particularly in relation to assessments and where to go if their child has emotional, social or behavioural issues

2

No involvement in the decision-making processes that affects their lives and the lives of their children; *"We were told that he [son] is on a waiting list to see a speech and language therapist but we still don't know why. If they came and said 'look, there's a problem with his speech so do you think he needs to see someone' then we'd know where we stand. Instead it's just being told, like, bring him here because we said so"* [Maeve- Parent].

3

Very little communication between professionals and parents with little understanding of the reasons or implications: *"Things were done to us not with us"* [Mary- Parent].

4

Lacking confidence when dealing with professionals; *"Every time I have to go up above [local health centre] I feel like I'm being dragged up in front of the school principal for being bold. I can't do nothing right... the child shouldn't be eating this, she should be in bed before that time and on and on like I'm stupid or the worst mother in Ireland. I go in there shaking and I come out raging"* [Carrie- Parent].

5

Feeling undermined and *"spoken down to"* [John- Parent] when seeking help or attending appointments in some services.



These consultations set the roadmap for how Start Right and its statutory and community partners would develop and deliver an appropriate framework for service provision in the model area. When asked what advice they would offer in trying to develop this new framework, one parent [Carrie] suggested:

‘Go and tell them [service providers] that I know my children inside-out, better than they ever will for the five or ten minutes that they meet them for. If they want to sit there and judge me....well they can come and live my life for a day and see what its like. Then they can see that I’m always flat broke and I’m always wrecked bloody tired and then they can tell me how to bring up my children. Honestly now, tell them they can come to my house for a day, any day’.



Putting learning into practice

One of the most important outcomes of engaging with parents involves using the information they provide to change the systems that they are experiencing difficulties with. This can be a long and timely process. Parents can't always see evidence of work happening in the background so, in addition to developing a more long-term strategy, Start Right needed to provide some 'quick wins'. These needed to be relatively fast changes or improvements, in order to show parents that their input was valuable and was leading to change.

An example of a 'quick win' and a significant step forward in terms of statutory and community partnership involved working with the local health centre. Service providers spoke of regular and repeated 'did not attends' (where children's clinical appointments are missed) and many parents spoke of their reluctance to attend such appointments. When asked why, one parent explained how the physical layout of the health centre was a barrier:

"I feel a like a criminal waiting to be buzzed in...all the questions...who I was here to see...they just stopped short of frisking me." [Meave- Parent]

Such insights led the way for discussions with local agencies around the importance of how parents and children are received and made to feel welcome in a service, from the very first point of entry. After negotiations with senior HSE personnel, the reception area of the health centre was reconfigured, buzzers were removed and an activity table for children was installed. Essentially, a few minor changes in layout led to the creation of more family and child-friendly environment. This didn't go unnoticed by parents with one [Mary] stating:

"They took off the buzzers on the front door...about time for them I mean what do they think we'd do?"

Another parent [Ellen] reported how the child's activity table made waiting for appointments easier to manage:

"The toys are a great idea aren't they? That small table kept him amused for 15 minutes while I was waiting for him to be seen...usually he'd be running all over the place and wrecking the place and I'd be giving out to him to stop but that kept him amused the whole time so I didn't have to."

The changes to the health centre's reception area did two things in terms of guiding Start Right's work. It showed parents that they were being listened to and secured ongoing involvement by those parents, and it highlighted that agencies and service providers are open to collaboration and change. Both of these were vital ingredients in the creation of Start Right's Community Wraparound Programme.

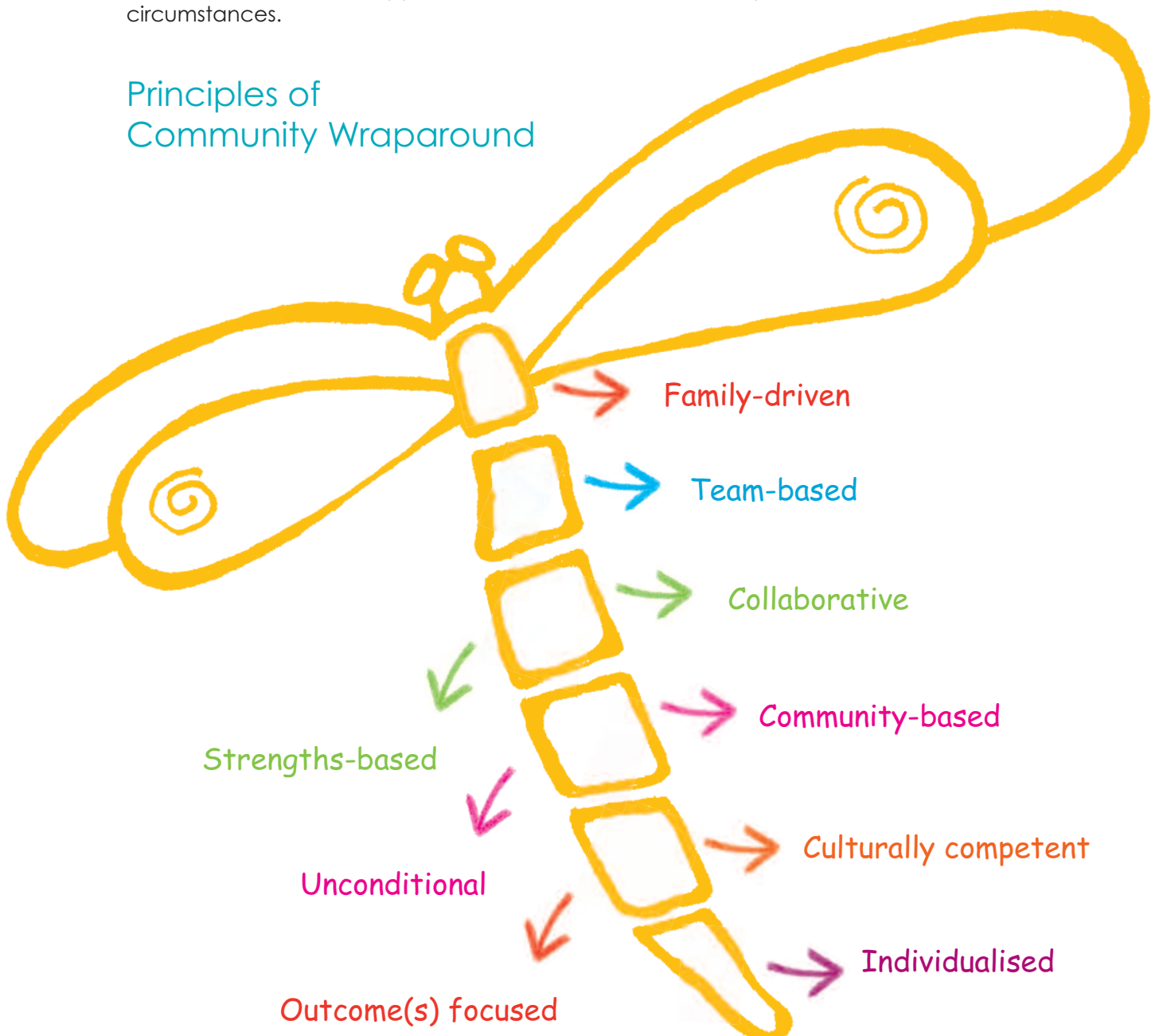
Community Wraparound

What is it?

Community Wraparound is a process that provides children and their families with flexible and ongoing support that meets their particular needs. It focuses on connecting families, service providers and community partners in effective relationships and support networks. Essentially, Community Wraparound is a shared approach to providing child-centred services and ensuring that all of those services are talking to each other and to parents. The Start Right model focused on working with families of children aged three and under, beginning in the antenatal period.

Community Wraparound is very important because standard practice leads to poor outcomes when families are not fully engaged in decisions that affect their children and when the supports available do not meet their specific needs or circumstances.

Principles of Community Wraparound



Through the development and roll-out of an intensive outreach programme, Community Wraparound was founded on the Start Right approach of *'meeting parents where they are'*. It began with engagement with statutory and non-statutory service providers, Early Years settings, schools and community-based service providers and through on-going contact and consultation with parents. In Community Wraparound contact with parents begins in the antenatal stage and is tailored according to the developmental stages of their child. Services and support are then provided in tandem with Public Health Nurse check-ups, with age and stage-appropriate information, workshops and parenting programmes.

All of these activities are housed within a population approach to parenting, which aims to:

- 1 Increase engagement with parents
- 2 Create an increased awareness among parents and service providers of the parental role in the context of child development
- 3 Support parents through the process of assessments (i.e. psychology, speech and language etc.)
- 4 Provide a combination of home-visiting and community-based supports to parents of young children
- 5 Develop effective communication strategies between parents and service providers
- 6 Increase awareness among parents of relevant service and the access routes to those services

"We need to know what's available and where to go to get it... I always hear that this was running and that was running and my child went to this and got that... after its over" [Ellen- Parent].





Start Right Community Wraparound is delivered through a variety of services and supports:



Ante Natal Clinic



Community Mothers



Infant massage



Creative Therapies



Psychology



Speech and Language Therapy



Parenting Programmes



Homemakers Family Support Service



The Southside Parent Forum

1 Ante Natal Clinic

The parent-child relationship has significant impact on the well-being and future potential of the child (Tusla, 2014). The creation of a collaborative culture of early intervention can therefore support expectant parents with issues including health, housing, finance, welfare and so on. Ante Natal home visiting by Public Health Nurses was used to introduce Community Wraparound to expectant parents. The development of a home assessment tool to guide expectant parents in identifying supports / concerns or needs that they had was created, as the antenatal component of the Common Assessment Framework Tool. At the same time, a satellite Midwives Clinic from UL Maternity Hospital to the Southill Health Centre was made available. This saw the provision of a community-based ante natal clinic in the model area, where local needs and circumstances can be taken into account.



This means that all parents attending the Health Centre have:

- Access to Community Mothers
- Access to clinics tagged on to their child's developmental check with their Public Health Nurse, such as dietician and speech and language clinics
- Increased knowledge of other services available (i.e. infant massage, weaning, infant and parent programmes)
- Increased familiarity with their local health centre and the services that it provides.

2 Community Mothers

Supports to families before, during and after pregnancy are more effective when bolstered by community and family support services, for those in need (Right from the Start, 2013). To enhance such supports Start Right made some funding available to expand the Limerick Social Service Centre's (LSSC) Community Mothers team, to designate two Community Mothers to the model area. In doing so, it formalised a partnership between Public Health Nurses and the Community Mothers programme. The Community Mothers programme is a home-visiting service for parents with new babies / young children. A Community Mother is an experienced mother who is trained to visit parents in their homes and to encourage them to enjoy and participate more fully in their child's life. One parent [Kathleen] who availed of the support of Community Mothers said:



“She (Community Mother) is great. She is a huge support to me and is always available to me when I need her help or advice...I ring her or send her a message and she's back to me like that. She got me involved in a few programmes as well which help me and the child... you know meeting other parents and reminding you of appointments”.

The partnership between Public Health Nurses and Community Mothers provides parents with professional support that is both formal and informal, statutory and community. It highlights the very essence of Community Wraparound and demonstrates that parents engage better when they have a 'support package' available to them.



3 Infant Massage

A review of studies on the benefits of massage therapy for full-term infants less than 6 months of age found evidence of benefits for mother-infant interactions, sleeping and crying and on stress hormone levels (Cochrane Database, 2013). As a result, an accredited infant massage programme is included in the Community Wraparound antenatal package. To date, 11 infant massage programmes have taken place with 50 parents.



“I find the infant massage great. It’s a good way to spend time with your baby but it calms them as well. ...I do it at bath time and I find that he sleeps much better” [Jennifer- Parent].

As well as being enjoyable bonding sessions for parents and their babies, infant massage classes have led to referrals on to other services such as the weaning clinic and Incredible Years (IY):

“From going to the infant massage classes I found out about a lot of other services that are there to help me. This is my first child so it’s all new to me and meeting other parents and knowing what’s out there has been a great help to me.” [Jo- Parent].

4 Creative Therapies

A balanced approach to emotional, social, cognitive and language development will prepare all children for success (Right from the Start, 2013). Significant levels of socio-emotional and behavioural issues among young children in Early Years services and the infant cohort of schools were identified through Start Right and the FRC’s work with those services. At the same time, waiting lists for psychology were increasing, ranging anywhere from 18 months up to 2 years for an initial assessment. Therefore, in partnership with Southill FRC a Creative Therapeutic Intervention Service that provides art therapy for children aged 2-6 in the model area was developed. The process was challenging and initially was met with resistance from some statutory partners. Concerns arose mainly around non-clinical personnel working with children who were attending or waiting for clinical services. It was, essentially, a fear of doing something differently to how things are usually done.



Having overcome such challenges, the Creative Therapeutic Intervention Service was operationalised in 2013 when an Art Therapist joined the Community Wraparound team. Originally the service occupied a space in a room of the local Community Development Project as a short term, accessible solution to a longer term planning. Eventually the service relocated to what is now known as the ‘Southside Parent Space’ in the Limerick Enterprise Development Park (LEDP), which has a private room as a designated therapeutic space.

“Securing this space is an example of what can be achieved when agencies pool together and work in a collaborative manner to achieve solutions to problems that benefit first and foremost children and families” [Tom- Service Provider].

4 Creative Therapies cont'd

The Art Therapist works with children who are experiencing low level social, emotional and behavioural problems. The service was promoted to local services and parents as an early intervention service and referrals began to come in almost immediately. The benefits of the work were quickly seen, with parents providing glowing reports about their children's progress since starting:

"I can't believe the difference in him in just 7 weeks. I didn't think at the beginning that he would stay because he found it strange at the start with him only being 4 but now on Thursday or Friday he is asking me how many more days before its Tuesday [the day he has art therapy]. Now he has no problems going in, saying good bye to me and his confidence has really come on. Even his teacher in school has said it to me about the difference in him"
[Jessica- Parent].



Another parent [Ellen] reported: *"She loves coming to him [the Art Therapist]...she loves it. She looks forward to it every week and I can see the difference in her... its brilliant. She tells me that he gives her choices and lets her make decisions and he talks to her and lets her play in whatever way she wants. Her behaviour has come on leaps and bounds. She still chanches her arm every now and again but she has learnt to control herself better"*

Parents also responded very positively to the approach of the Therapist in his work with both themselves and their child. They felt like they were *"an important part of the conversation"* [John – Parent]. This kind of regular feedback continues to shape the Community Wraparound programme and is a vital part of developing it further.

"He is so non-judgemental... he listens to you, lets you talk and always asks your opinion on stuff or how something would make you feel if he was to speak to another service or something about extra help... he always talks to you and is very gentle in his way" [Jessica- Parent].





5 Psychology

For children experiencing high stress, specialised early interventions are needed to target the cause of that stress and protect the child from its consequences (Right from the Start, 2013). As a result, a Psychologist from the HSE Child and Family Centre was brought into Community Wraparound to work with the 10 children in the model area under 6 years of age who were on the waiting list for psychology.

Initially some confusion existed among parents regarding the service:

“I got two letters in one week...one to say that my son was on the waiting list to be seen by a psychologist which could take up to two years because of the waiting list. Then I got another letter from the same place saying my son has been picked as part of the Start Right programme and will be seen in the next few weeks. It gave a date for me [child’s mother] to meet with the psychologist. So I had to go and ask in the Resource Centre what the letters meant and why was only my son picked over other children when there is a two year waiting list and if this was a new programme or service again... but once it was explained to me I was very happy that it was happening but I was confused because the letter didn’t explain what she explained” [Kelly- Parent].

This highlighted the need for improved communication among services and between services and parents. Again, these kind of issues provided vital learning for Community Wraparound and how it responds to obstacles. Once the Psychologist started and children on the waiting list were called for assessment, the benefits of the service became clear, with parents reporting high satisfaction levels with the service and the Psychologist:

“She [the Psychologist] is lovely....she sat me down and spoke to me and explained everything to me which put me at ease. She was really nice and took all my concerns and opinions down and told me exactly what she would be doing with us over the next few weeks” [Bridget- Parent].

Three parents also highlighted their frustration at having had to wait so long for assessment and support and for being ‘bounced’ between different services:

“If they had just sent me to her 12 months ago then I would’ve have been sorted ages ago....I’d have known what was wrong with him and he could have been getting the help he needed sooner. She could tell me what was wrong after a couple of weeks” [Barry – Grandparent].

“After two years of going around to different services like a fool and getting nowhere, he now has a diagnosis and is starting to get the help he needs...he doesn’t have everything in place yet but at least it’s happening now” [Bridget – Parent].

“I originally went about getting my child assessed because I was worried about his development and if you told me 12 months ago what it involved I would never have gone near them. We were given the run-around going from one service to the next...early interventions, occupational therapist, St Gabriel’s you name it and no one could tell us what was wrong with him” [Carrie – Parent].



6 Speech and Language Therapy

A community-based Speech and Language Therapist is part of the Community Wraparound team. Working between the Health Centre and local primary school and Early Years services she provides supports to parents and other service providers through different methods:

Happy Talk

A series of Happy Talk* programmes were delivered by the Start Right Speech and Language Therapist (SLT) over the lifespan of the project. Happy Talk is a 4-week programme for parents, delivered through partnership between parents, Early Years settings and the SLT. It is aimed at developing listening and attention skills in pre-schoolers and teaching them how to expand their use of language. One parent [Meave] who participated in the programme noted

“It’s easy to do it when you know how...otherwise you’d just be correcting them all the time, telling them to talk properly or you’d be talking back to them using the same words that they do but the courses with the Speech Therapist gave me tips for doing it right and I’m more confident I’m doing it right now”.



Hanen Parent training

A series of Hanen parent training programmes was also delivered by the Start Right Speech and Language Therapist, with in excess of 100 parents participating as a result. Hanen’s ‘It Takes Two to Talk’ programme was delivered specifically for parents of young children (birth to 3 years of age) in small group settings. Parents learned practical strategies to help their children learn language naturally throughout their day together. The programme taught parents, step-by-step, how to become their child’s most important language teacher :

“The programme itself was really great...it gave me tips and exercises to practise at home myself with my child... which I found really good”

[Anne – Parent].

Another parent [??] spoke about her own empowerment through the programme; *“it makes me feel good that it’s me that is helping by being able to practise with him at home and help him with his words. I’m delighted I did it”.* [Kelly – Parent].



* Start Right is one of 11 projects under the National Early Years Access Initiative. Happy Talk is a Cork-based project under the same umbrella and developed the speech and language programme of the same name.



7 Parenting Programmes

Positive parenting practices create positive outcomes for children (Tusla, 2014). With this as a guiding philosophy, the provision of co-ordinated, ages-and-stages appropriate parent training became a core part of Start Right's Community Wraparound programme.

Infant IY

A series of Infant and Parent Incredible Years Parenting programmes were co-delivered between clinic, educational and community based professionals.

The Parent and Infant programmes were delivered over an 8-week period and focused on helping parents to:

- Communicate with their baby – learning to understand their cries, smiles and gestures
- Encourage their baby's learning with fun and games
- Learn more about feeding and sleep patterns
- Meet other mothers and share experiences
- Receive peer support from other parents.

The parents found the infant programme an excellent learning experience but also a supportive one:

"I loved, loved, loved the infant programme. We did it a while back and all of us are still in contact with each other today and we meet regularly....we can share information and ideas with each other which is a great source of support" [Johanne- Parent].

"I could ask questions that didn't make me seem silly or stupid...there was huge support and learning from the other parents and the facilitators were great too" [Maggie- Parent].

"Parents also seemed to enjoy the statutory and community partnership element of the co-delivery method; "It was great having a nurse doing the programme....especially when you were struggling with teething, and had questions about spoon feeding and stuff. The tips were great and really helpful." [Anne- Parent].

IY Toddlers

A series of Incredible Years Parent and Toddler programmes were also co-delivered between clinic, educational and community based professionals. These programmes were delivered over a 12-week period and focused on helping parents to:

- Promote positive relationships
- Promote their toddler's language and play
- Engage in praise and encouragement
- Establish routines





- Handle separations
- Positively discipline their child.

The programme provided parents with an opportunity to meet other parents and share common experiences but, more importantly, to receive support from other parents.

“I would recommend the programme to all parents...the support you get is unreal and the things you learn to help you cope as a parent is great but it’s the experience of the other parents that’s important because they know what it’s like, they can relate better to your situation and they don’t judge you”

[Maggie- Parent].

8 Homemakers Family Support Service



One of the key findings of the 'How Are Our Kids' report (2011) was the need to provide practical support for parents to address a range of issues. In response to this, and as part of its ongoing learning through Community Wraparound, Start Right partnered with the Limerick Children and Young People’s Services Committee (CYPSC) to develop the Homemakers Family Support Service. A home-based family support service provided through Barnardos, Homemakers began in 2013.

To date it has worked with in excess of 40 families, supporting parents with everyday childcare-related tasks such as bathing, establishing bedtime routines and preparing nutritionally balanced meals. The key aim of the service is to provide short-term but intensive support to parents, to make them more confident and capable in their parenting role.





9 The Southside Parent Forum

Parents need social networks as parenting is easier when parents can talk to peers (Tusla, 2014). The idea of a parent's forum came from an informal conversation that took place with a group of parents who had been engaging with Start Right and the Southill Family Resource Centre. These parents felt that they did not have a voice in decision-making processes at a time when a lot of changes were taking place on the Southside, particularly in relation to the restructuring of key services for children. Some parents suggested that one group - regardless of what service a child was attending or even if they weren't attending a service at all - should be developed to allow parents to come together to discuss common issues and organise cohesive responses to such issues. As a result, work towards the establishment of a parent-led forum began.

A series of parent focus groups took place to determine:

- 1 The need, and local desire, for such a group
- 2 What kind of structure would best suit such a group
- 3 How it could be best organised to achieve results
- 4 What support(s) would be needed by partner agencies



As a result of the consultations, the Southside Parent Forum has been established. While the first piece of work was addressing the questions outlined above, parent members have also identified three priority areas to start working on in 2015. The challenges, as one parent noted, is maintaining the momentum which led to the creation of the Forum in the first place: *'It's about getting people to turn up and put in the work because if we don't make decisions and have our say someone else will do it for us'* [Robbie- Parent].

The most notable characteristic of the Southside Parent Forum is its gradual and organic development. Parents didn't suddenly come together and decide to campaign for change. For three years, parents met with Start Right and the Southill Family Resource Centre staff in a variety of ways. While there were organised consultations, focus groups and some training, daily encounters in the community created a trust and mutual respect, which has contributed to the creation of the Forum. In terms of parental engagement

'Never underestimate the value of a cup of tea in the community café, a chat at the school gate or a sympathetic ear when someone is feeling down-trodden or just having a bad day. You can't come at people cold and expect them to feel safe enough to discuss issues affecting themselves or their children. You need to build a relationship and that takes a significant investment of time and trust on both sides' [Project Coordinator].



Final Thoughts

Every parent, regardless of culture or circumstance, wants the best for their child. During one of its first community consultations Start Right created a wishing tree. Parents were given a leaf on which to write their hopes for their children. None mentioned money, fame or material things. Instead, the following hopes were shared:

'I want my daughters to have what I don't – confidence in themselves'

'I wish for them all the things that I never had'

'For my child to feel safe and loved and to know that he can do anything in life'

'Just for them to be happy and to know where you come from doesn't make you who you are or stop you getting on in life'

'I want my kids to know that we love them and would do anything for them.'

Parents on the Southside face many challenges that can make parenting an even more difficult task. Socio-economic disadvantage and the associated risks (high crime, poor educational attainment and welfare dependence) add a layer of struggle to daily life. In order for parents to realise the 'wishes' outlined above, they need to feel heard and they need to feel supported.

As with all groups who suffer from various forms of social and economic disadvantage such situations persist as a result of oppression. Dominelli (2002, p.8) defines oppression as "*relations that divide people into dominant or superior groups and subordinate or inferior ones*". Services need to be fully aware of the power imbalance between service users and providers in order to work in an anti-oppressive manner and support parental involvement.

There is no doubt that effective parental involvement is complex. Much damage can be done if parents are empowered to engage with agencies and services who don't reciprocate. Times change quickly and the design of service provision needs to keep pace and reflect such changes. As demonstrated through Community Wraparound, for example, good relationships with service providers, web text reminders of appointments and follow-up e-mails make parents feel included. This inclusion leads to increased participation and it is only then that improved child outcomes become more achievable.

There is no such thing as the typical parent. The parents that engage with Start Right and the FRC span the entire range of diversity - mothers, fathers, very young, grandparents, foster carers, settled, Travellers, those newly released from prison, those with special needs and more in between. Some parents shout loud and sit on many committees. Others remain in the background, unsure and unseen. Similarly, there should be no typical service. Instead, services need to respond appropriately to the different needs of different families, by listening.

Better child outcomes become ever closer when we realise that you can't fit square pegs into round holes. Services need to be shaped to fit families' needs, families can't be shaped to fit only what services have available.



“For almost four years myself and my wife were banging our heads off of walls trying to help our middle child. Nobody was listening. ‘We’ll put him on a waiting list and send you a letter’ we were told. No idea what the waiting list was for! Imagine that, can you? Your child will be seen by someone in a few years and that is all you need to know. It’s not good enough. My wife cried a few weeks after we started with the Community Wraparound Programme. People were finally talking to us! Our boy saw the Speech and Language Therapist and the Art Therapist and he came on in leaps and bounds. He’s a different kid and we’re happier parents but the sad thing is, this should all have happened four years ago. Someone should have listened to us”

[Robbie – Parent].



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Start Right Limerick aims to improve outcomes for children under 6 years of age living in the Southside of Limerick City. Start Right is governed by 3 core principles:

1 Sustainability:

The programme will leave a strong legacy of improved quality of practice and service capacity, as well as through the introduction of new practice.

2 Service integration

3 The involvement of parents

The Start Right Programme serves children by applying these principles in

- a Building quality and professionalism in early years services
- b Offering an improved range of services accessible through both statutory and voluntary services, such as Art Therapy, Infant Massage, and Home-based supports to parents
- c Improving communication and coordination between agencies to ensure that the children are at the centre of needs led, rather than supply led, service provision.

These case studies aim to highlight what statistics cannot: that for practitioners, parents and carers the quality of relationships and interaction between people is as important as the changes being introduced. Whether in the context of improving quality through a practice manager, building confidence in early years practitioners to engage with parents and other services, and learn from each other, or taking the time to support parents who would not have otherwise engaged with services, the stories contained in the case studies have two common themes:

- Parental engagement is essential to effective intervention
- Quality services require quality relationships

We hope you find these studies both interesting and practical.



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