

Open Kindergartens: Improving Family Support Provision in Scotland – Summary Report

The aim of the project was to consider an alternative model of low-threshold family support for parents with children aged 0 to 3 years of age – the Open Kindergarten.

Open Kindergartens are drop-in open sessions for parent and child staffed by early years practitioners and non-statutory social workers, which offer parents support through peer interaction and professional support.

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Introduction

The early years, when a child is aged 0-three, are known to be very important for their development, learning and wellbeing.

The Scottish Government has recognised this in a range of policies such as the Early Years Framework and the National Parenting Strategy and has committed to making Scotland 'the best place to grow up'.

Scotland's National Parenting Strategy recognises that parents need to be better supported to ensure every child has the best start in life. It also acknowledges that this support should be helpful, well-organised and flexible enough to address a range of needs, and that steps need to be taken to improve the availability and access to early learning and childcare (ELC).

Early Learning and Childcare (ELC)

The Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014 includes lots of measures that aim to improve children and young people's outcomes. One measure increased the entitlement to free ELC to 600 hours per year to all three- and four-year-olds, and eligible two-year-olds from August 2014. The Scottish Government has now committed to increase this to 1140 hours per year for all three- and four-year-olds and eligible two-year-olds by 2020.

By increasing the provision of free ELC the Scottish Government aims to reduce inequalities in the early years, close the educational attainment gap between children from advantaged and less advantaged backgrounds and improve children's outcomes.

A consultation carried out by the Scottish Government with parents suggests, however, that parents may not take full advantage of their entitlement to free ELC because places are not available in their chosen/preferred setting, or because the opening hours of ELC settings are not suitable for their needs. This is particularly true of the eligible two-year-olds who are more likely to be from less advantaged backgrounds.

Support in the early years

A range of other early years support has also been introduced, including: a new health visiting pathway that establishes 'a core home visiting programme to be offered to all families by health visitors as a minimum standard'; a baby box being delivered to every parent of a new baby born in Scotland from August 2017, and the introduction of the Best Start Grant by summer 2019, which will replace the Sure Start Maternity Grant in Scotland.

Maternal mental health is well known to have a significant impact both on children's outcomes and on parents' ability to cope. Early intervention to support families is crucial as, if left untreated, these issues can have a significant detrimental impact on individuals and their families.

Supporting parents in the early years

There is a need for support for parents in the early years that bridges the gap between the health information and support that is provided in the very early days and the early learning and childcare that is provided from the age of two or three.

This needs to be directed at parents and carers, providing support that is holistic, does not stigmatise and is open to all. It needs to tackle social isolation and offer both peer to peer support and professional help, building parents' capacity and self-confidence.

The Review

A literature review was carried out to provide insights into the key features of the Open Kindergarten model that is found in some Nordic countries (i.e. Finland, Norway and Sweden) and evidence of its impact on families. The review also considered the key features of Family Centres more generally as Open Kindergartens are often collocated within and referred to as the core of Family Centres in the Nordic countries.

The second aim of the review was to consider 'what works' in terms of preventive family support offered to families with young children (0 to five years old).

Conclusion and recommendations

There were several important reasons for exploring the potential value of the Open Kindergarten approach in Scotland.

Firstly, we were very aware of the Scottish Government's policy objectives. Key among those were addressing the current discrepancy in educational attainment between children who have had effective support for their early cognitive development and those who had not, supporting parents to give their children the 'best start in life' and minimising the risk of long-term inequalities in life outcomes in learning, health and wellbeing.

In addition, we were aware that parents in difficult circumstances were generally less likely to access early years support services, even when these were free and close at hand. We were also conscious that, when resources are limited, a sustainable approach using existing staff and buildings would be relatively

straightforward to put in place and, indeed, was desirable for other reasons such as parents and children becoming familiar with a setting and building relationships with staff before the children reached the age of entitlement to pre-school provision.

We found that many parents had not found it particularly easy to find out about services in their community where they and their children might access support and advice. In most cases they had found out about provision through other parents. The health visitor could be pivotal here and, for many, they had been a great source of advice.

Critically important for many was the welcome they received, as was the attitude of the professionals they encountered. Parents were less keen on attending sessions that had prescribed content. They felt they gained more benefit from services when they were able to raise issues that were current and important for them. Practical help and advice that they could realistically act on were valued. Many described the peer support from other parents as being a really important element of groups they had used and was instrumental in their deciding whether they continued involvement with a service or never returned after the first visit. This approach also served to build parents' own capacity outside settings and services.

While parents much enjoyed doing activities with their children and learning together, many really valued a balance between doing things together and having some element of respite. The staff we spoke to, all with lengthy experience in working with young children and their families staff, generally reinforced what the parents had said. The quality of the relationships between parents and professionals were what underpinned the effectiveness of the support.

Recommendations

The conclusions were that Open Kindergartens could: meet parents' support and learning needs more effectively; provide parents with critical peer support; upskill the early years workforce, particularly on parental engagement; represent a sustainable and financially viable model, readily capable of being upscaled and, most importantly, contribute to achieving better and more equitable outcomes for children.

To demonstrate the value and impact of the model a number of recommendations were suggested:

- The approach is tested out in at least two contrasting early years settings
- A capacity-building programme is provided for staff. This would cover forming and using relationships, particularly in terms of reaching out to those less likely to engage spontaneously, co-producing the curriculum and supporting parents to adopt constructive ways to develop their child's confidence, learning and wellbeing

- We work with specialist agencies in terms of supplementing the core activities, such as with art, music or drama
- The staff in the settings we work with become skilled in advising parents on healthy child development and encourage parents to engage with them on this at any time
- An information session, supplemented by hard copy and web-based advice, is provided for local agencies who might broker first contact and encourage parents to attend. Health visitors will be a very important element of this
- A model of initial outreach and accompanied visit(s) is always adopted
- Parent and baby/child sessions are held twice weekly, with sessions lasting around two hours
- Funding is available to help with transport if needed
- Ground rules are adopted about behaviour for all participants
- Sessions are staffed by qualified centre staff, supplemented from time to time by specialists as described above
- There is no programme or prescribed content, the topics talked about are raised by the parents
- There is no compulsion on participants to attend every session
- Sessions are open to mother and fathers together or to either separately
- The sessions are fun and not didactic
- Qualitative and quantitative evaluation is conducted
- A plan is developed for upscaling the approach.

Author details

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