Children’s Centres: Lessons from the ‘Evaluation of Children’s Centres in England’

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Do children’s centres promote better outcomes for families, parents, and children?

- Impact is explored using statistical models that predict child, parent, and family outcomes when children were age 3 years, after controlling for other influences such as family background or gender.
- Use of different services is measured over 3 time points, around the ages of 1, 2 and 3 years.
ANALYSIS STRATEGY FOR EXPLORING IMPACT

- Families entered the study when children were 9-18 months. They were followed up one year and two years later.
- The sample included 2,608 families registered with 117 CCs across England.
- Parents were interviewed in homes at 1 and 3 years, and by telephone at 2 years. Children’s development was assessed in homes when they were 3 years.
**Modelling Effects on Outcomes**

- **Child outcomes**
  - Naming vocabulary & non-verbal ability
  - Behaviour (Internalising, Externalising, Pro-social)
  - Physical health and diet

- **Mother outcomes**
  - Mental health (GHQ)
  - Physical health & diet

- **Family outcomes**
  - Early Home Learning Environment
  - CHAOS
  - Parental distress
  - Child-Parent Dysfunctional interaction
  - Household Economic status

- Contextualised models (CA) for child cognitive and behavioural outcomes where no baseline measure was available
- Change models (CVA) for mother and family outcomes where baseline measures were available
Investigating Impact: CC Predictors

Significant child, mother, family, and neighbourhood characteristics

Families’ use of children’s centres, centre services & childcare over time
- Use of children’s centres (registered/any)
- Duration of use of registered centre
- Use of services and types over time
- Use of outreach services over time
- Use of formal childcare over time

Centre characteristics & processes (registered only)
- Centre characteristics over time
- Services provided by centre over time
- Use of formal childcare over time, including outside the CC

Tested individually and in combination

Outcomes at child age 3+ years

Child
Mother
Parenting/family
**Drawing together the Impact Findings - Overview of Positive Impacts**

* Note: No significant positive effects identified for change in child health or Household Economic Status (workless household).

**All significant effects were small to modest in size**
INVESTIGATING IMPACT: CHILD OUTCOMES AND SERVICE USE

- Higher formal childcare use (anywhere) predicted better cognitive outcomes, lower levels *internalising* behaviours and greater *pro-social* skills

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effect size</th>
<th>Externalising</th>
<th>Internalising</th>
<th>Prosocial</th>
<th>Vocabulary</th>
<th>Non-verbal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intermittent</td>
<td>ns</td>
<td>-0.20**</td>
<td>0.15*</td>
<td>0.12#</td>
<td>0.10#</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long term</td>
<td>ns</td>
<td>-0.31***</td>
<td>0.14*</td>
<td>ns</td>
<td>0.10#</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Comparison group: None

Significance values: #p<0.08  *p<0.05  **p<0.01  ***p<0.001

- Children whose families used CC services at baseline (compared to none) showed lower levels of later *externalising* behaviour at age 3 years
- Little evidence that CC service use predicted improvements in children’s cognitive outcomes at age 3 years
INVESTIGATING IMPACT: CHILD OUTCOMES

Lower levels of *externalising* and higher levels of *prosocial* behaviour found for children at centres with more ‘named’ programmes at baseline and those that increased the number of named programmes for families.

- Children registered at school-led centres showed better *prosocial* behaviour.
- Children registered at school-led centres had higher vocabulary scores.
Mother Outcomes And Service Use

- Taking children to organised activities (registered CC or elsewhere) predicted improved mother physical health.

- Mothers with poorer mental health had greater contact with health visitors. This suggests health visitors were identifying mothers with greater needs in line with policy of targeting ‘needy’ families.
INVESTIGATING IMPACT: FAMILY OUTCOMES AND SERVICE USE

- Service use predicted most family outcomes in some way, but was strongest for reductions in CHAOS and improvements in the Early (pre-school) Home Learning Environment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effect size</th>
<th>CHAOS</th>
<th>Early HLE</th>
<th>Parental distress</th>
<th>Parent-Child dysfunct. Interaction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Any use (Reg CC)</td>
<td>-0.24**</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any services (Reg CC)</td>
<td>-0.15*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Long term use of Reg CC</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.19*</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Significance values: #p<0.08  *p<0.05  **p<0.01  ***p<0.001  Blank cell=Not significant
**INVESTIGATING IMPACT: FAMILY OUTCOMES AND SERVICE USE**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Effect size</th>
<th>CHAOS</th>
<th>Early HLE</th>
<th>Parental distress</th>
<th>Parent-Child dysfunct. Interaction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family/parenting activities vs none</td>
<td></td>
<td>0.10#</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organised activities at 1 wave</td>
<td>0.10*</td>
<td></td>
<td>ns/</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organised activities at 2-3 waves vs none</td>
<td>0.18**</td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.19#</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Significance values: #p<0.08  *p<0.05  **p<0.01  ***p<0.001  Blank cell=Not significant
INVESTIGATING IMPACT: FAMILY OUTCOMES AND CHILDREN’S CENTRE CHARACTERISTICS

- Families registered at CC with moderate partner-agency resourcing (compared with none) showed reductions in *parent-child dysfunctional interaction*
- Families registered at centres not experiencing cuts (either growth or stasis versus cuts) showed consistently better outcomes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Effect size</th>
<th>CHAOS</th>
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<th>Parental distress</th>
<th>Parent-Child Dysfunction. Interaction</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Moderate Partner Agency resourcing (vs none)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>-0.13*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Centre growing or remaining same v reducing</td>
<td>-0.19*</td>
<td>0.22*</td>
<td>-0.15*</td>
<td>-0.12*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The effects of cuts to budgets to CC

- High disadvantaged families attending financially stable centres (not experiencing cuts) and those that had increased the number of more specialised services (named programmes) showed improvements across a range of family functioning measures including:
  - Lessened Parenting-Stress
  - Lessened Home CHAOS;
  - Improved Home Learning Environment
**Changes in Resourcing**

1. ‘Supported growth’ centres (34%)
   - had reported little or no cuts that affected staffing or services and were adding new services;
   - Served smaller, more disadvantaged reach areas
   - Their users were more likely to: live in highly disadvantaged neighbourhoods; be financially disadvantaged; have few qualifications; show poorer mental health.
   - More likely to attract high need families from within their reach areas, which may be a function of the smaller geographical size of their reach areas.
CONCLUSIONS (1)

- CCs have evolved over the evaluation period
- Findings show more impact on outcomes for families and mothers; fewer effects for child outcomes (especially cognitive skills and child health) and Household Economic Status (SES)
- Few children attended childcare at their registered centre (8% at Wave 3). Centres signpost families to Private/Charitable childcare provision
- A number of measures of families’ service use and characteristics of CC predicted better outcomes. These effects were more numerous than expected by chance.
- Children’s centres are targeting high need families for specialised services, in line with their core purpose
CONCLUSIONS (2)

- Nonetheless, the main driver of child, mother & family outcomes is family background. The effects of financial disadvantage, mother’s education and the Toddler Home Learning Environment are still strongest. Children’s centre use helps to lessen but does not eliminate influence of disadvantage.

- Evidence that CCs help to improve outcomes for all, but especially important for the High financial disadvantage group

- Challenges to the analysis included:
  - variations in the services and families’ use of services,
  - policy changes over time,
  - and the short term (2 year) nature of the analysis of change

- CC vary and families pattern of use varies too, thus no single intervention can be tested. It is important to recognise this ‘real life’ constraint on evaluation design.
An overview of the project and its publications can be found at:

**DfE**


**University of Oxford:**

**Natcen:**
[http://www.natcen.ac.uk/our-research/research/evaluation-of-childrens_centres_in-england/](http://www.natcen.ac.uk/our-research/research/evaluation-of-childrens_centres_in-england/)