

Education and Lifelong Learning

Perspectives on Early Years Services: Qualitative Research with Service Users

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Through a series of focus groups, with both parents and children, GEN researched views on matters pertinent to the Early Years Framework, including health behaviours, childcare, early education, play and leisure and family support.

Main Findings

- Families frequently do not know where to access information on what services are available to them;
- The skills, attitudes and approach taken by staff are crucial to how service users of all ages assess the quality of services;
- Access to transport is an issue for families living in rural and urban areas. It impacts on their ability to access services and amenities;
- Perceptions and experiences of safety impact on the freedom that parents and carers allow their children;
- A significant proportion of parents and carers do not differentiate between the purposes of early education and the purposes of childcare;
- The cost of childcare can be prohibitive and acts as a barrier to parents and carers returning to work;
- Children, parents and carers value local provision of clean, safe, accessible outdoor play areas;
- National health and healthy eating campaigns have had an impact on children's attitudes;
- Both adults and children value choice in the services they use; and
- Parents of children with additional support needs face barriers to a wide range of services across all of the themes of the Early Years Framework.

Background

The early years of a child's life are crucial to development, affecting their behaviour, educational attainment, employment and relationships. The Scottish Government and COSLA have stated their commitment to working together to ensure that there is an effective approach to early intervention and the early years in Scotland. This has led to the current, ongoing development of the Early Years Framework, which is due to be launched later in 2008. It will be a ten year framework and will cover the range of services that support children up to age 8 and their families, including education, health, family support and social services. Services for parents and carers which have a critical impact on children, such as housing, will be included.

Aims and Objectives

GEN was commissioned by the Scottish Government to carry out qualitative research with parents, carers and children to inform the Framework. We explored their needs and experiences of early years services through discussion in focus groups with the adults and through activity-based groups with children. We consulted with families in rural and urban areas and with families with a wide range of service needs.

The themes on which we focussed attention were:

- Pre and post natal health;
- Childcare and early education;
- Health behaviours;
- Play and leisure; and
- Parenting and family support.

Methodology

Our methods were designed to address the key early years issues and maximise participation amongst target groups. We carried out:

- 36 structured focus groups with parents and carers across Scotland; and
- 22 interactive workshops¹ with groups of children aged up to 8 years².

¹ These were carried out in partnership with Illuminate, who are specialist drama in education practitioners.

² When piloting our research tools we found that it was difficult to elicit meaningful information from children below 3 years of age and in agreement with the Scottish Government, focused the main part of the research on older children (aged 3 to 8).

We developed a range of tools for the fieldwork, including the scenarios used for opening discussion in the groups; the topic schedule and focus group structures and content; a recruitment pack for intermediaries and participants; and consent and equal opportunities monitoring forms.

Main findings

Preconception, ante-natal and post-natal care

Thinking about the preconception stage, parents said they would have liked better information on pre-conception diet and exercise; some felt there to be a lack of support groups for people with fertility problems; and some identified the need for more work with young people to divert them from unwanted pregnancy.

In relation to ante-natal care, many parents saw there to be a lack of contact with health professionals in the earlier stages of pregnancy and wanted more comprehensive advice on diet and exercise in pregnancy. Parents definitely value clear, concise ante-natal information.

A smooth transition from midwife to health visitor care is seen as essential by the majority of parents. Many mothers want breastfeeding advice and support – a significant minority cited difficulties in feeding this way as a reason they bottle fed their children.

Post natal depression (PND) was cited by sufferers as a major issue, which is frequently not identified early enough and there is a lack of early intervention support where PND occurs. There is a lack of counselling for men whose partners are suffering from PND and for men who are suffering from it themselves.

Childcare

Parents and carers want there to be a choice of accessible, affordable high quality childcare. Parents often find it difficult to find this and it can be even harder in rural areas. They need childcare that is flexible and has extended hours to fit with work and training patterns.

Parents and carers do not always know what help is available to them or what initiatives are in place to help them pay for childcare. Regardless of their economic circumstances, parents feel they ought to be able to choose to stay at home and care for their children if they wish, rather than return to work.

Children are very keen that their nursery should have an outdoor play area and the equipment and activities are crucial to how they assess the quality of childcare. Children want childcare workers who are kind, fun and caring.

Early Education

Pre-school education hours should be more flexible, many parents told us. There is a lack of school or childcare cover for children starting in Primary 1 with short school days and where there is childcare cover, it can be expensive to pay for these extra hours.

As with childcare, parents of children with additional needs felt strongly that there is a definite gap in early education services for their children.

Play and Leisure

Parents report a lack of organised activities and classes for children aged below five years – the majority are for older children.

Parents in rural areas acutely felt the need for family friendly transport links and this is still something of an issue for families living in more urban areas.

The cleanliness and quality of play areas and parks varies considerably, it was widely reported. Both children and parents wanted local, good quality, clean, safe play areas and children like there to be a variety of equipment and, a few said, see wildlife. There was strong support for parks to be closed at night and have wardens during the day.

Health

A number of parents commented that there is a lack of exercise classes and activities where childcare is provided free or children are involved in the activity.

Parents and carers in all areas should be able to buy affordable, good quality fresh food including fruit and vegetables. It was widely felt that schools and nurseries reinforce this through providing healthy snacks and meals.

Some parents believe that there should be more communication between them and schools on the issues of sex and sexual health so that they can give consistent messages. They also want schools to work with them to help them talk to their children about alcohol and drug misuse and so divert them away from problem behaviour.

A handful of individuals suggested that all calls to NHS 24 should be free – one mother had started a petition to her MSP to this effect. There were occasional suggestions that transport to hospitals for those who need it should be free, and for free childcare for families who must visit hospital – but for this care to come from providers other than social work.

Practical demonstrations on healthy cooking are highly valued by parents.

The attitudes of health staff are very important to children and they like there to be rewards provided after appointments. Getting stickers from the dentist is a popular example.

Parenting and Family Support

Some families in the study had experienced anti-social behaviour in their area and found it difficult to get help to tackle it. Their perception is that no agency is taking responsibility for dealing with specific instances of such behaviour.

Many examples were cited of support services not working in a joined up way and it is especially important, where families have complex needs, that they do.

There should be readily available bereavement support for families who have lost a child, some parents thought.

Similarly, some suggested that there should be information on the support available to families when partners separate or divorce, including support for children.

Where parents and carers decide to return to work, they want a joined up package of support to help them do so and to support them through the transition back in to employment.

There should be foster care payments for family members who are caring for a relative's child or children, those with experience of such situations indicated.

Access to support services is a particular issue in rural areas and outreach and home visiting services are considered crucial, was a strongly held view.

Children's views

The aim of the Early Years Framework will be to achieve better outcomes for Scotland's children and so will focus on services for and about children as well as services that may impact on their lives. It is therefore very important that the Framework is based on a clear picture of children's perceptions, views and experiences of current and future services.

The most significant findings from the work with children shows:

- The importance they place on the attitudes and approach

of adults who they come in to contact with, in school, in childcare and in health and other services. It is a major factor influencing their perceptions of a "good" or quality service.

- In a range of settings (at school, at nursery and in their leisure time), they value access to outdoor spaces and safe, stimulating environments.
- The importance of appropriate independence for example they enjoy having opportunities to make choices about what they do and the activities they get involved in.

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The Perspective on Early Years Services: Qualitative research with Service Users research findings & accompanying full report can be downloaded from the publications section of The Scottish Government website:

<http://www.scotland.gov.uk>

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