



An Evaluation of the Strengthening Families Programme in Co. Kildare.

Executive Summary



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents the results of an evaluation of the Strengthening Families Programme (SFP) in Co. Kildare. The evaluation took place between January – April 2017 to explore the perspectives of families and stakeholders involved in the programme. The Strengthening Families Programme has been delivered annually in Co. Kildare since 2013, and previously in 2008 and 2009. This evaluation investigates the delivery of the SFP from 2013 – 2016, with a particular focus on programme impact and implementation in 2016.

Summary of findings

- A range of benefits were reported for families, including improved family relationships, enhanced parental wellbeing and parenting competencies, and improved child behaviour
- Family attendance and completion in Newbridge 2016 was high. Of the 13 families who commenced the programme, 5 attended all 14 sessions and 7 families attended 10 or more sessions. One family withdrew from the programme at Week 5
- Parents indicated a high level of satisfaction with the programme experience; however, materials may need to be adapted for purposes of engaging more effectively with teenagers
- Some families may require additional/ongoing support for parental depression and for challenging child behaviour
- Involvement in SFP delivery was perceived as beneficial for services
- Several factors were identified as key for the sustainability of the SFP in Co. Kildare, including embedding delivery in an area with a high level of service provision for families; managerial and funding structures put in place beforehand; potentially reviewing the number of very high risk families accepted on the programme; identifying an appropriate venue; finding and retaining a pool of trained staff; and exploring avenues to source additional funding
- The cost of delivering the SFP should be considered in the context of the personal, family, societal and economic costs that would potentially have been incurred if the family had not engaged with the programme

Experiences of families

The collective findings from this study indicate that there were many benefits for families who had participated in the Strengthening Families Programme, including: improved family communication and relationships; increased parental confidence and competence in dealing with challenging child

behaviour; enhanced peer relations and social support; greater school attendance for the children; and a reduction in service utilisation for some families.

Interviews with parents also highlighted perceived improvements in child behaviour and parental stress although the questionnaires indicated that, three months following the programme, some parents were still experiencing moderate levels of depression and reported high levels of difficult child behaviour. Such families may require additional support. It should be noted that the questionnaires were used only to collect data for the child with the most challenging behaviour in the family and therefore did not capture any potential benefits amongst siblings (where applicable). Furthermore, it was not possible within the context of this study to collect data from families before the programme started; therefore, the nature and extent of any change achieved as a result of the SFP is unknown. Future larger evaluations of the SFP are needed to address this important question.

Summary of reported benefits

- Better family communication and relationships
- Improved child behaviour and wellbeing
- Increased parental competencies and confidence
- Enhanced social life
- Greater school attendance
- Reduced service utilisation

“I feel like a family now whereas before it was just like four people in a house” (parent)

Summary of reported benefits for families from the qualitative analysis

Parents reported a high level of satisfaction with the programme experience and appreciated the meals, transport, and personal touches of the family portraits and the graduation night. The children also enjoyed the fun and the activities. However, a few teenagers would have preferred if their sessions were more lively and engaging. Parents reported challenges with regard to difficulties in engaging children in family sessions, the need for more personnel to manage children with disruptive behaviour, the quality of food in Newbridge 2016, and the need for linkworkers for all families.

Experiences of SFP staff ¹

The SFP also led to a number of benefits for services involved in delivery, including: offering a unique, intensive and preventive family-focussed intervention; reducing service utilisation by

¹ ‘Staff’ refers to service personnel involved in implementing the SFP, including Site Coordinator, facilitators, linkworkers, steering group, referral agents, funders and so forth

families and/or helping families to engage with other services; enhancing the professional 'toolkit' of staff; and helping to develop interagency collaboration more generally within Co. Kildare.

- SFP offers benefits to families and services in terms of:
 - Family focus
 - Intensive support
 - Preventive
 - Fits remit of funding organisations
 - Evidence-based
 - Practical to implement
 - Cost effective
 - Loss if not there

- Reduces family utilisation of services
- Helps families engage with other services
- Enhances professional skills of staff
- Built interagency collaboration in Co. Kildare

Perceived benefits of SFP to organisations

According to staff interviewed in this study, it is logistically challenging to implement the SFP on an annual basis given funding and staffing restrictions. The findings indicate several factors that may be key to ensuring successful implementation and sustainability of the programme, the most important of which was the need to embed the SFP in an area with a high level of service provision for families (e.g. Newbridge). This would be important in easing the workload of acquiring and retaining SFP staff and of receiving appropriate referrals. Other significant factors include: managerial and funding structures put in place beforehand; potentially reviewing the number of very high risk families accepted on the programme; identifying an appropriate venue; finding and retaining a pool of trained staff; and exploring avenues to source additional funding.

- Managerial and funding structures in place
- Embedding in the right location
- Referral issues
- Getting the venue right
- Staffing
- Programme delivery

Key factors that help or hinder implementation

Given that most, if not all, of the families presented with a high degree of need and risk, the evidence from this evaluation indicates that the impact of the programme may extend beyond the family unit to the wider community (e.g. greater school attendance, reduced service utilisation). Therefore, the costs of implementing the SFP should be offset against the personal, family, societal and economic costs that would have been incurred if families had not attended the programme. For instance, as a result of the SFP, some children were removed from the Child Protection Notification System, thereby preventing family breakdown and the costs of foster/residential care.

“Me and him [Dad] used to not be able to talk but now it's different. We're always talking. We do more stuff together.” (Teenage boy)

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