

Supporting parents and improving child outcomes

March 2018

Introduction

In February 2018 Barnardos launched its LOST Childhood campaign. The campaign shines a light on the fact that for one in seven children in Ireland their childhood is lost. These children have their dreams and chance at a bright future lost to poverty, homelessness, neglect and injustice. Children make up over a quarter of the population of Ireland, yet they are infrequently at the centre of national policy.¹ Children cannot vote and have little say in the political choices which affect them. Poor policy decisions leave children behind. Barnardos works with over 14,000 children and families each year. We see the positive impact of small interventions carried out early enough to give families and children the support they need to thrive. Barnardos is seeking investment in two key initiatives which would support parents, improve child health and development outcomes and reduce child protection incidences.

Why Support Children and Families?

Our childhood has a deep and long lasting impact on the course of the rest of our life. Children who receive the care, affection, stability, stimulation, consistency, along with the social, emotional and physical supports they need have a much better chance of developing successfully into young adulthood and beyond. Parenting has the greatest impact on a child's development. If a parent is unable to properly support their child's development because of a lack of skill or understanding or because of a specific crisis or challenge they are faced with, it can have severe and long lasting impact on their child's chances in life.² Most families which receive early, low-level interventions can be

¹ Department of Children and Youth Affairs, (2016) *The State of the Nation's Children: Ireland 2016*, Dublin: Government Publications. Available at www.dcyu.ie

² Barnardos (2017) *Partnership with Parents Staff Guidance: Birth to 2 years*. Dublin : Barnardos

equipped with the skills they need to thrive. In cases where more intensive supports are required early detection would be better for children and families in the long run.³

We know supporting a parent's capacity to enhance their child's development early reaps huge benefits, not only for child and parent but also for society. Later interventions are more costly and less likely to be successful. International research shows investing in well-designed prevention and early intervention approaches yield a return on investment (ROI) ranging from \$1.26 to \$17.92 for every \$1 invested.⁴ Intervening early means the benefits are felt for a longer period of time improving ROI. Not only is there a financial gain to be made but also significant societal dividend in terms of supporting children to develop into content, well-adjusted adults. Intervening early to promote good child development is associated with greater educational attainment, more productive workforce and a reduction in social welfare reliance, crime and anti-social behaviour.

A Dedicated Child and Family Public Health Nurse System

Public Health Nurses (PHNs) play a crucial role in children's earliest years in Ireland. All children in Ireland are entitled to a PHN home visit at birth. Under the current system subsequent PHN visits take place in the clinic where developmental checks are carried out at three months, seven months, two and three years after which the child is discharged unless there is some concern.⁵ These checks were formerly carried out in the home; however a rise in child health caseload led to the decision to cut home visits for greater time efficiency. This decision has undoubtedly negatively affected some children. Families may struggle to make a clinic appointment for a variety of reasons but those children of parents who might be struggling and those living in rural locations are particularly vulnerable. A survey carried out by the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation found the two and three year visits to be most likely to be missed meaning these children weren't being screened for developmental delay, behavioural problems, speech and language issues and hearing and sight deficiencies.⁶

³ Barnardos. (2015) *Rise Up for Children Report*. Dublin : Barnardos

⁴ Wave Trust. (2013). *Conception to age 2- the age of opportunity*. Croydon: Wave Trust

⁵ Health Service Executive. 2018. *Childhealth*. [ONLINE] Available at: <https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/list/2/primarycare/pcteams/dublinsouthpcts/dunlaoghaireglasthulepct/childhealth.html> [Accessed 16 March 2018]

⁶ Phelan A. & McCarty S. (2016) *Missed Care: Community Nursing in Ireland*. University College Dublin and the Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation, Dublin.

PHNs deploy a range of skills in their work which are taken from three different disciplines; nursing, social sciences and public health sciences.⁷ PHNs in Ireland are generalists with a broad range of responsibilities from new-borns to elder care; unlike countries such as the UK where work with children is allocated specifically to a mix of midwives, health visitors and nurses.⁸ One often overlooked role of a PHN is identifying child protection issues. Research suggests this role is increasingly difficult practice safely, particularly in the context of cuts to home visits.⁹ Home visit nursing programmes which begin in pregnancy and extend through a child's early years are proven to improve child protection and development outcomes. Decades of research on programmes such as the Nurse Family Partnership in the US has shown such home PHN visits improve child and maternal health through better pregnancy outcomes, prevention of child abuse and neglect and improved school readiness.¹⁰

Recommendation: Barnardos recommends investing €6.6 million to set up a dedicated Child and Family Public Health Nurse system.¹¹ This would allow for the recruitment of 180 new PHNs in 2019 with a similar ongoing investment in 2020 and 2021 increasing to 500 PHNs over three years. Ideally this dedicated system would come under the remit of the Child and Family Agency (Tusla); however if it remains under the remit of the HSE at very least there must be strengthened ties with Tusla to ensure child protection and welfare issues don't fall through the cracks. Beyond existing referral pathways Barnardos envisions the new dedicated PHN service would be able to refer families to a bolstered family support service.

Resourcing Family Support

All parents need support at some time during their child's life. A recent survey carried out by Barnardos found 69% of parents first turn to family and friends when they need support, while just 2% seek help from public services. A third of all respondents said they didn't have sufficient support.¹² Indeed many families need more support than friends and family can offer. This could be due to a need to improve parenting skills or because the family is dealing with a specific challenge, for example bereavement,

⁷ World Health Organisation. (2017) *Enhancing the role of community health nursing for universal health coverage* Geneva: World Health Organisation

⁸ Nicholson W. & Greenwood P. *Best start in life and beyond: Improving public health outcomes for children, young people and families*. London: Public Health England

⁹ Phelan A. & McCarty S. (2016)

¹⁰ Association of Public Health Nurses. (2016) *The Public Health Nurse: Necessary Partner for the Future of Healthy Communities*. Columbus: Association of Public Health Nurses

¹¹ Prevention and Early Intervention Network (2017) *Pre Budget Submission*. Dublin: Prevention and Early Intervention Network.

¹² Barnardos. (2018)

parental relationship breakdown, developmental delays or disability. These families would benefit from a family support service. By 'family support' services we mean an in home service which evaluates what a child and family's needs are and carefully tailor a personal package of services to respond to those needs. These may include but are not limited to parenting programmes, therapeutic supports and practical advice and help.

Research has shown programmes are more effective if they are offered in parents' home. Parents are more comfortable and better able to learn in their home environment and it gives the worker a better understanding of the family's home life and how this might be impacting upon parenting.¹³The ethos underpinning family support is in line with the Sings of Safety approach adopted by the Child and Family Agency which focuses on child safety in partnership with children, families and their wider network.¹⁴ Barnardos approves of the current model of service provision which has a mix of community and voluntary and statutory providers. The services provided by the Community and Voluntary Sector offer an independent and trusted source of support, which is particularly valuable when working with families who have had negative experience or are wary of statutory services.

Recommendation: Barnardos recommends the State allocate funding of €20 million annually to provide an additional 540 family support workers.¹⁵ These workers could be deployed throughout the country and provide approximately 12,500 families with wrap-around support to build parenting capacity, manage challenges and improve outcomes for children.

Conclusion

There have been far too many child protection scandals in Irish society in living memory. Far too many children suffer needlessly because their parents can't cope. Far too many children fall behind because problems go unrecognised or unsupported. Children might not have influence over who wins an election; but investing in children can influence the course of Irish society for years to come. The double pronged approach of identifying issues early on and providing support before problems escalate is proven to work for children and costs much less than paying for more intensive therapeutic / remedial interventions, foster care or aftercare later on. The cost of

¹³ Barnardos. (2017)

¹⁴ Tusla (2017) *Child Protection and Welfare Strategy 2017-2022*. Dublin: Tusla

¹⁵ Health Service Executive. (2018) *Consolidated Salary Scales 1st January 2018- Amended*. Dublin: Health Service Executive. Calculated based on average Family Support Worker salary of €36,975.

delivering these two programmes is just 0.03% of the cost of delivering the National Development Plan 2040. We believe children deserve far more but this would be a good start.