

# Early years interventions to improve child health and wellbeing: what works, for whom and in what circumstances?

## Background:

Child health and wellbeing is influenced by multiple factors, and adverse early life experiences can have lasting effects across the life course. Effective evidence-based early years provision can have positive impacts on child health and development and later life outcomes.

There are numerous early years policy initiatives, programmes and interventions, resulting in a broad but disparate evidence base. Existing studies have addressed effectiveness, but there is a knowledge gap regarding the underlying mechanisms governing how and why interventions work, and for whom they work, in given contexts, to achieve desired outcomes. Drawing on our previous work on maternal and infant health, this study will synthesise available interdisciplinary evidence and generate new evidence about 'what works' to improve child health and wellbeing, by exploring how and why early years interventions cause change and generate outcomes. For the purpose of this work, we define early years as from conception to school entry.

This project was undertaken as part of a programme grant from the Scottish Government Chief Nurse's Office to the SMART collaboration ([www.smartmidwifery.org.uk](http://www.smartmidwifery.org.uk)).

## Aims and Objectives:

The main aims of the study are:

- To explore how early years interventions can increase child health and wellbeing and reduce inequalities, answering the research question 'what works, for whom, and in what circumstances?'
- To develop an evidence-based framework capturing the characteristics of effective interventions, the contexts in which they are most likely to work, and the population groups for whom they are most effective.

## Methods:

In health and social care, programmes and interventions are often described as being complex and have outcomes that are dependent on context. When these complex interventions fail to achieve their desired outcomes, the explanation frequently provided is because they are both complex and context dependent. Realist research approaches can help make sense of these type of interventions, allowing empirical data to be tested against a theoretical framework, with an explanatory focus.



## Realist synthesis

We will use a theory-driven, iterative, realist approach to review and organise multiple types of evidence. We will identify underlying causal mechanisms of change, exploring how they work and under what conditions.

## Progress so far

We have (i) carried out a scoping exercise and mapped the current landscape of early years policy and programmes in Scotland; (ii) consulted extensively with stakeholders and experts; (iii) conducted a case study of the development and implementation of Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC), the Scottish Government's child wellbeing policy framework; (iv) created a protocol for a realist review of the literature; (v) developed a theoretical framework for effective interventions to identify the factors associated with successful and unsuccessful programmes and explain the links between programme activities and outcomes.

Currently we are synthesising a wide range of evidence in relation to emerging themes including: intervention design; pre-implementation; delivery; recruitment and retention; access; practitioner styles; relationships and models of support; ending support and transitioning to other services.

## Impact:

This study will strengthen the evidence base informing current early years policy and practice in Scotland, with longer-term impacts on health inequalities and later life outcomes. Our project will bring the added value of a framework that specifically aims to get inside the 'black box' by setting out 'what works, for whom, in what settings', thus allowing for the complexity of the circumstances of the children whose needs for support are the greatest. This framework could be used (a) to assist the development of effective sustainable interventions fit for given settings and (b) to support the development of successful implementation and evaluation strategies. It is anticipated that this framework will be mobilised and applied to a range of organisations delivering services to children and families.

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