



FoNS Improvement Insights

The Early Start Programme – Evaluating an Intensive Health Visiting Service for Blackburn with Darwen’s Most Vulnerable Families

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Duration of project: December 2010 – May 2012

Keywords: User consultation, collaboration, Early Start programme, harder to reach, patient focused

Project background

The Allen Report (2011, p 26) noted that ‘early intervention enables every baby, child and young person to acquire the social and emotional foundations upon which our success as human beings depends’. NHS Blackburn with Darwen (NHS BwD now Lancashire Care NHS Trust), considered a number of different approaches when developing an early intervention health visiting programme that would meet the needs of its culturally diverse population. The population of Blackburn with Darwen is ranked 11th nationally in terms of deprivation indices (Office for National Statistics, 2011) and faces exceptional challenges to its health and well-being. The Early Start programme involves health visitors working with vulnerable first-time parents and their families from as early in the ante-natal period as possible, until the first child reaches the age of two years. The programme aims to improve health and well-being, reduce health inequalities and break the inter-generational cycles of deprivation for these children and families.

Aim and objectives of the project

The aim of the project was to use parent and family experience to evaluate the Early Start programme and guide future development of the service.

The objectives of the project were to:

- Engage members of the Early Start team
- Provide a supportive environment to enable the voice of parents and families who were traditionally ‘unheard’ to be ‘heard’
- Understand the parent and family experience of the service
- Disseminate the findings to the wider service

Key activities and outcomes of the project

The three main approaches used within the project were: engagement of the Early Start team; a parent focus group and parent interviews.

- Engagement of the Early Start team

An Early Start team away day was arranged to gain the opinions of the staff about ‘how’ to move the project forward along with the other Early Start programme developments. The team leader facilitated the session, supported by the other project team members. Following group discussion, review of the prior Early Start programme work on client collaboration using the previous year’s annual reports and a ‘SWOT’ analysis (strengths,

weaknesses, opportunities and threats), it was agreed that parent/family feedback and collaboration would need to be a necessary part of the programme’s development.

- Parent focus group

A parent focus group was facilitated by the Practice Development Facilitator from FoNS. Eight families attended on the day and a range of creative methods was used to gather feedback including disposable cameras, collage work and group discussion. The feedback was themed around what they wanted to keep in the Early Start programme, what they wanted to throw out and what they wanted to add to the programme. The participants identified that they would keep all of the current content as they could not identify any parts of the programme that were not useful. They also identified new additions to the programme in the form of group work opportunities such as baby massage, infant feeding and fathers’ groups.

- Parent interviews

The third phase of the project involved individual interviews with nine parents that were ‘seldom heard’. All interviews were completed in the parents’ home by an Early Start team member and detailed notes were recorded by the team administrator who accompanied the interviewer. The notes were coded as case numbers and all identifiers were removed. These were then thematically analysed by an academic consultant from the University of Central Lancashire. The key themes that emerged from the parent interviews were the professionalism shown by the health visitors, how they were visibly credible in their approach with parents and were ‘personal to me’.

The Early Start team has now embedded collaborative working with parents and families within the service and there are plans to roll out the additional services as recommended by the parents, for use within the Early Start programme.

Implications for practice:

- Using parent experience to evaluate an Early Start programme identified additions to the programme that would be beneficial for parents and families
- The feedback from the parent focus group challenged the staff assumption that parents would lack confidence to interact well in a group
- Working in collaboration with an academic partner enabled an in depth analysis of the data from the parent interviews

A full project report including references can be accessed from: <http://fons.org/library/report-details.aspx?nstd=41269>

This project was supported by the FoNS Patients First programme in partnership with The Burdett Trust for Nursing.