

“What Works?” Series Summaries

What Works in community development with children?

Summary

Author: Gary Craig 2000

The 'What Works?' series

Some ways of dealing with problems work better than others. Every child has the right to expect that professionals intervening in their lives will do so on the basis of the best available knowledge. But the majority of interventions in social care are not evaluated before they are introduced. In that sense, much of the work done with children is an uncontrolled experiment.

Barnardo's has a special interest in evidence-based practice, that is, finding out what works, and ensuring that the interventions we and others make in children's lives are as good as they possibly can be.

As Roy Parker and his colleagues have pointed out:

'A hundred years ago, the benefits of providing separate care for deprived and disadvantaged children were thought to be self evident. It has since become increasingly apparent that unless outcomes in childcare can be adequately measured, we have no means of justifying the actions of social workers, which may have far reaching and permanent consequences for individuals.'

Qualitative work, and user studies, for which the UK has a good record, are important in understanding the processes which enable interventions to work well, and understand what service users most value. They do not, however, help us to know what interventions work best, or why.

In order to understand cause and effect - the relationship between a particular intervention and an outcome - randomised controlled trials are important. RCTs in the UK and North America include studies of day care, home visits, accident prevention, and other early childhood interventions.

The cohort studies, such as the National Child Development Study (NCDS) enable us to see who does well after a poor start in life, and understand what factors may lead to resilience.

Barnardo's What Works reports draw on a range of research designs and evaluations which suggest that particular interventions are worthwhile.

This report in brief?

Participation, community development and empowerment are currently seen to be essential in any social intervention, by those in policy and political circles. However, they are concepts, which can be utilised in different ways with different results. This report examines concepts, research and case studies around community development in order to establish a coherent knowledge base for practitioners working with children.

Community development and children

Community Development involves working with people in a way which starts with their own perceptions of their needs and then organising with them to meet those needs in appropriate ways. Community development with children may involve working directly with children and enabling them to speak for themselves, or working with parents and communities in a way that indirectly benefits children.

Community development has many benefits. As well as producing its outcome goals, the interventions have frequently led to increased community cohesion, empowerment and capacity building among locals. However, this approach does have its pitfalls, including being time-consuming, and these are discussed.

When talking about concepts of 'childhood' the report examines how children today are discussed in policy circles as people with rights and opinions of their own. In such a climate it is important to involve children in decisions that will affect them. This raises the questions of how far children can speak for themselves and what impact participation will have on their lives.

Social research is often an important part of community development, as it allows external agencies to assess the needs and interests of local individuals and communities. Much research has, and does, not involved children directly, often because of assumptions about their lesser capabilities and experience. However a growing body of research with children has shown that children are more articulate and willing to be heard than has often been assumed by adults, provided researchers adapt their approach to the age and maturity of the children involved.

Where the issues researched are sensitive, there are child protection issues to be considered. The general finding from research, provided there have been adequate safeguards, is that children welcome the opportunity to discuss these issues. Nonetheless, working directly with children, both in research and in community development, raises both methodological and ethical issues:

- Children are not legally autonomous and so there are questions as to the extent that they can speak for themselves
- Children, according to their age, depend on adults, so 'empowering' them can lead to conflict with adults
- Children are vulnerable and it is essential that projects do not manipulate or exploit them

Good practice in research with children

The growing practice of interviewing children tells us a considerable amount about how to carry out such interviews.

- Design research appropriate to the age and capabilities of the children
- Ensure interviewers are skilled and experienced in working with children
- Structure the research so that a distinction can be drawn between discussing inherently distressing material (which may have been unavoidable, given the content of the interview), and making the interview a distressing experience (which should be avoided).
- Ensure that a 'significant other' is available to support the child at the end of the interview.
- Provide explicit guidance of what researchers should do if they have information which reveals that the child may be, or has been, in danger or is in need of protection
- Give a written undertaking to child respondents that everything they say will be confidential, unless the team learnt something which might suggest someone was in danger (Clarke et al. 1996)

Evaluating Community Development Programmes

Community development involves a process of moving from research into action alongside individuals and community groups. This chapter looks at the extent to which children can organise to change their world. In so doing the author examines issues around evaluating community development programmes.

Evaluating programmes is important as it allows participants to know what works, what does not work and why. This will inform future decisions about which approaches to use and possible ways to improve them.

Points to remember about evaluation:

- There are external processes that interfere with evaluation of programmes and which need to be accounted for, such as natural demographic change
- Evaluators need to remember that desirable outcomes may involve long-term change and effects may not be immediately visible

- Process goals are important as well as outcome and output goals – programmes should not just lead to the desired outcome; local people should be empowered and community cohesion should be increased
- The outcomes should be sustainable
- Empowerment may lead to decisions with which some stakeholders disagree (including the community development workers). Effective work with children may lead to them taking decisions that adults dislike
- Evaluation needs to take account of many different perspectives
- The evaluation needs to be participatory and ‘owned’ by local people
- Both quantitative and qualitative (‘hard’ numerical data and ‘soft’ descriptive data) should be synthesised in the evaluation in order to give a fuller picture of the outcomes of the programme

Performance indicators used to measure the effectiveness of interventions should be negotiated between all the relevant parties, including local communities. Several different possible frameworks for evaluation are laid out in the report.

The key elements of evaluating work with children, in addition to those above, are:

- Examining the approach to see if the programme was truly participatory and not just involving children in a tokenistic manner
- Ensuring that performance indicators and methods were be appropriate to the age of the children

More work is needed to understand the appropriateness of different interventions, at different ages and in various cultural contexts as the role of children varies widely across the world.

Community development with children

Children depend on adults to provide many of the opportunities and resources which allow their participation. It is therefore the responsibility of adults to encourage children’s participation in an effective and age-appropriate manner. Children can participate in community development and this leads to benefits for both the children and their communities, as has been indicated by a growing body of research.

The author goes on to outline six areas of community development work with children, illustrating them with case studies:

Children as part of their families

Many projects aim to improve the whole family situation, such as projects that aim to increase parent’s employability or their skills in looking after their children

Children as part of their communities

Some programmes seek to enhance the capacity of individual young people to act socially, and to increase community links. A good case study is the work of Spectrum, a project centred in Sunderland, which worked with local schools, youth organisations, an older people's group and the local environment agency to make a garden safe for elderly residents;

Promoting children's health

Health educators realised that adults telling children and young people how to live more healthily did not work. Community based approaches are considered to be more effective. An example is YAP, a project based in the London Borough of Merton, which is designed to combat drug use through peer education.

Promoting children's safety

Many children do not feel safe in public places due to problems with drugs, traffic, racism and crime. Children have been involved in campaigning for traffic calming measures and creating safe play areas

Promoting children's education

Close links between schools and communities have many benefits. Developing 'community schools' is one way of helping failing schools and disadvantaged communities. The buildings and the facilities of the school can then be used at evenings and weekends and children and adults can learn alongside one another.

Helping children prepare to become citizens

Some programmes work with children and young people to equip them to become full citizens and overcome the exclusion they often feel. This may be part of a wider project in which children are consulted for their opinions, or the programme may have the creation of a permanent consultative structure for children or young people as its goal. An example is the Vale of Glamorgan youth forum, which is run by young people aged around 13 and above with support and advice from adults.

Conclusion

The author concludes that:

- Children and young people need to be involved at the early planning stages of the project
- Consultation needs to be continuous to ensure that local people continue to feel that it is their project
- Projects need to have a specific child/youth focus, not be an add on to adult programmes
- Projects need to reflect children's lives and their concerns
- Participation means different things for each age group. Projects need to be developed for and be appropriate to each age group
- Participation depends on trust and this takes time to build up.

- Programmes need adults' support but this needs to be balanced against adult control. As a project becomes more established, the balance may change as children and young people become more confident and develop their skills

To order a full report:

Tel: 020 8498 7844

www.barnardos.org.uk/resources

For more information about Barnardo's other publications visit

<http://www.barnardos.org.uk/AboutBarnardos/publications/index.html>