

Improving children's lives: Can intervening early make a difference?

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HEALTH



POLITICAL



SOCIAL

SUMMARY

Growing up in poverty has many long term consequences for both the individual child and society at large. Preparing for Life (PFL) is an early intervention programme which aims to improve children's health and development by intervening during pregnancy and working with families until children start school. Since 2008, researchers at the UCD Geary Institute for Public Policy/School of Economics, have been using a randomised controlled trial design to measure the impact of PFL on children's development. The results to date, concerning parent and child outcomes, have led to the expansion of PFL in a number of other disadvantaged communities through the Government's Area-Based Childhood Programme.

This research focuses on the impact of an early intervention programme which aims to improve children's health and development from pregnancy through to starting school.



DESCRIPTION

The Preparing for Life (PFL) programme is being evaluated by researchers at the UCD Geary Institute for Public Policy/UCD School of Economics using a longitudinal randomised controlled trial design and an implementation analysis. The experimental component involves the random allocation of participants to a high treatment group or a low treatment group. Both groups receive developmental toys, access to free preschool, public health workshops, and a support worker. Participants in the high treatment group also receive home visits from a trained mentor and have group parent training via the Triple P Positive Parenting Programme. 233 women were recruited and randomly assigned to the high or low treatment groups. Between 2008 and 2016 the team have measured child development, child health, parenting, home environment,

maternal health and wellbeing, social support, childcare, household factors and socio-economic status when the children were 6, 12, 18, 24, 36, and 48 months of age. The results to date suggest that the programme has been effective in improving parenting skills, as well as child development and health. In particular, at 48 months, children in the high treatment group exhibited stronger fine motor skills and cognitive development, in addition to a reduced incidence of clinically significant levels of externalising and internalising problems, compared to the low treatment group. They were also less likely to be overweight, and have sleep problems. While the effects on parenting and child health emerged during infancy, the majority of the effects on child development were restricted to the later time periods.

DETAILS OF THE IMPACT

This research has had an impact on four key groups: **parents and children, service providers, policy-makers, and the academic community.**

In terms of our **academic impact**, the research team have published in leading journals and working papers series. Dr. Doyle, the principal investigator's (PI), work has been cited over 1,069 times according to Google Scholar (882 of these since 2011) with an H-index of 16. She is one of the few Irish researchers to have published in the top ranking child development journal 'Child Development' (IF: 4.9). Her article Doyle et al. (2009) is one of the most cited articles in the journal 'Economics and Human Biology'. The PI has been invited to present at numerous academic seminars including: University of Sydney, University of Queensland, Aarhus University, Xiamen University, University College London, University of Chicago, University of Stirling, Royal Holloway University of London, Bristol University, TCD, NUI Galway and Queen's University Belfast. She has also presented at many international conferences including the European Economics Association Annual Congress, the Society for Research in Child Development Biennial Conference, and the World Association for Infant Mental Health World Congress to name a few.

In terms of **policy impact**, the government announcement in Budget 2012 of a further €30million investment in Area-Based Childhood (ABC) Programmes by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and Atlantic Philanthropies has been attributed to the findings from the original evaluations of the Prevention and Early Intervention Programme sites, of which the PFL study was one.

In terms of **impact on service providers**, based on the interim results, the PFL programme is now being rolled out to all families in the PFL catchment area, as well as three additional disadvantaged communities in Ireland. Thus, the work has led to a direct **impact on parents and children**. Within the PFL communities alone, 145 new parents are receiving the PFL programme as of April 2016. While this research is helping to ensure the direct provision of the programme in Ireland, the dissemination of the work has also contributed to the international evidence-base on the effectiveness of home visiting programmes. The team have been invited to present to a number of international governments and policy units including the Economics Research Unit of the Welsh Government, the UK's Cabinet Office Behavioural Insights Team, and the Irish Public Service Evaluation Network. They have also engaged in knowledge transfer with practitioners and service providers including the Longford Westmeath Parenting Partnership, Irish Pre-school Play Association, and Early Childhood Ireland.

Finally, impact regarding knowledge transfer has been achieved through network development, for example, the PI is the Chair of the Children's Research Network of Ireland and Northern Ireland, which has over 400 members drawn from academia, policy and practice arenas. Through regular workshops, summer schools and the annual conference, the work of the team is brought to a large and diverse audience thus maximising impact.



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RESEARCH REFERENCES

Peer Reviewed Articles:

- Tatlow-Golden, M., O'Farrelly, C., Booth, A., O'Rourke, C., Doyle, O. (2016) "‘Look, I have my ears open’: Resilience and early school experiences among children in an economically deprived suburban area in Ireland". *School Psychologist International*, 37(2): 104-120.
- Doyle, O., Fitzpatrick, N., Rawdon C, & Lovett J. (2015). Early intervention and child health: Evidence from a Dublin-based trial. *Economics and Human Biology*, 19: 224-245
- Doyle, O., McGlanaghy, E., Palamaro Munsell, E., McAuliffe, F. (2014) "Home based educational intervention to improve perinatal outcomes for a disadvantaged community: a randomised control trial". *European Journal of Obstetrics and Gynaecology*, 180: 162-167
- Booth, A. Palamaro Munsell, E., Doyle, O. (2014) "Maternal Engagement in a Home Visiting Intervention: What Lies beneath Psychological Resources?" *Journal of Community Psychology*, 42(1): 29-46
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- Doyle O, McEntee L, McNamara K (2012) "Skills, Capabilities and Inequality at School Entry in a Disadvantaged Community". *European Journal of the Psychology of Education*, 27: 133-154.
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- Doyle O, Harmon C, Heckman J, Tremblay R. (2009) "Investing in Early Human Development: Timing and Economic Efficiency", *Economics and Human Biology*, 7(1): 1-6
- Girard, L., Pingault, JB., Doyle, O., Falissard, B., Tremblay, RE. "Developmental associations between conduct problems and expressive language in early childhood: A population-based study". Forthcoming in *Journal of Abnormal Child Psychology*.
- Palamaro Munsell, E., Lovett, J., McNamara, K., Doyle O. (2016) "Friend, foe or facilitator? The role of the parent-service provider relationship in the early implementation of a family-based community intervention". *Community Psychology in Global Perspective*, 2(1): 52-72.
- Doyle, O & PFL Evaluation Team (2014). Assessing the Impact of Preparing for Life at **Twenty-four Months**. Report to Preparing for Life Programme (Atlantic Philanthropies & Department of Children and Youth Affairs)
- Doyle, O & PFL Evaluation Team (2013). Assessing the Impact of Preparing for Life at **Eighteen Months**. Report to Preparing for Life Programme (Atlantic Philanthropies & Department of Children and Youth Affairs)
- Doyle, O & PFL Evaluation Team (2013). Assessing the Impact of Preparing for Life at **Twelve Months**. Report to Preparing for Life Programme (Atlantic Philanthropies & Department of Children and Youth Affairs)
- Doyle, O & PFL Evaluation Team (2012). Assessing the Early Impact of Preparing for Life at **Six Months**. Report to Preparing for Life Programme (Atlantic Philanthropies & Department of Children and Youth Affairs)
- Doyle, O & PFL Evaluation Team (2010). PFL Impact Evaluation Report: **Baseline Analysis**. (Atlantic Philanthropies & Office of the Minister for Children)

Websites:

- <http://geary.ucd.ie/preparingforlife>
- <http://preparingforlife.ie>
- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qx4SznYddHI>

Grant Information:

- Northside Partnership - "An Evaluation of the Impact of the Preparing for Life Home Visiting Programme Phase II". 2016-2018, €129,065
- Northside Partnership - "Evaluation of 'Preparing for Life' Early Childhood Intervention Programme" PHASE I: July 2007- Dec 2013, €800,000. PHASE II: Jan 2014 - Dec 2015, €541,000
- UCD/TCD Innovation Academy "Improving Children's Welfare with Community Innovation: An experimental evaluation of an Irish early childhood intervention". 2010-2014. €87,745
- Irish Research Council Collaborative Research Projects. 2012/2013 - "A mixed methods approach to understanding parental anxiety and coping: Measuring the effects of an early childhood intervention on parenting stress". October 2012- Sept 2013. €88,622
- HRB Project Grant - "Frontier Methods for the Evaluation of Health Interventions". October 2008- September 2011. €300,000

Awards:

- Novartis prize for the best paper in Health Economics at the 2015 Irish Economic Association Annual Meeting, €500
- Winner of the Irish Research Council (IRC) Digital Research Poster Competition 2013. €1000
- Awarded the 2011/2012 Barrington Medal by the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland

Reports:

- Doyle, O & PFL Evaluation Team (2016). Assessing the Impact of Preparing for Life at **Forty-Eight Months**. Report to Preparing for Life Programme (Atlantic Philanthropies & Department of Children and Youth Affairs)
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