

A Randomised Controlled Trial and Process Evaluation of the Lifestart Parenting Programme

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Abstract : This paper presents the findings from a randomised controlled trial (RCT) and process evaluation of the Lifestart parenting programme. Lifestart is a structured child-centred programme of information and practical activity for parents of children aged from birth to five years of age. It is delivered to parents in their own homes by trained, paid family visitors and it is offered to parents regardless of their social, economic or other circumstances. The RCT evaluated the effectiveness of the programme and the process evaluation documented programme delivery and included a qualitative exploration of parent and child outcomes. 424 parents and children participated in the RCT: 216 in the intervention group and 208 in the control group across the island of Ireland. Parent outcomes included: parental knowledge of child development, parental efficacy, stress, social support, parenting skills and embeddedness in the community. Child outcomes included cognitive, language and motor development and social-emotional and behavioural development. Both groups were tested at baseline (when children were less than 1 year old), mid-point (aged 3) and at post-test (aged 5). Data were collected during a home visit, which took two hours. The process evaluation consisted of interviews with parents (n=16 at baseline and end-point), and focus groups with Lifestart Coordinators (n=9) and Family Visitors (n=24). Quantitative findings from the RCT indicated that, compared to the control group, parents who received the Lifestart programme reported reduced parenting-related stress, increased knowledge of their child's development, and improved confidence in their parenting role. These changes were statistically significant and consistent with the hypothesised pathway of change depicted in the logic model. There was no evidence of any change in parents' embeddedness in the community. Although four of the five child outcomes showed small positive change for children who took part in the programme, these were not statistically significant and there is no evidence that the programme improves child cognitive and non-cognitive skills by immediate post-test. The qualitative process evaluation highlighted important challenges related to conducting trials of this magnitude and design in the general population. Parents reported that a key incentive to take part in study was receiving feedback from the developmental assessment, which formed part of the data collection. This highlights the potential importance of appropriate incentives in relation to recruitment and retention of participants. The interviews with intervention parents indicated that one of the first changes they experienced as a result of the Lifestart programme was increased knowledge and confidence in their parenting ability. The outcomes and pathways perceived by parents and described in the interviews are also consistent with the findings of the RCT and the theory of change underpinning the programme. This hypothesises that improvement in parental outcomes, arising as a consequence of the programme, mediate the change in child outcomes. Parents receiving the Lifestart programme reported great satisfaction with and commitment to the programme, with the role of the Family Visitor being identified as one of the key components of the programme.

Keywords : parent-child relationship, parental self-efficacy, parental stress, school readiness

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