

### Early Help – early intervention

#### What is early help?

##### Some background information

In 2010 child protection expert Professor Eileen Munro was commissioned by the UK Government to produce an independent review into child protection systems in England. The purpose of the review was to recommend better ways of working and to reform child protection systems from being mainly focussed on compliance to those that 'keep a focus on children, checking whether they are being effectively helped, and adapting when problems are identified'. The full report, *The Munro review of child protection – A child centred system (2011)* concentrates on a number of themes such as clear principles of what contributes to effective child protection systems and practice and how this then impacts upon children. The report also introduced a new phrase that has since become a common use of language that describes both the principles and processes required to support identification and responding to early interventions for children and young people. This approach is referred to as 'early help'. A whole chapter in the Munro report was dedicated to early help drawing attention to the need for shared responsibilities for the provision of early help and how this would best be achieved.

Previous reviews from others such as the Right Honourable Frank Field MP, Graham Allen MP and Dame Claire Tickell had provided the platform for much discussion about the need to support children earlier in order to prevent problems or concerns escalating to more significant, harmful and dangerous situations and circumstances. Munro stated that '*Preventative services [early help] can do more to reduce abuse and neglect than reactive services*' [Statutory Services]. The child centred focus that Munro advocated, would therefore provide children and young people with the help that they needed in a timely and appropriate way. This would involve effective partnerships with parents and other professionals or adults supporting children and families and would have great potential to apply effective joined up and coordinated interventions and services that ultimately safeguard children.

Whilst some of the recommendations made in Munro's report were not taken on board by the Government, the growing focus and development of early help practice continues.

Statutory guidance in England, Scotland and Wales advocates the importance of early help (early intervention) highlighting it as a means to prevent concerns for children or families from escalating and getting any worse. This concept and practice is acknowledged in the following Government statutory guidance.

Department for Education (DfE), 2018

Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, 2017

Scottish Government, 2014

Welsh Government, 2018

## Government guidance on early help (England)

In England, early years providers must have regard to the statutory guidance '*Working together to safeguard children A guide to inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children*'. (2019) This guidance has some specific explanations and expectations of early help. It specifies that;

- early help is more effective in promoting the welfare of children than reacting later
- support for early help should be provided as soon as the problem emerges at any time in a child or young persons' life
- early help can prevent further problems from arising

The guidance advises that practitioners should be *alert to the potential need for early help* for a child who:

- is disabled and has specific additional needs
- has special educational needs (whether or not they have a statutory education, health and care plan)
- is a young carer
- is showing signs of engaging in anti-social or criminal behaviour, including gang involvement and association with organised crime groups
- is frequently missing/goes missing from care or from home
- is misusing drugs or alcohol themselves
- is in a family circumstance presenting challenges for the child, such as substance misuse, adult mental health problems and domestic abuse
- has returned home to their family from care
- is showing early signs of abuse and/or neglect
- is at risk of being radicalised
- is privately fostered

## Some considerations

- Early help is not a statutory requirement. This means that local authorities do not have a legal duty to support a child with early help services as they do with children who are child in need or at risk of significant harm as defined in the Children Act 1989.
- Early help assessments must to be done with consent from the child's parent or legal guardian.
- Effective early help assessment and interventions require good partnership working with others including professionals who are experts in their field such as health / medical professionals, schools and early years practitioners.
- Information sharing plays a vital role in effective early help practice. Information sharing must demonstrate compliance (what is required by law) and take into account best practice that supports transparency and a child centred approach.

### Early help in the early years

Children who are supported through early help interventions and services may be;

- Identified as needing extra support through the progress check at two (Early Years Foundation Stage - England)
- Have an education, health and care plan
- Receive support that has been identified by the 'named person' for a child through a planned and coordinated approach (Getting it right for every child - Scotland)
- Supported by one single agency for specific targeted interventions
- Supported by a multi-agency approach that will involve early years practitioners and other professionals to provide a holistic solution to meet the child and families identified needs
- A child who has previously been subject to a child protection plan or a child in need and whose needs are no longer as concerning but still require targeted and coordinated support

