

NCI Tionscnamh Luathfhoghlama Early Learning Initiative

ParentChild+ Equal Possibilities From The Start

RETHINK IRELAND Our Social Innovation Fund

EVALUATION OF THE PARENTCHILD+ PROGRAMME: EVALUATION REPORT

By: Sarah Murphy, Independent Social Research Consultant & Dr. Jane Pillinger, Senior Research Consultant & Policy Advisor

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Executive Summary

This summary gives an overview of this- evaluation process of the ParentChild+ programme process, its purpose, methodology and sample as well as its key findings and recommendations arising from these.

Purpose of Evaluation

The objective of this evaluation was to follow on from the critical review of the programme conducted in 2018-19 and to:

1. Critically evaluate whether ParentChild+ is having an impact on children's development and identify what factors contribute to the outcome.
2. Critically evaluate the scaling of ParentChild+; examine if replication is working to the same extent and what factors contribute to the outcome.
3. Highlight and discuss emergent themes that arise during the research process.

Methodology

This evaluation has applied a mixed methods methodology consisting of quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis. The secondary research took the form of desk-research and included an analysis of data already gathered and any other appropriate documentation and research material. This consisted of the i) review of relevant literature, manuals and programme resources regarding replication, quality and scalability; and ii) analysis of ParentChild+ data to date, including participant data, child and parent observational assessments (Child Behaviour Trait and Parent and Child Together), evaluation forms, quality assurance, participation data and previous internal and external evaluations of the programme.

Primary research was also conducted in the form of focus groups, observation and interviews between May and June 2025:

- Three site visits to carry out observations of supervision practice for quality and fidelity with three diverse sites nationally.
- Six interviews, two at each participating site with the manager and coordinator regarding fidelity and scalability.
- Four focus groups with staff, one each with managers, coordinators and home visitors.
- Four focus groups with parents.

Sample

The sample for the consultations for this evaluation has included managers, coordinators and home visitors working with ParentChild+ and parents engaged with the programme. In total, 57 staff and 11 parents participated in the consultations.

Key Findings

The seven key findings of this evaluation have been the following:

1. ParentChild+ is viewed as highly effective by staff and parent stakeholders

There were high levels of satisfaction with the programme across all parents engaging with the programme and all staff, in manager, coordinator and home visitor roles, delivering it. All participants in the interviews and focus groups perceived the programme to be performing well and as highly

effective in bringing about positive outcomes for children, parents, families and wider communities. Parents reported that the programme had exceeded their expectations. A majority of parents reported that outcomes for their children, themselves and their family would not have been possible without the programme. The scaling of the programme nationally was widely welcomed and viewed as successful regarding fidelity and performance. Participants called for the sustainability and further expansion of the programme, both to increase numbers of families engaged with at site level and to increase the numbers of sites.

2. ParentChild+ is resulting in improved outcomes for children

Participants reported the following ten improved outcomes for children as a result of the programme: i) İmproved overall child development; ii) Improved development for children with additional needs; iii) improved speech and language; iv) improved attention and focus; v) improved social skills and interactions; vi) improved emotional regulation and behaviour; vii) increased confidence levels; viii) improved mood, wellbeing, happiness and emotional resilience; ix) improved educational outcomes and school readiness; and x) improved bond and relationship with parent and other family members. Improved outcomes were also reported for other children in the home and wider family networks.

Improved overall development in the programme's five focus areas of physical, intellectual, language, social and emotional, gross and fine motor skills development. Early detection of developmental issues was also reported due to engagement with the programme and it's the timing of its interaction with families when the child is eighteen months to three years. Improved development was also reported for children with additional needs. Due to the timing of the programme, ParentChild+ was often delivering supports to children and their families before any assessment or diagnosis had taken place and often and in the absence of other supports. When children did ultimately receive diagnoses and supports other professionals, including psychologists, considered them to be ahead of their peers due to their engagement with the programme. Improved mood, wellbeing, happiness and emotional resilience for children included reported longer-term emotional resilience by home visitors whose children had completed the programme and were now in primary and secondary education. Finally, improved outcomes were reported for other children in the home and wider family networks, including other siblings and cousins who had participated in the visits, benefited from the VISMS, practices, and routines in the home and from improved relationships and atmosphere in the home and family dynamic.

3. ParentChild+ is resulting in improved outcomes for parents

Improved outcomes for parents were reported by parents and staff. These included: i) enhanced parenting skills, practices, and understanding of how to best support their child and the importance of play; ii) enhanced parenting skills and supports for parents of children with additional needs to best support the specific needs of their child; iii) improved awareness of the importance of reading; iv) improved relationship, interactions and quality time with their child; v) increased confidence and sense of empowerment; vi) reduced stress and worry about their child and increased feelings of reassurance; vii) reduced social isolation and increased social integration and sense of belonging in the local community; viii) increased engagement with other community services, programmes and activities; ix) increased social capital and likelihood of progressing on to training, education and employment; and x) administrative support regarding relevant schools, assessments, services and entitlements.

Parents and staff reported that improved parenting skills and related practices and routines learned through the programme were continued after children had graduated, leading to sustained changes in protecting quality time, positive interactions, and improved relationships and family dynamics. Parents of children with additional needs were often not receiving any other supports at the time of engagement with the programme. Parents and staff reported changed behaviour and increased awareness of reading. This included learning practices to read and act out stories in an engaging way and to tell stories through pictures using books with less text where there were literacy issues. Parents and staff reported becoming members of their local libraries for the first time through the programme. Parents and staff reported reduced stress and worry about their child and increased feelings of reassurance as a result of ParentChild+. Often this was due to advice and guidance received from the home visitor and positive affirmative support regarding their parenting. Parents' worry about their children also decreased due to the improved outcomes that were achieved for their child and their development as part of the programme, including improved language, social and emotional skills and school readiness.

Parents and staff reported reduced social isolation and loneliness and increased social integration and sense of belonging in the local community as a result of ParentChild+ home visitors being a trusted adult they could talk to, and being linked with other families and social groups and peer networks through the programme. Some parent peer support networks were established as a direct result of participation in the programme and related networking support. This was especially significant for families who had recently moved to Ireland, who had limited family and friends visiting their homes, limited English and limited opportunities to socialise. The programme was also considered an important way to introduce Irish culture to families and to involve them in intercultural and diverse communities. Parents and staff reported becoming more active in their local communities and availing of increased supports as a result of ParentChild+, including attendance at community events. Increased engagement with other services was particularly reported by staff working within wraparound contexts who could cross-refer parents to other relevant supports within the same lead agency. Parents and staff reported confidence and sense of empowerment as a result of the programme. This confidence related to their role as parents and empowerment regarding potential future opportunities in terms of further training and education and employment. Home visitors who had been parents spoke of their participation in programme as being the catalyst for them to undertake training, education and employment. Finally, administrative support for parents regarding relevant schools, assessments, services and entitlements assisted parents in navigating systems and supports and was especially important for parents who had recently moved to Ireland, had limited English or had additional needs.

4. ParentChild+ is resulting in improved outcomes for the social integration and social capital of communities

This evaluation has found in addition to outcomes for children, parents and families, ParentChild+ is also exerting a 'ripple effect', producing improved societal outcomes for wider communities in which the programme is delivered. These communities characterised by intergenerational unemployment and socioeconomic deprivation and marginalisation. Outcomes identified for these communities included: i) improved social integration and cohesiveness as a result of the social integration of parents and families; and ii) increased education and community employment, both through home visitors' employment, training and progression to formal education and through participating

parents' enhanced confidence, increased likelihood to pursue further education and employment, and increased participation in community events and local libraries. ParentChild+ has been operating for several years in many sites and in some communities since 2008. This longevity, linked with its model of employing and upskilling local people as home visitors, and in some cases, coordinators and managers, means that the programme has developed intergenerational links with families and extended family and community networks.

5. Scaling and fidelity of ParentChild+ is working well

Scaling and fidelity of the programme is working well:

- All staff reported positive experiences with replication and fidelity.
- Understood the rationale for fidelity and that it was grounded in research.
- Considered it to be essential to the functioning and scaling of ParentChild+.
- Described fidelity as 'very important'; 'very positive'; 'key'; and that it 'makes sense'.
- Protects staff and families, providing appropriate boundaries
- Some flexibility exists to adjust the programme to child and parent needs, including for children with additional needs, and to local context.
- Staff mentioned that where they did adapt it was to 'add on' practices, including additional training.

Enabling factors

A range of enabling factors were identified as part of this evaluation which have fostered the successful performance of the ParentChild+ programme and related levels of satisfaction. These include the programme's successful evidence-based model and approach and additional factors enabling its effectiveness.

The successful evidence-based model and approach applied by the programme was seen as unique and a significant enabling factor in achieving outcomes for children, parent, families and communities and differentiating ParentChild+ from other services families may be interacting with. Specifically, enabling elements of this model and approach included the programme's: i) home-based nature; ii) evidence base and related research on impact; iii) supervision and reflective practice and related support and peer learning; iv) non-judgmental approach; v) model of local people working as home visitors in their own communities; vi) structure, length and content of the programme; vii) timing and capacity for PEI support; viii) free high quality toys and books; ix) voluntary nature; and x) credibility, reputation and trusted and recognisable 'brand' in communities in which it operates.

In addition to the programme's model and approach, other enabling factors identified were: i) the engagement and commitment of parents; ii) the quality, training, skills and commitment of ParentChild+ staff; iii) the trusted relationship between parents and home visitors; iv) effective staff relationships and team culture; v) positive relationships, community of practice and peer support across sites; vi) support and capacity-building from the Early Learning Initiative (ELI) and the Home Visiting Alliance (HVA); vii) flexibility to adapt programme to needs of families and communities; viii) community events organised or supported by ParentChild+; and ix) relationship with other community organisations and services.

The engagement of parents was considered essential to the functioning of the programme. Their continued engagement was especially important given the long timeframe of the programme's 92 visits. The high quality, training, skills and commitment of ParentChild+ staff, including home visitors, coordinators and managers were identified as enabling factors in the successful delivery of the programme and achievement of related outcomes. It was considered essential that this is protected through effective staff retention. The trusted relationship between parents and children and the home visitor was considered key to the success of the programme and was closely related to aspects of the model, including the programme's home-based nature, the consistency in contact which facilitated the formation and maintenance of a relationship as well as the non-judgmental and strengths-based approach applied. Effective staff relationships and team culture were important enabling factors and were facilitated by the model's supervision and reflective practice. Positive relationships, community of practice and peer support across sites were cited as key for manager and coordinator roles. Community of practice was not referenced for home visitors. Support and capacity-building from ELI and HVA were found to enable effective operation of the programme as well as its continuous expansion and improvement through dissemination of training and resources to promote best practice. This support was found to be responsive to emerging needs and to incorporate feedback from sites regarding current challenges or training and learning needs.

Notwithstanding the overarching importance of fidelity to the ParentChild+, there was also some flexibility identified which was considered essential to enabling staff to dynamically tailor the programme to optimise outcomes and relevance of support for children, families and communities. Community events organised or supported by ParentChild+ were enabling in further bolstering parents to access supports or to make connections with other families in their communities. Finally, strong interagency relationships between ParentChild+ staff and other community organisations and services were considered a key enabling factor to the programme's successful performance. The aforementioned high quality of ParentChild+ staff and management in terms of educational and professional qualifications and experience, commitment and passion regarding PEI and supporting families was evident as an enabling factor and one that needs to be protected through improved retention.

Challenges identified

Challenges were also identified as part of this evaluation process. These relate to challenges in terms of the operation of the programme as well as challenging external contexts in which the programme is working.

Challenges regarding the operation of the programme were identified. Firstly, challenges were identified by all staff regarding funding of the programme and perceptions that current funding is insufficient. This was partly due to increases in running costs and equipment due to inflation, with Verbal Interaction Stimulus Materials (VISMS) reported to have increased in price by 33%. Staff called for funding to be increased to provide for these increases and to increase salaries. This would reflect the high performance and proven outcomes the programme is achieving and to enable its expansion to more families to address high needs in their communities and related waiting lists for ParentChild+. Managers and coordinators were critical of the significant quantity of time they spent on fundraising activities, as well as challenges sourcing funding. Staff spoke of finding it difficult to source funding for staff costs and that lead agency overall budgets could prevent them from applying from certain grants despite not having access to these budgets. Staff expressed disappointment and confusion that government commitment at policy and strategy level to home visiting had not, in their view, been translated into increased funding and longer-term core funding models which would

assist in service planning, improve retention and improve morale. Staff salaries were considered relatively low which was impacting on staff retention, with staff increasingly leaving to better paid roles which aligned with high levels of training. Managers and staff called for increased salaries to improve retention and also to ethically renumerate staff for their work, reflect their levels of training, and ensure parity of esteem with staff in similar roles. Staff were critical of inequality, inconsistency and a lack of transparency of funding across sites. Some staff also referenced challenges sourcing VISMS, especially high-quality wooden toys.

Staff also identified challenges regarding the increasing and high numbers of referrals of children with additional needs which was constituting approximately 40% of their intake and a lack of specific training in working with these children and a lack of VISMS for them. Staff also reported challenges regarding the need for more practice-based in-person training for home visitors to appropriately prepare them for the role, longer shadowing times, and additional training on child protection and relationships with parents. Managers and coordinators were critical also of recent changes which had meant that it was no longer possible for home visitors to train part-time for qualifications while staying on in their roles and that advocacy efforts with the ETB had so far been unsuccessful. These changes have meant that while home visitors were formerly able to complete Levels 5 and 6 in the evening while working as a home visitor, this is not possible due to the discontinuation of evening courses. This was seen as especially problematic in the context of the community sector being endemically under-funded, with the vast majority of home visiting carried out by women. These recent changes further prevented women from accessing progression routes to training and education and limited the community employment activation arm of ParentChild+, considered a particular strength in terms of breaking cycles of disadvantage. Finally, challenges were identified regarding a lack of awareness of the programme among some services and organisations, which hampered referral, and the need to strengthen interagency collaborative relationships.

Staff referenced external factors relating to issues families they are working with are facing. All staff reported that they had never seen needs as high and as complex as families were now presenting with. These included increased numbers of children with additional needs, a lack of services and supports, and significant waiting times; high levels of criminality; addiction; domestic and sexual violence in the home; mental health issues among children and parents; increased homelessness; high needs of Traveller families, comprising up to 50% at some sites; and families in direct provision accommodation. Of particular concern were the lack of basic PHN services and extreme delays reported by parents and staff in terms of waiting lists for assessments and supports for families, including SLT, OT, CDNT and psychology and mental health supports. Given the timeframe of this programme, focusing on children aged 18 months to 3 years, they generally do not have a diagnosis and the majority of parents and families engaging with the programme are not receiving specialised supports. This is hugely problematic especially in the context of research outlined in Section 1 confirming the importance of early intervention to improve child outcomes and in line with government commitments to the PEI approach. This also risks over-burdening home visitors who, while highly trained in child development, are not experts in supporting children with additional needs. ParentChild+ staff felt they are ‘plugging a hole’, ‘filling a gap’, having to constantly do more and expressing their wish that they could simply deliver the programme as designed with families rather than also having to address these serious issues. They felt increasing pressure to accept referrals in the absence of other supports for families and struggled to maintain a balance in the profile of children they were working with.

Recommendations

This section presents recommendations across nine areas for the future development of the ParentChild+ programme arising from the findings of this evaluation. The recommendations are cognisant of ELI's Strategy 2020-2025 and related scaling plans, as well as funding commitments as outlined in Section 1. The recommendations are for action by ELI, and in some areas, also for attention by national policy-makers, as detailed below:

1. **Ensuring long-term sustainability of funding for the ParentChild+ programme**

Recommendations for ELI:

i) Improve transparency of funding across ParentChild+ and sites nationally.
ii) Increase capacity within sites regarding future fundraising, funding and related grant application processes.

Recommendations for policy-makers at the national level:

Establish a mechanism for further exploratory discussions regarding funding options to secure the long-term sustainability of the ParentChild+ programme. This could include the setting up of a national committee with membership from sites nationally, and from ELI and NCI. This group or forum should explore options regarding:

i) Securing sustainable funding through multi-annual, core national funding streams for ParentChild+, building on the advocacy work already undertaken by HVA;
ii) Increasing staff salaries to ensure parity of esteem and improve staff retention;
iii) Increasing funding for the home visiting programmes' resources, including ParentChild+ VISMS, in line with inflation.
iv) Improving transparency and equity of funding across home visiting programmes and sites nationally.

2. **Supporting children with additional needs engaging with ParentChild+ and staff working with them.**

Recommendations for ELI:

i) Increase training for home visitors on working with children with additional needs.
ii) Consider other ways to support staff working with children with additional needs, including potential introduction of VISMS for children with additional needs and the development of a guidance document or toolkit for parents of additional needs. This could include signposting to local, regional and national supports, services and assessment processes and guidance regarding potential milestones and ways to best support their children in a strength-based way.

Recommendations for policy-makers at the national level:

i) Support the development of national guidance and protocols for working with children with additional needs as part of home visiting services.
ii) Ensure access to resources and training linked to early intervention, assessments, and wraparound supports for home visitors working with children with additional needs.
iii) Ensure sufficient resourcing of specialist assessment, services and PEI support for children with additional needs, including CDNT, psychology, SLT and OT supports. National attention

must be focused on appropriately resourcing staff within these services to ensure that current waiting lists and gaps in assessment and related services are addressed to support children and families.

3. **Safeguarding fidelity during future scaling to maintain quality and trust in ParentChild+.**

Recommendations for ELI:

Continue to ensure a commitment to safeguarding fidelity during future scaling to guarantee ongoing quality assurance, which is identified as key to the future development of the programme. This should include continued commitment to the model and related enabling factors such as reflective practice and maintaining trusted relationships with parents and families, while allowing flexibility for sites to respond to local needs.

4. **Enhancing initial and additional training for home visitors to enhance preparation and support educational and career progression.**

Recommendations for ELI:

i) Encourage in-person initial training for home visitors where possible, and increase training in workshop format to further prepare staff. This should include interactive training to encompass role play and real-life scenarios that home visitors are likely to encounter.
ii) Explore ways of furthering advocacy and related collaboration with ETBs to reinstate access routes for home visitors to complete training. This should include options for part-time and evening training with a view to ensuring community employment and education activation as part of ParentChild+.
iii) Enhance training on child protection, parent relationships, and addressing additional needs, as referenced in area 2 above, or signpost staff to appropriate training.

5. **Establishing and supporting a community of practice for home visitors**

Recommendation for ELI:

Expand the community of practice to enable home visitors, as well as coordinators, to participate in events or further support sites' capacity to conduct regional community of practice days or events for home visitors. These would ideally be in-person and would allow home visitors to engage and benefit from peer learning across sites as coordinators are three times per year.

6. **Increasing awareness of ParentChild+ and strengthening collaborative relationships across services**

Recommendations for ELI:

Promote further awareness raising of the programme among parents and other services and agencies working with families. This could include outreach activities to schools and community organisations and annual showcase events. Such efforts would help to strengthen awareness of the programme among parents, families and organisations and services working with them to increase referrals and broaden the referral base and pathways for the programme.

7. **Supporting families and ParentChild+ staff regarding domestic violence in home visiting contexts**

Recommendations for ELI:

i) Support sites in developing and implementing protocols, policies and procedures to support home visitors and families in contexts of domestic violence
ii) Provide practical guidance and training on domestic violence for ParentChild+ staff.

Recommendations for policy-makers at the national level:

i) Develop specialist guidelines and protocols for home visitors on addressing and supporting families with domestic violence.
ii) Develop policies and procedures for domestic violence, including guidance on safety and mandatory reporting requirements. This could include partnering with national organisations supporting survivors of domestic violence regarding best practice ways to support staff encountering violence in the home and the families impacted by this.

8. Increasing awareness and transparency regarding the role of ELI

Recommendation for ELI:

Increase awareness and transparency regarding the role of ELI, its scope, and how it can support sites, and the limits of this role. This should include transparency regarding ELI's role in relation to funding arrangements for programme delivery and ways it can support and guide regulation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation, capacity-building and CPD.

9. Supporting and sustaining peer support networks of parents who have engaged with ParentChild+

Recommendations for ELI:

Support the establishment, maintenance and sustainability of parent-led peer support networks of parents who have engaged with ParentChild+, and build capacity within sites to do so, to further long-lasting change and social connections among parents and families.

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Glossary of terms

ABC	Area-based Childhood Programme
CBT	Child Behaviour Traits observation measures
CDNT	Children's Disability Network Team
ELI	Early Learning Initiative
HSE	Health Service Executive
HVA	Home Visiting Alliance
IMH	Infant Mental Health
IPAS	International Protection Accommodation Service
NCI	National College of Ireland
PACT	Parent and Child Together observation measures
ParentChild+	ParentChild+ programme
PCHP	Parent Child Home Programme (former name for the ParentChild+ programme)
PEI	Prevention and Early Intervention
PEIN	Prevention and Early Intervention Network
PHN	Public Health Nurse
PPFS	Prevention, Partnership and Family Support
RCT	Randomised controlled trial
REC	Research Ethics Committee
SENO	Special Educational Needs Organisers
SLT	Speech and Language Therapist
Tusla	Child and Family Agency
VISM	Verbal Interaction Stimulus Materials.

Section 1: Introduction and context

This section provides a brief overview of literature and policy commitments relating to early intervention and preventative approaches relevant to the ParentChild+ programme. It also provides background context on the establishment of the National College of Ireland's (NCI) Early Learning Initiative (ELI) and the ParentChild+ programme, its evolution, how it works and intended outcomes. This section concludes by presenting the aims and objectives of this evaluation.

1.1 Prevention and early intervention (PEI) approaches

The vital contribution of prevention and early intervention approaches is increasingly acknowledged as essential to improve outcomes for children, parents, families and wider communities and to address early indicators which could lower these outcomes. The first five years of a child's life are considered especially important (Valcan, Davis and Pino-Pasternak, 2018). Early childhood programmes are viewed as effective in supporting the development of children at risk, ensuring school readiness and improving future outcomes for children and families (Peterson, Loeb and Chamberlain, 2018; Han and Neuharth-Pritchett, 2019). PEI approaches, detailed below, including supporting parents in home-based and community-based wraparound initiatives, are recognised as positively impacting on a range of areas. These include reducing inequality and disadvantage, improving brain development and capacity for learning, nutrition, oral language and communication, and academic achievement. There are also considerations for scaling PEI initiatives, including early childhood and parenting programmes, as summarised below.

Children who grow up in conditions of poverty are more likely to experience social exclusion and health problems in the future and face more challenges in developing to their full potential. Research has found that early childhood interventions can tackle inequality, mitigating the negative impact of poverty and helping to break the cycle of disadvantage (Guerin, 2014). Research evidences a strong economic case for an early intervention and preventative model, asserting the value of interventions at an early stage in both a child's life and in the development of the parent-child relationship, and identifying positive returns of at least double the investment in services (Barnardos UK, 2012). Similarly, US-based research found returns of up to sixteen times the initial investment in early childhood care and education (Start Strong, 2011). The Irish National Economic and Social Forum (NESF) estimated the benefits of investment in early care and education in Ireland to be between €4 and €7 for every €1 invested (NESF, 2015). More recently, the Irish Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth has produced research studies and policy papers with similar assertions regarding the economic case for PEI and home visiting and the disconnect between policy and government commitment to PEI and actual practice (Doyle, 2024; McGilloway et al, 2024).

To address disadvantage, it is necessary to have a balance of universal supports with appropriate and responsive targeted provision for the most marginalised children, young people and their families. (Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures, 2014: 30). Literature also affirms the importance of interagency working in improving outcomes for children and families (Statham, 2011; Boydell, 2015). These working arrangements may be interagency, multiagency, multisectoral (Statham, 2011; Williams, 2012) and focus on joint working across service providers, organisations and agencies, increasing public value, creating synergy, sharing common goals and an emphasis on negotiated process (Williams, 2012).

Research evidences the neuroscience of child development and infant mental health. Research specifically focuses on the fact that an infant's brain is fully developed by the age of three years and highlights the value of intervention at an early stage to maximise brain development, infant mental

health and capacity for learning in later years (Marmot Health Inequalities Review, 2010: 22). Neuroscientific research has also linked positive early experiences and supportive early childhood relationships and environments to improved brain development (Winter, 2010). Research from the Irish longitudinal study, Growing up in Ireland, links early nutrition to later outcomes regarding obesity and has found that 1 in 4 children were overweight or obese by the age of three and the quality of a child's nutrition and diet in these early years had implications for risks of being overweight or obese (Nixon, 2012).

Research is increasingly linking PEI with improved oral language and communication skills and conversely, speech and language difficulties and speech delays with social disadvantage and mental health issues (O'Connor et al, 2012). Research asserts that this link between oral language difficulties and social disadvantage is such that with each increase in the level of disadvantage, there is an associated increase in the number of children experiencing language difficulties (Law et al., 2017). The lack of SLT support and limited vocabulary and language competence can exacerbate the issue of mental health and anxiety among children and adults. Children from families experiencing disadvantage can be six months behind in terms of language acquisition and use by two years (Fernald et al., 2013). Speech and language difficulties have negative impacts on educational attainment, and their prevalence is most severe in disadvantaged areas, with up to 50% of children in such communities identified as having a Speech and Language need (Conti-Ramsden and Botting, 2004; Locke et al., 2002; Leitao and Fletcher, 2004). Hartshorne (2009) links a higher prevalence of speech, language and communication with disadvantage. If these needs are unsupported, they can have significant costs to individuals, families, and the state in general, in terms of educational attainment, social relationships, personal development, behavioural and emotional development, criminal activity, and employment prospects. Research emphasises the importance of prevention through i) supportive early environments; ii) integrated early intervention programmes to prevent and identify needs as early as possible; iii) focusing on universal and targeted services for oral language development; and iv) building capacity of parents and early years professionals in this area (Hartshorne, 2009; Rafferty, 2014).

Regarding academic achievement, early childhood support is recognised as key to developing skills and attitudes that lead to academic achievement and later success (Aboud and Yousafza, 2015; Britto et al, 2017; OECD, 2020). The earlier this support can occur, the greater the benefits, with the first five years considered critical for all areas of development, including cognitive and oral language development, as outlined above. The behaviour and supportive involvement of parents is also considered crucial as is presented further below (Valcan, Davis and Pino-Pasternak, 2018). Early childhood intervention programmes have been found to improve development outcomes for children at risk, including school readiness (Peterson, Loeb and Chamberlain, 2018; Han and Neuharth-Pritchett, 2019).

Supporting parents as part of PEI has also been found to have significant implications for outcomes for children, as well as for parents themselves (Guralnick, 1997) and is especially important to mitigate the risk factors associated with social disadvantage (Shaw and Winslow, 1997; Barlow et al, 2012). Parents are now recognised as the first educators of their children, and their relationship with their children exerts a profound influence on their children's wellbeing and future life progression. The home learning environment has been found to have a profound impact on children's cognitive and learning development (Kleemans et al, 2012; Niklas and Schneider, 2017). Irish research has also shown that a focus on parenting, educational support and quality of life can mitigate the long-term effects of poverty and marginalisation for vulnerable children and families (Madden, 2018). Parenting and positive parenting behaviours are thus central in promoting healthy child development (Shonkoff

and Garner, 2012; Asmussen et al, 2016). Analysis of Growing Up in Ireland data has also shown that the quality of the early parent-child relationship predicts how well children will get on with their peers later in life (Nixon et al, 2013). Results from the equivalent longitudinal study for children in the UK, the Millennium Cohort Study, show that positive parenting styles can help improve early child development outcomes for children experiencing disadvantage UK (Centre for Longitudinal Studies, 2024). This highlights the importance of bonding and attachment for both child and parent outcomes.

Parenting support programmes have been found to bring about significant improvements in reducing parental depression and stress levels, improving parents' confidence and skills, reducing social isolation and improving children's behaviour (Allen, 2011; Nixon, 2012; Sneddon and Owens, 2012; Statham, 2013; Halle et al., 2015). Literature and policy acknowledge that reducing social isolation among parents, parental and community engagement, and community-based services and supports are critical to improving children's development outcomes (OECD, 2012). Early childhood parenting intervention should be i) tailored to families' needs ranging from universal interventions, to more targeted and specialist to provide more intensive supports (Asmussen et al, 2016; Britto et al, 2017); and ii) take place in a range of settings suitable to families' relationships and needs, including school and home settings, and use multiple methods (Sneddon et al, 2012).

Home visiting programmes aim to support parent and child in their home environment. Home visiting programmes' theories of change are often based on focusing on parental change as a mechanism for improving child outcomes (Raikes et al, 2014). Home visiting programmes have been found to improve parenting skills, parent-child relationships, children's language development and family health, and to have most impact the earlier they engage with parents, ideally prenatally (Henwood et al, 2020). Enabling factors identified for successful home visiting programmes include strength-based philosophy; voluntary enrolment; regularly scheduled visits; a curriculum to structure the Home Visitor's interventions; and careful selection, training and supervision of Home Visitors (Heaman et al, 2006; Nievar, Van Egeren and Pollard, 2010). Azzi-Lessing (2011) calls for an expansion of methods and tools to evaluate home visiting programmes and for them to be viewed as a component of a comprehensive system of child and family supports, rather than as a stand-alone intervention model.

Community-based parenting supports can facilitate referrals to a range of local services, enhance a sense of belonging and social cohesiveness, and prevent social isolation. Wraparound approaches, relevant to the ParentChild+ model, have evolved from evidence-based efforts to work more effectively with children's families in challenging situations in communities (Burchard et al, 2002). Wraparound is considered in the literature to be an empowering intervention rather than a service (Burchard et al, 2002; Walter and Petr, 2011). Research relating to wraparound approaches has included a focus on supports and outcomes for children and young people experiencing behavioural difficulties or trauma, and children and young people with experience of juvenile justice systems (Carney and Buttell, 2003). Wraparound models have been found to improve outcomes for children and young people with emotional and behavioural disorders and their families (Clark et al, 1998). Wraparound is a collaborative and interagency approach which represents a coordinated way to identify needs and plan for addressing these in an individualised and culturally appropriate way with a view to achieving defined outcomes where families are recognised as active partners (Burchard et al, 2002)

In an Irish context wraparound has been described as a structured process which aims to meet multiple needs and reduce barriers to engagement through collaborative, multidisciplinary practice and service delivery in community settings (Evaluation of Wraparound in Ireland for Children and

Families ENRICH, 2019). Certain elements are considered necessary for wraparound working, including management by a collaborative interagency structure, rather than ownership by a single agency; implementation being guided by experts; interagency referral pathways and processes; regular review of progress and achievement of agreed outcomes (Bruns et al, 2012). The US-based National Wraparound Initiative (NWI) states that formal or informal policies should be developed to guide successful wraparound implementation, including regarding how information is shared, how referral happens, and how decisions are made in relation to whether families are eligible for wraparound supports (Bruns et al, 2012). As mentioned above, it has also been stressed that it is important for children and families to be partners and not passive recipients of supports and that parent champions and advocates are engaged and nurtured to provide community-based peer support: Youth and families should be afforded leadership roles on teams and be supported by parent advocates. To extend the empowerment idea of wraparound beyond the individual case level, a clear commitment to social justice by working toward system change must be made (Walter and Petr, 2011).

Finally, the importance of scaling PEI early childhood initiatives is widely recognised. Adapting early years and parenting programmes is considered more complex than other health and social programmes because the determinants of child development span multiple sectors. As such, wraparound approaches are preferred. It is also crucial for scaling processes to involve local communities in service delivery and to recognise the distinct needs of each context and allowing sufficient flexibility to respond to local needs (Azzi-Lessing, 2011). Successful scaling also inevitably requires data to track progress and enable change, monitor costs and ensure appropriate accountability (Cavallera et al, 2019). Ensuring organisational capacity and comprehensive succession planning, which avoids dependence on individuals, is considered key in scaling early childhood and parenting initiatives. Enablers facilitating scaling include synergies between systems, workforce, governance, and social-political mobilisation of parents (Britto et al, 2022). Where variations or adaptations occur across sites, these should be transparently reported (Lum et al, 2024).

1.2 Policy context

Levels of deprivation, child poverty and homelessness are increasing currently in Ireland (Children's Rights Alliance, 2024; ESRI, 2025). Some children are considered to be especially at risk, including those in large families, in lone parent households, and in households where someone has a disability (ESRI, 2025). Several Irish policy commitments relate to PEI in the context of poverty, deprivation and social marginalisation and exclusion. The whole of government policy, Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: The Irish national policy framework for children and young people 2014-2020, recognised that investment in the very early years, i.e. 0-3 years, yields the highest returns and improves outcomes for children which extend to adulthood (Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: 15). The subsequent policy Better Outcomes Brighter Futures: Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2023-2028 similarly includes a focus on supporting children and young people experiencing poverty, disadvantage and social exclusion. First 5, a whole of Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families (DCYA, 2018) upholds the importance of early intervention for healthy child brain development and mental health and recognises that parents' behaviour and positive parent-child attachment are the most important factors in infants' self-identity and psychological wellbeing. This was later acknowledged in the area of parenting supports in the National Model of Parenting Support Services (DECDIY, 2022) and the 2022 National Parenting Strategy from the Department of Children.

Health and maternity policies have emphasised the importance of PEI, specifically early intervention before birth, to improve child health and wellbeing into adulthood as well as outcomes for families (Healthy Ireland Framework 2013-2025; The Healthy Ireland Strategic Action Plan, 2021-2025; Creating a Better Future Together: The National Maternity Strategy 2016 – 2026). Young Ireland, the national policy framework for children and young people for 2023-2028, also includes PEI as a key strategy by identifying problems, risks and intervening early to improve outcomes for children and young people (Department of Children, Disability and Equality, 2024).

Ireland has engaged in Prevention and Early Intervention (PEI) initiatives through partnership approaches between Atlantic Philanthropies, NGOs, state agencies and the Government for decades. The Prevention and Early Intervention Programme (PEIP) 2006-2013, which was co-funded by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA) and Atlantic Philanthropies and delivered across three areas in Dublin. Key learning from the research carried out on the outcomes of the PEII was that direct work with parents has a positive impact on their children (Centre for Effective Services, 2014). The Area Based Childhood (ABC) programme emerged from the Prevention and Early Intervention Programme (PEIP), jointly resourced by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and the Atlantic Philanthropies between 2007 and 2013. The Prevention and Early Intervention Network (PEIN) was established in 2010 and represents organisations and individuals working in children, family and community services throughout Ireland who are committed to developing a prevention and early intervention-led approach to service planning and delivery. ParentChild+ is represented on the PEIN Executive Committee. Finally, ParentChild+ addresses international policy and strategic goals related to breaking cycles of disadvantage, including the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, including Goal 1 to Reduce Poverty, Goals 3 to achieve Good Health and Well-being, Goal 4 to realise Quality Education, and Goal 10 to Reduce Inequalities (ELI, 2020).

1.3 Background context and evolution of the ParentChild+ programme

The Early Learning Initiative (ELI) at the National College of Ireland (NCI) was developed to address the problem of educational underachievement in marginalised communities. Building upon best practice in early years intervention, its mission is to work with the most marginalised communities to provide world-class parent and child learning support programmes. These innovative programmes aim to improve the educational aspirations and outcomes of children and young people. ELI has grown from 400 participants (children, parents and professionals) to 14,000+ participants a year and moved beyond its initial Dublin Docklands catchment area to support other communities across the country. ELI is funded by a mix of statutory and voluntary funding, including DCEDIY, Tusla and the HSE, as well as corporate funders (ELI, 2024).

ParentChild+ forms a key part of The Early Learning Initiative's family support programmes. The ParentChild+ programme is an early childhood home visiting programme providing innovative home-based literacy and parenting supports to strengthen families and promote school readiness. Originating in the US in 1965, it is an evidence-based, 'learning through play experience' for parents and their preschool children. It is designed to strengthen the natural bond between parent and child and to encourage a love of learning. It employs a non-directive approach and encourages the parent as the child's first and best teacher and central in supporting their children's learning and development outcomes in early childhood and school years. This programme prepares children for later success in school. Unlike the US, ParentChild+ in Ireland is delivered by local women, all mothers, rather than professionals. ParentChild+ employs specially trained local people as Home Visitors, to model verbal interaction for the parent and child. The programme is targeted at supporting parents and children experiencing socioeconomic marginalisation, about which there is a

lack of research (Traynor, Kent and Darmody, 2019). In 2007, ELI began delivering ParentChild+ to 15 vulnerable families with children aged 16 months to 3 years in Dublin Docklands and East Inner City Dublin. Since then, it has expanded across the country to provide supports for almost 500 families annually in 15 communities around Ireland. Almost 2000 families have participated in ParentChild+ since 2008. The programme aims to build capacity within communities, employing local people and supporting their educational and career progression. Approximately 20% of Home Visitors were originally parents on the programme who are now trained and employed by the programme, working with families in their areas. Approximately 50% of Coordinators were originally Home Visitors (ParentChild+ Strategy 2020-2025). There are currently 15 ParentChild+ sites established and operating across the country as detailed in Table 1. The expansion of the programme is driven through the National ParentChild+ Strategy 2020-2025.

Table 1: ParentChild+ Sites

No.	ParentChild+ programme	Started
1	Docklands and East Inner City (NCI), Dublin	2007
2	Dublin South City Partnership, Dublin	2009
3	Daughters of Charity, working with the Area-based Childhood Programme (NCI), Dublin	2014
4	Garryowen Community Development Group, Limerick City, Limerick	2015
5	Galway Rural Development, Ballinasloe, Galway	2015
6	Liffey Partnership, Ballyfermot, Dublin	2017
7	St. Ultans Campus, Cherry Orchard, Dublin	2017
8	Blue Skies ABC programme, Clondalkin, Dublin	2019
9	Louth ABC programme, Dundalk, Louth	2019
10	Youth New Ross, New Ross, Wexford	2021
11	Brill Family Resource Centre, Waterford City	2021
12	Galway Rural Development, Tuam, Galway	2022
13	Louth ABC programme, Drogheda, Louth	2022
14	Parents First, Tullamore, Offaly	2023
15	Cavan County Local Development, Cavan	2025

The ParentChild+ National Home Visiting Training, Research and Support Centre was established to support the delivery of high-quality evidence-based sustainable models of Home Visiting and innovative emerging future-orientated family home-based learning across Ireland. It also aims to ensure fidelity to the programme and high-quality service delivery through ongoing comprehensive support to ParentChild+ Managers, Coordinators and Home Visitors nationally.

The Home from Home Programme is an adaptation of the ParentChild+ programme which was developed to address the needs of families living in emergency, homeless or International Protection Accommodation Services who would not be able to commit to the two-year ParentChild+ programme. To date, it has been delivered in the Dublin's Inner City Docklands and has now extended to five additional communities around Ireland. It is an intensive weekly home visiting programme that provides an integrated plan of intervention and support for families with children aged 16 months onwards over a 12-week period. Tusla's National Home Visiting Programme was established in 2024 through the Government's Children's Fund.

1.4 Establishment of the National Centre and Home Visiting Alliance (HVA)

A National Centre for Parent-Child Home Visiting and Family Engagement was established within ELI in January 2020 to support communities across Ireland to deliver high-quality Home Visiting and Parent Engagement Programmes, in line with the Irish Government's First 5 A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028. The overall goal was to capture new knowledge and practices and disseminate them locally, nationally and internationally. It supports and learns from ELI's work in Dublin Docklands and Inner City and uses it as an example of best practice from which other communities can learn. The Centre aims to develop and scale up sustainable models of Home Visiting programmes so that the 12,400 children born into poverty in Ireland each year get the support they need to thrive in education, career and life. The National Centre supports the following activities:

- Scaling up sustainable models of Home Visiting programmes across Ireland.
- Research and innovation in response to quality assurance and ever-changing contexts.
- Building partnerships to increase influence and impact.
- Sustaining and developing the portfolio of Dublin's Inner-City Programmes.

The ELI Director chairs the HVA and ELI is a member. ParentChild+ is one of the five national programmes recognised in First Five. The HVA group represents the collective national voice of early childhood home visiting in Ireland providing home visiting to 4,500 children aged 0-5 years in Ireland.

1.5 How ParentChild+ works and intended outcomes

ParentChild+ employs specially trained local women as Home Visitors, to model verbal interaction for the parent and child. The Home Visitor visits the family twice a week, in their own home, for two short (1/2 hour) play sessions, which are run during the (primary) school year only. The family then continues the activities in their own time, thereby enabling the ParentChild+ child and their siblings to develop their language, literacy and numeracy skills. The Home Visitor brings developmentally appropriate books and toys to the home. Each week a new book or toy is introduced, and the Home Visitor models reading and play for the parent and child. The books and toys are given as a gift to the family to encourage continue learning and build a quality home learning environment. On the second visit of the week, the same book or toy is used again to encourage and promote the use of the materials. An observational report is written by the Home Visitor after each visit to record the child's development and family engagement. Home Visitors receive an initial 16 hours of training and attend weekly team reflective supervisions. As part of the ongoing education of Home Visitors, facilitated lectures/discussions on relevant topics are included in supervision. Supervision also provides an opportunity to report back on the progress of the visits and to receive feedback and support from the Coordinator and the team. Home Visitors are also encouraged to continue with their professional development through academic and community courses such as FETAC Levels 5, and 6 as well as Degrees and higher in Early Years Education and other relevant topics.

ParentChild+ aims to result in the following outcomes for parents and children:

- Improved educational outcomes for children, particularly in pre-numeracy and pre-literacy skills, as result of their engagement in ParentChild+. They will start school ready to learn, thereby maximizing their chances of success in education and life.
- Increased parent involvement in their children's educational development. Parents will have the self-confidence and skills to support their children's learning as they progress through the education system and on to employment.

The average cost per year to provide a family with two home visits a week for a minimum of 23 weeks, a library of high-quality books and educational toys, accredited and supervised staff, and regular assessments and monitoring to ensure progress and quality is €4,000 (ParentChild+ Licence Agreement, 2025). Funding arrangements vary across sites. ParentChild+ Dublin's Inner City (Docklands) is part of ELI and based in NCI. ELI provides funding to other sites on a two to five-year cycle, drawing support from corporate donors, individual supporters, and philanthropic foundations, including significant contributions from the Irish Funds. ELI also provides information and support to sites regarding fundraising. As per the scaling objectives outlined in the ELI Strategy 2025, more recently, ELI has provided the license for the programme and committed to providing training and regulation support with organisations sourcing their own funding to deliver the programme.

1.6 ParentChild+ Growth Strategy, scaling objectives and funding arrangements

As mentioned above, the expansion of ParentChild+ is driven through the National ParentChild+ Strategy 2020-2025. This strategy references a detailed scaling plan, which was developed to support the planned and intended growth of ParentChild+. This plan includes scaling objectives for the period 2023-2025:

- A refined nationwide partnership programme, building on key learnings and successes from existing partnerships.
- Development and expansion of ParentChild+ National Office to support this growth, maintaining strong support for partner sites and ensuring a consistent high-quality programme delivery.
- Deeper and broadening of engagement with key strategic partners.
- Secure multiannual funding to support the National Office as a centre of excellence.
- Embed an extensive impact management framework to track and highlight short, medium and long-term outcomes from nationwide programme delivery.

To accompany the scaling plan, ELI has also developed a National ParentChild+ Stakeholder Engagement Plan 2025 and a specific ParentChild+ approach and criteria for partner selection, as well as detailed contractual documents which outlines the role of ELI and the responsibilities of sites. ELI has adapted its funding arrangements due to increased challenges of securing and maintaining funding. Potential additional sites can access the license for ParentChild+ and Home from Home and must secure their own funding for programme delivery, with ELI providing guidance and long-term support in areas of regulation, quality assurance and capacity-building. Potential new sites are provided by ELI with estimated costings, a readiness assessment, and other start-up materials. ELI continues to source funding for its initial sites.

1.7 Aims, objectives and oversight of this evaluation

This evaluation was funded through Rethink Ireland's Scaling Education Fund. The objective of this evaluation was to follow on from the critical review of the programme conducted in 2018-19 and to:

1. Critically evaluate whether ParentChild+ is having an impact on children’s development and identify what factors contribute to the outcome.
2. Critically evaluate the scaling of ParentChild+; examine if replication is working to the same extent and what factors contribute to the outcome.
3. Highlight and discuss emergent themes that arise during the research process.

The intended deliverable of this work was an evaluation report, including recommendations pertaining to the future development of the programme.

A Research Oversight Group was established to oversee this evaluation process which included representation from ELI and representation from NCI, including from the Director of Quality and Institutional Effectiveness and the department of psychology. This group met regularly during this research, approved research materials and the final Evaluation Report.

Section 2: Methodology

This section outlines the methodology applied for this evaluation of the ParentChild+ programme under the following headings:

1. Research design and development of research materials
2. Sample, recruitment and limitations
3. Informed consent, confidentiality and data protection
4. Overall response rate
5. Data coding and analysis
6. Ethical considerations and safeguards.

2.2 Research design and development of research materials

The research design for this evaluation has included both primary and secondary research.

2.2.1 Secondary research

Secondary research was conducted in the form of a desktop analysis of all available relevant programme data, research and evaluation. This included:

- Reviewing relevant literature, manuals and programme resources regarding replication, quality and scalability.
- Analysing all ParentChild+ data to date. This includes participant data, child and parent observational assessments (Child Behaviour Trait and Parent and Child Together), evaluation forms, participation data and previous internal and external evaluations of the programme, both Irish and US-based.

2.2.2 Primary research

Qualitative primary research was applied for this evaluation, as recommended in research focusing on parent and staff perspectives in the context of early childhood and parenting supports (Guillot-Valdés et al, 2025). This qualitative research has also been conducted through the following three means of consultation:

1. Interviews
2. Focus groups
3. Observations at site visits to three diverse sites nationally.

Research materials for these evaluation consultations were developed to address the two main focus areas, as outlined in the Introduction: i) to critically evaluate whether ParentChild+ is having an impact on children's development and identify what factors contribute to the outcome; and ii) to critically evaluate the scaling of ParentChild+; examine if replication is working to the same extent and what factors contribute to the outcome. The following materials were approved by the National College of Ireland (NCI) Research Ethics Committee (REC) and by the Evaluation Steering Group prior to the initiation of the research:

- Interview schedule.
- Focus group schedule.
- Consent form.
- Participant Information Leaflet.

These materials were developed in collaboration with ELI and were deliberately designed to be inclusive and accessible in language and approach. These are all included in the appendices of this report. This evaluation process was embedded in a human rights framework and recognises the importance of qualitative research in evaluating social supports in the context of marginalised and disadvantaged groups as it enables the research to engage directly with stakeholders to ascertain the perceived social impact of services and supports (Jarvie, 2012; Leko, 2014; Arbeiter and Toros, 2017; Urrea-Monclus et al, 2022; Guillot-Valdés et al, 2025).

2.3 Sample, recruitment and limitations

2.3.1 Sample

The sample has included i) parents engaged with the programme, and ii) staff of the programme, including managers, coordinators, and home visitors. Focus group participants included staff delivering the programme at participating sites and parents engaged with them. Sites for observations and interviews were selected to ensure maximum heterogeneity regarding urban/ rural geographical location and length of establishment of the programme at the site. Three sites were omitted from participation in observation and interviews because they were too newly established, had not yet undergone a quality assurance process, or did not currently have a manager in place. These sites could participate in the focus groups. One site was omitted from participation in all consultations because they are not audited by ELI and another site was established during the evaluation process.

2.3.2 Recruitment

Initial awareness raising and information sharing about the evaluation process and related consultations was disseminated through ELI and the ParentChild+ coordinators/ managers. All potential participants were provided with information from the ParentChild+ Coordinators explaining the purpose of the research before engaging in the research process. Potential participants were all provided with a Participant Information Sheet via the coordinators prior to taking a decision regarding participation. This document outlined, in accessible language, the purpose of the evaluation, and what it may entail should they wish to participate, including information on interviews, focus areas sample research questions. They were also be provided with the researcher's contact details should they wish to contact them and ask any questions about the process. If they did wish to participate, they could inform the coordinator or the researcher directly. The researcher then determined the sample from the potential participants.

2.3.3 Limitations

This evaluation process has not included direct consultations with children. As such, where outcomes for children are presented, these are arising from stakeholder perceptions or from research that has taken place rather than children's own narratives.

2.4 Informed consent, confidentiality and data protection

2.4.1 Informed consent

Participants were asked to consent to participate through a consent form that sets out the ethical considerations and confidentiality of the data collected. They either emailed this form to the researcher or submitted it in hard copy before the focus groups or interviews. Participants were informed that participation was entirely voluntary, would not have any impact on the programme or

supports they were engaged with, and that the research was being carried out by an independent researcher. Participants were also informed that they could withdraw from the research up to 6 weeks following their consultation and that they could take breaks whenever they wished. Finally, all participants were informed of their right to access their transcript within one calendar month of receipt of the request, if required.

2.4.2 Confidentiality and data protection, management and storage

The privacy of participants was upheld throughout. All information shared with the researcher remained confidential. All quotes and personal stories were de-identified and any information that included identifiable information omitted in the reporting of the findings. All data arising from the research was secured safely, with the researcher as data custodian in accordance with best practice. All data generated from the consultations has been stored in line with data protection legal obligations and standards and deleted following the review, in accordance with data protection standards and NCI data protection policies and procedures.

2.5 Overall response rate

Summary of consultations

The sample size was 68 in total across the focus groups, interviews and observations, including 11 parents and 57 ParentChild+ staff members. This was sufficient to meet the research objectives for this evaluative research. Consultations conducted included:

- Three site visits to carry out observations of supervision practice for quality and fidelity with three diverse sites nationally.
- Six interviews, two at each participating site with the manager and coordinator regarding fidelity and scalability.
- Four focus groups with staff, one each with managers, coordinators and home visitors.
- Four focus groups with parents.

Staff had been engaged with the programme from between 1 – 18 years, with an average of 5.5 years. The majority of parents had been engaged for 1 year or more. Parents reported having been referred into the programme by a range of professionals, including SLT, CDNT, PHN, Social Worker, Family support worker, creche and early years staff, as well as self-referring as a result of word of mouth, following hearing of other parents' positive experiences.

2.5.2 Observations and interviews

In-person site visits took place at three sites selected to include the flagship Dublin's inner-city site, another Dublin site and a rural site and to provide maximum heterogeneity as outlined in section 2.3 above. Sites visits were conducted between May and June 2025 with 18 staff participating in total. These entailed i) six interviews with manager and coordinator at each site regarding fidelity and scalability; ii) observations of supervision practice for quality and fidelity; iii) review of relevant site progress notes and paperwork including financial documents to ensure compliance with standards. Each interview lasted for approximately one hour. All interviews were semi-structured.

2.5.3 Focus groups

Eight online semi-structured focus groups were completed in total, including four with staff, with 33 staff participating in total, including one each with managers and coordinators and two with home visitors. Four managers, eight coordinators and 21 home visitors participated in focus groups. Four

focus groups were also conducted with parents with 11 parents participating in total. Focus groups were conducted via Teams or Zoom and lasted approximately 1.5 hours. Focus groups took place following the completion of observation and interviews as these provide a useful method for gaining in-depth discussion about a given topic. The focus groups enabled the research team to hold in-depth discussions with participants about the current operation and future development of the programme, including any limitations and challenges, and suggestions.

2.6 Data coding and analysis

All interviews and focus groups were digitally recorded, with participants' expressed consent, and transcribed verbatim for analysis. Qualitative thematic analysis was the analytical method used to generate findings according to the focus areas for this evaluation as well as any unintended findings brought to discussions by participants. Coded and categorised text was retrieved and sorted, with export to Microsoft Excel to allow for final analysis. There has been a concerted effort to give voice to participants' experiences and views by using their own words wherever possible in this evaluation report.

2.7 Ethical considerations and safeguards

This evaluation adopted a collaborative approach and worked to ensure transparency and respect in all aspects of the research process. Ethical approval was granted for this evaluation by the NCI Research Ethics Committee (REC). Ethical and data protection standards were adhered throughout the evaluation process to ensure all evaluation participants were respected and their rights promoted.

Potential participants gave consent to participate, based on a consent form that set out the ethics and confidentiality of the data collected. Following a risk assessment process, safeguards were put in place. There was a low risk that participants may become distressed following participation. Safeguarding follow up supports were put in place and communicated to participants prior to the initiation of the research process. Supports included NCI's Employment Assistance Programme (EAP) which offers free counselling for employees. All ParentChild+ staff received follow up support from their line managers where required and could contact the designated liaison person (DLP) for support information. Coordinators of ParentChild+ linked parents to relevant supports in the community where required.

There was also a low risk that information may be imparted regarding disclosures of abuse. While all participants are adults, child protection and welfare were carefully considered and in the event that a historic disclosure of child abuse or neglect was made, confidentiality would have been breached in order to adhere to National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children (2011). Should this have arisen, the ELI Child Protection Policies and Procedures and ELI Child Safeguarding Statement would have been invoked and the matter referred to the designated Child Protection Officer within ELI. This did not occur during this evaluation process.

Summary

This section has outlined the methodology for this evaluation, the following section details national and US-based research and evaluation on ParentChild+.

Section 3: National and US research on the ParentChild+ programme

This section summarises national and US research on the ParentChild+ programme, including longitudinal research on longer-term impact. This research uses a variety of methods, quantitative, including RCTs, and qualitative, and a range of tools. CBT (Child Behaviour Traits) and Parent and Child Together (PACT) are the are the two standard observational ParentChild+ measures that have long been used across all sites as required assessment measures. Both were designed to ascertain the degree of children's school readiness over the time and to enable fidelity to the programme's standards as it develops and more sites are operating. Replication sites are implementing the programme according to the national standards and norms. The PACT measures positive parent-child interactions; responsive parenting behaviours; consistency; communication in relation to the child; and parent-child relationship. The CBT measures child behaviours relating to their social-emotional and cognitive development, self-regulation, independence and task orientation and pre-literacy skills. Other studies have also used other measures such as the Teacher Rating of Language and Literacy (TROLL) items, and various vocabulary tests and learning assessment indicators. CBT was introduced in Ireland in 2011, and PACT in 2015 (Ryan, 2025). Some of this research refers to the Parent Child Home Programme (PCHP), which ParentChild+ was formerly known as.

3.1 Previous Irish research and evaluation on ParentChild+

Considerable evaluative research has been conducted on the impact of ParentChild+ and this evaluation has been cognisant of the findings of a range of research and evaluation studies conducted on ParentChild+ since its introduction in Ireland. These have included regular programme data collection and end of year reports, as well as a baseline evaluation of the Docklands PCHP in 2011 (Share et al, 2011); a critical review in 2018/19 (Traynor, Kent and Darmody, 2019); and a follow-up evaluation in 2023 (O'Neill, 2023); as well as more recent quality assurance reviews. The findings of this evaluative research is summarised below.

3.1.1 Baseline Evaluation of the Docklands the Parent Child Home Programme (2011)

A baseline evaluation of the Docklands PCHP, as ParentChild+ was formerly known, was conducted in 2011 by the Children's Research Centre, Trinity College Dublin (Share et al, 2011). This found that the programme aligned with the US replication standards; that there were high satisfaction levels among parents with programme delivery and related materials; and that families were increasingly receiving a standardised recommended number of visits, books and toys as specified in the replication guidelines. Parental satisfaction related to their relationships with the home visitor and the books and toys provided, increased enjoyment of reading and playing, increased quality time with their child, and the bond that developed between the Home Visitor and the child. This evaluation identified the programme's positive impact on families, including other children who could participate in reading or be read to, participation in playing and improved practices and routines in the home. The evaluation found that due the wide age range and variation of family types involved it was not possible to attribute child outcomes to participation in the PCHP. It highlighted challenges in ascertaining impact on school readiness of very young children and children with English as a second language participating in the same tests as children with English as their first language.

Areas identified for improvement included the need for standardised information for parents about what to expect from the programme and how to use the materials; improved electronic data collection and record keeping to inform monitoring and evaluation and to account for books and toys; and improved communication with families, such as a text-messaging system. The programme was identified as deliberately providing universal access at the start to minimise stigma, engaging

with a diverse range of parents from varying socioeconomic backgrounds. A combined approach, which included more targeted supports, was called for to ensure the programme reached families most in need. Finally, the evaluation recommended a formal assessment of children's suitability for the programme in terms of cognitive development, socio-economic status, educational background and home literacy environment at programme recruitment stage to ensure the programme reaches children in need, and to evaluate the programme's effectiveness.

3.1.2 Research on three cohorts of graduates of the programme (2014-2017)

Data was collected from three cohorts between 2014 and 2017 to explore the impact on parents and children who had engaged with the programme for a period of two years. Quantitative and qualitative data was collected via a phone interview which was structured around a questionnaire addressing the impact of PCHP, specifically: the current home learning environment; the child's attitude towards school; the child's engagement with school; the child's academic development (Maths, English and special educational needs); and the parent's or primary caregivers' confidence towards supporting their child's learning and development. This research found that a majority of parents across cohorts, and all in some cohorts, believed that the programme had prepared their child for school; had been beneficial and enjoyable for them as a parent and for their child; had improved their child's attendance, involvement and attitude towards school, performance in English and Maths and general attitude to learning; and had improved their child's behaviour. Parents specifically mentioned valuing the books and toys and the ways the use of these was modelled by Home Visitors; learning how to communicate with their child and spend quality time with them reading and playing, which improved their interactions and relationship. They also reported their child's confidence had increased; that their child had learned communication, reading, and social skills; and that other children in the family had also benefited.

3.1.3 Comparison of PCHP graduates with Growing Up in Ireland Participants (2018)

In 2018, the ELI compared the quantitative data collected on the Home Learning Environment and Parent Rated Academic Performance of PCHP Graduates with Growing Up in Ireland Participants. These comparisons were made in the context of the likelihood that PCHP children may be from families of a lower socio-economic status than GUI samples. While a small percentage of GUI homes (n=70) did not have any children's books available in the home, every PCHP graduate home reported having at least one children's book available to the child. A significantly greater percentage of PCHP parents (54%) rated their children's performance at maths as being 'excellent' than GUI parents (22%). Parent ratings of children's academic performance at English (or 'reading' in the case of the GUI) showed similar patterns, with 64% of PCHP parents rating their children's English performance as 'excellent', compared to 29% of GUI parents. 98% of PCHP graduate children read for fun, compared to 94% of GUI children. Fewer PCHP graduate parents responded that they never read for fun with their child than GUI parents.

3.1.4 Critical Review (2018-19)

A critical review of the ParentChild+ programme was conducted in 2018-19 (Traynor, Kent and Darmody, 2019). It stated that the programme constituted a novel approach to early literacy and parenting support and the first to focus on parenting support and early literacy for children aged 16 months to 3 years in Ireland. This review identified key strengths of the programme, including the unique cultural context within which the programme operates, and the consistently positive results from ongoing programme evaluations, results and learning following on from the 2011 baseline evaluation. These positive results included CBT and PACT scores over time and high satisfaction

among parents engaged with the programme. These results confirm the long-term benefits of the PCHP as a PEI initiative. This review also highlighted limitations with the ParentChild+ research protocol relating to providing robust evidence of the impact of the programme and falling short of criteria for scientific dissemination. These limitations were linked in the review to the ParentChild+ beginning as a pilot study, its small sample size, inconsistency in data collection and lack of the use of validated outcome measures. The review also mentioned the problematic nature of reliance on parents' feedback given ELI's relationship with them.

3.1.5 Follow Up Evaluation (2023)

The ELI's 2020-2025 Strategic Plan included an action to conduct an evaluation of the long-term impact of the ParentChild+ programme. An external Follow Up Evaluation Study was conducted in 2023 (O'Neill, 2023), which builds on previous evaluations of the ParentChild+ programme (2014-2017). This study aimed to provide a deeper insight into the experiences and progression of graduates of the programme and to identify any recommendations to further support children and families. Specifically, the research aimed to explore their current home learning environment experiences, academic engagement and development across cognitive, behavioural, and socioemotional domains, and to map the children's educational journey and find out what, if any, other supports children may need as they progress through the education system, and to identify if the service was beneficial to the participants. This research took the form of a qualitative case study involving 13 parent and child graduates of the programme and two teachers. It included questionnaires, interviews with teachers, focus groups with parents and standardised test scores were collected for child participants. This study found that the programme's stated goals were being achieved and that children's attitudes towards school were positive. It highlighted positive outcomes for children and parents, including communication skills, socio-emotional and academic skills and interest in learning. Parents reported increased patience and improved parenting skills and sustained practices following completion of the programme and trusted and valued relationships with home visitors. These findings confirmed those of previous evaluations outlined above in 2011 and 2014-2017.

This research reported difficulties in making recommendations on improvements on the content or delivery of the programme due to its small sample size and challenges in ascertaining children's perspectives. It called for continued, longitudinal research to gain insights on the long-term impact of the programme. This evaluation called for books and games to be aligned with the specific preferences of the child. This evaluation also recommended the development of opportunities for families to engage with Home Visitors outside of the ParentChild+ programme, such the ELI Stretch Graduate programme. The Stretch Graduate programme supports families with children aged between 4 and 6 years who have graduated from the ParentChild+ programme, from other ELI programmes, or who have been referred from schools and services from the Dublin Inner City. Specifically, the 2023 evaluation made recommendations for the further development of evaluation tools and standardised tests to monitor impact; development of formal and informal group meet-ups/events for participants of the ParentChild+ programme both during the programme and after completion; development of an Alumni Network for graduate families, to ensure up-to-date contact information and delivery of additional supports to enable children to attain their goals; creation of/extension of an Access type event for primary school children to introduce them to pathways to education and training; transition events and socio-emotional development events which could develop or strengthen referral pathways to external services; and fostering of close relationships with local primary schools including development of evaluation tools for continued data collection on outcomes for the ParentChild+ programme children and controls.

3.1.5 ParentChild+ Quality Assurance Review (2023-24)

A ParentChild+ Quality Assurance Review was carried out by ELI on 11 established sites in 2023-24. Data was collected via a Quality Assurance Feedback Form and on-site visits by reviewers and entailed the submission of various documentation for review. Sites were assessed in terms of three areas: files, staff supervision Observation and meeting with site Coordinator/s, as detailed below:

Area	Evidence
Files	Six Home Sessions Reports written by a variety of Home Visitors.
	Review of family folders (randomly selected on-site by the Reviewer).
	Verbal Interaction Stimulus Materials (VISM) Selection.
	Coordinator's workflow system: (should include Home Visitor sign-out sheets and family sign-out sheets.
	Guide sheets for parents and home visitors (6 submitted for review.
Staff Supervision Observation	Coordinator consistently conveys the philosophy and practices of the Programme.
	Coordinator(s) encourages a tone of mutual respect among staff
	Coordinator uses reflective supervision; consistently supports Home Visitors and reflects an understanding of their concerns.
	Staff maintains family confidentiality.
	Coordinator and staff maintain a tone of respect toward families.
	Adequate VISM preparation
	Adequate overall organisation: Paperwork and VISM distribution.
Meeting with Site Coordinator/s	Site Coordinator shows insight into the community being served.
	Site Coordinator acknowledges obstacles and has initiated strategies to deal with them.
	Site Coordinator can accurately describe the goals of the Programme.
	Site Coordinator understands the importance of Home Visitor supervision.
	Site Coordinator articulates best practices and/or issues regarding Programmes reputation in the community and professionals in the community, etc.
	Site Coordinator keep Excel records up to date.
	Site Coordinator observes home visits, either personally or through audio/video recordings.
	Site Coordinator conducts a yearly Home Visitor performance review.
	Site Coordinator home visits families.
	Site Coordinator ensures all items of uniform are adhered to and worn when appropriate.

Out of a maximum of 90 points, the average across the 11 sites was 87 points. 10 of 11 sites were awarded a certificate of excellence for quality assurance, with five sites achieving 90 points. One site was awarded a certificate of high achievement for quality assurance.

3.1.5 ParentChild+ sites' programme data and end of year reports

As mentioned above, the development of children engaging with national ParentChild+ sites is monitored by home visitors conducting two observational assessments, CBT and PACT, at four points throughout the programme: after the 6th, 44th and 68th visits and finally at the 92nd visit. Additionally, parents are requested to complete pre and post evaluation forms and their reflections are recorded by home visitors after each visit. Consistent positive results have been recorded, including 80% of children reaching their CBT milestones by the end of the programme, and almost 90% of parents and children reaching PACT milestones as presented by the 2025 State of the

Moment Report, reviewing the performance of ParentChild+ (Ryan, 2025). ELI's latest End of Year Report 2023-2024 outlines positive results in line with previous years. These results included the percentage of children reaching their developmental milestones increasing during the programme from 26% at the beginning to 71% on completion. Developmental increases were evidenced in children engaging with the programme across the three CBT subscales, cognition, behaviour and language, at each stage. The greatest overall increase was regarding percentages of children reaching their developmental milestones in the area of cognition (54%), followed by increases in language (45%) and behaviour (38%). Significant increases were also evidenced in high-quality interactions between parents and their children, from 57% at PACT 1 to 84% at PACT 4. This included improvements in all four areas of assessment: parents' responsiveness to their child, parent's affection toward their child, parent's communication with their child and parent's consistency with their child.

3.2 US research and evaluation on ParentChild+

Prior to Irish implementation, there has been a 50-year research accumulation of evaluative data and research conducted on ParentChild+ in the US. US research has found long-term benefits from the ParentChild+ programme, or Parent Child Home Programme (PCHP), as it was initially named, for children and families, including decreased needs for special educational supports (Lazar and Darlington, 1982; DeVito and Karon, 1990; Springs, 1990); improved reading and numeracy skills, school readiness and higher rates of school completion (Levenstein and Sunley, 1967; Levenstein, 1970; Ginandes and Roth, 1973; Bradshaw-McNulty and Delaney, 1979; Slaughter, 1983; DeVito and Karon, 1984, 1990; Levenstein, Levenstein and Oliver, 2002; Shiminski, 2005; ORS, 2010). Longitudinal research on the impact of ParentChild+ has found a relationship between children's early home learning environment experiences and later life success, including school completion rates, employment levels, and income levels (European Commission, 2011; Sama-Miller et al, 2019; Centre on the Developing Child, 2023). Furthermore, research has found particular benefits for children from low-income families in school competence, developed abilities, children's attitudes and values, and impact on the family (Lazar and Darlington, 1982; Shiminski, 2005; Allen and Astuto, 2007; ORS, 2010). Children from low-income families who completed PCHP were found to graduate from high school at rate of middle-class children nationally, a 20% higher rate than their socioeconomic peers, 30% higher than control group in the community (Levenstein et al, 1998). Children who participated in the programme have been found to be less likely to be considered 'at risk' on completion (Rafoth et al, 2005) and it had optimal effects for families who completed the two-years (ORS, 2010).

Other US-based research has found the programme to have improved oral language skills, school readiness and later school success (ORS, 2010; Mann et al, 2014; ORS Impact, 2015, 2016; Manz et al, 2016); improved social and emotional skills and expressive and receptive language skills, including for culturally and linguistically diverse cohorts (Levensteinand Sunley, 1968; Astuto, 2014, 2018); improved child behaviour and parent-child relationships (Astuto, 2014, 2018); and increased positive parenting behaviours and improved parents' interactions with their children, including increased talking, reading, engaging in educational activities at home and in communities as well as increased praise and encouragement (Madden et al, 1984; Kamerman and Kahn, 1995; Rafoth et al, 2005; ORS, 2010). Beneficial effects of PCHP for oral language have been most pronounced among children with first languages other than English (Mann et al, 2009; Manz et al, 2016). This aligns with literature on home visiting, which has found that children from non-English speaking families are at greater developmental risk and, as such, are more positively impacted (Olds et al, 2002; Halle et al, 2009; Manz et al, 2016). Recent research has also shown that the ethnicity and first language of home

visitors themselves play a significant role in the benefits of the programme. Families with children who shared both the ethnicity and language with their home visitor were 2.6 times more likely to complete the ParentChild+ programme (Zhou et al, 2024). Research has also found the PCHP to have benefits in terms of cost effectiveness and as an early intervention initiative that supports parental involvement (Hevesi, 2001; Bartik, 2008). Finally, a recent US Family Satisfaction Survey conducted in 2023 found that overall experiences with ParentChild+ were very positive. Learning included the need to collect feedback from families who leave the programme early, to embed satisfaction surveys in standard data collection practices, and to improve the dissemination of survey findings to inform sites' practice development.

Summary

The research summarised in this chapter shows that ParentChild+, in US and national contexts, consistently positively impacts parents and children, specifically relating to school readiness and competence, oral language, communication and social skills, child behaviour, parent-child interactions and relationships, and home learning environment and related parental skills.

Section 4: Findings of this evaluation process

This section presents the findings of the evaluation process and related consultations, including observations, interviews, and focus groups, relating to the effectiveness and impact of ParentChild+, its outcomes and enabling factors, experiences and challenges regarding replication and fidelity, current challenges, and suggestions for the future development of the programme. To contextualise the findings and the stakeholder groups' perspectives while protecting the confidentiality and anonymity of participants, quotes have been categorised according to whether they are from staff (home visitors, coordinators or managers) or parents. Observations confirmed the quality assurance data recently collected and summarised in Section 3. All three participating sites displayed excellent fidelity regarding supervision practices, positive management and coordination practices, and peer learning and support.

4.1 Impact of the ParentChild+ programme

This section presents findings concerning the overall effectiveness of the programme and outcomes achieved.

4.1.1 Overall view of the effectiveness of the ParentChild+ programme

All stakeholders, staff and parents perceived the ParentChild+ programme as performing well and as highly effective in bringing about outcomes for children, parents and the wider community. Staff used words such as 'transformational', 'life-changing', and 'monumental' to describe the programme and its impact and referenced the effectiveness of the programme as a reason for the longevity of its staff:

> *The impact is huge.* (Manager Focus Group Participant)
>
> *Absolutely astronomically [effective]…a big thumbs up*. (Manager Focus Group Participant)
>
> *It's definitely effective…everyone here would agree with that…that's why we've all been here so long…the majority of us have been home visitors, and then…progressed on to coordinator.* (Coordinator Focus Group Participant)

This was reiterated by staff in interviews:

> *It definitely works…the programme has different ways of working for different families the whole aspect of going into the home and building the relationship and supporting them to reach their full potential…families hit crisis at different times, and they've built up a relationship with someone, and they sign post them, or they walk them to an appointment…that's huge*. (Coordinator Interviewee)
>
> *I can tell you from a personal and a professional point of view, it 100% works*. (Coordinator Interviewee)
>
> *It's hitting all the right spots. It's why I work for it. It's why I'm so passionate about it. Because I can see…it can be brought to anybody, and it can be adjusted to suit the child's need.* (Coordinator Interviewee)
>
> *I's absolutely monumental to families, to feel supported, to have changes of behaviour, to see the development and progress of their child…it's transformational for a lot of people. So it has significant impact.* (Manager Interviewee)
>
> *I get notes [from parents]…thanking me…it's life changing for them.* (Manager Interviewee)

Parents reported that the impact of the programme had exceeded their expectations and described it as 'amazing' and 'really beneficial' and that they were 'excited' to complete it:

> *For me, it was a really good surprise. I wasn't expecting that the programme would be so good, to be honest.* (Parent Focus Group Participant)

> *For me it worked very well…for me it was really amazing*. (Parent Focus Group Participant)

> *It's a great programme…having access to it was really, really beneficial and we're obviously looking forward to continuing on until the end of the programme and excited about seeing where it goes…We're very happy.* (Parent Focus Group Participant)

Parent participants were asked whether outcomes could have happened anyway, without the ParentChild+ programme. Three of eleven parents said that outcomes were caused by both the programme and their early years service, that they may have occurred anyway but that engagement with ParentChild+ assisted and accelerated progress and helped them understand and interpret signs of progress in their child. Eight of eleven parents reported that outcomes could not have happened without the programme and that they were not in receipt of other supports at that time. One parent said that no one was visiting their home except the home visitor:

> *I'm fully convinced that it was through the programme.* (Parent Focus Group Participant)

> *I would say not, no, because no one, only…the programme…[was] visiting our house, you know, that was our main concern*. (Parent Focus Group Participant)

> *I do believe it's all down to this programme and the home visitor*. (Parent Focus Group Participant)

4.1.2 Outcomes for children

All staff and parents reported outcomes for children resulting from engagement with the programme. Ten specific outcomes were reported:

i) Improved overall child development in the five focus areas and early detection of developmental issues

Staff and parents noted improved child development across the five focus areas of the programme: physical, intellectual, language, social and emotional, and gross and fine motor skills. Benefits for child development resulting from engagement with the programme also included early detection of developmental issues and onward referral.

> *There's huge outcomes for the child…huge improvement in children reaching their milestones, we've had a huge jump in that…which is the really, really vital part of the programme.* (Manager, Focus Group Participant)

> *What I really like are the CBTs and the PACTS…they really can show trends in terms of children's progress over the time.* (Coordinator, Focus Group Participant)

> *You can show a parent a little graph, or…the numbers…they know that when the numbers are going up, that means that the child is making progress on the various stages…very visible, concrete evidence of things are changing.* (Coordinator Focus Group Participant)

> *You can see it happening…with the child…from day one….the difference, oh, my God, it's just, it's just miraculous, you can see it first-hand*. (Home Visitor Focus Group Participant)

Staff echoed these sentiments in interviews:

I see the five areas developing and improving…speech and language…gross motor skills…fine motor skills, the cognitive development. (Coordinator Interviewee)

It has a direct impact on the growth educationally, socially and cognitively, of children. (Manager Interviewee)

I see the results of the…test…it's an evidence-based programme, and the evidence points to the difference it's making [for children]. (Manager Interviewee)

[Home visitors] pick up any other issues. (Manager Interviewee)

Parents similarly saw positive outcomes in terms of their child's development as a result of the programme and the opportunities to play with many different types of toys, and that they continue to use them in between visits:

I have seen huge difference in [child]…I definitely recommend it [the programme]. (Parent Focus Group Participant)

It is very beneficial…I do feel lucky that I have had a chance to do the programme…I am very grateful for it…my little fella was very late developing…with the talking, with walking…I did feel like he was very behind with his milestones and all of that. (Parent Focus Group Participant)

It's helping my child…[child]'s been given opportunity to play with different type of toys...I have the opportunity to play with my child even when the home visitor is not around here. I use them. (Parent Focus Group Participant)

It [programme] is great. All the educational toys and the books now left…to get [them]…they're lovely…it is great programme. (Parent Focus Group Participant)

One parent living in an IPAS centre spoke of the difficulties in obtaining a creche place and the importance of being able to engage her child:

[Programme] made a difference in engaging my child…for now, getting creche is not easy…so before I could get the creche, I'm happy my child is learning something and it's engaging him. (Parent Focus Group Participant)

ii) Improved development for children with additional needs

Improvements in development for children with additional needs were also reported. These children were often pre-verbal and engaged with the programme in the absence of other supports and limited access due to long waiting lists, up to several years.

I've seen first-hand…how children come on…there's different levels…autism and global and speech development…there's so many families struggling…waiting for HSE appointments and SLT…we help them on the road…we give them hope. (Home visitor, Focus Group Participant)

The programme is really valuable for children with additional needs who don't get any support. We can link them also with different groups and with different model for the parents. (Home visitor, Focus Group Participant)

Staff referenced the positive and empowering effects of the programme for these children, their parents and families:

We have had so many…neurodiverse children on the programme that have come on…and developed so much…so much so that their families were telling everybody else in the area

about it…we've had so many parents that have had children that…eventually got diagnosed with autism and other additional needs…on the programme, [who] have been empowered to come together to create a group. (Coordinator Focus Group Participant)

By the time they [children] come into the [additional needs] services, they're actually a very long way along the path of…looking at social interaction…communication skills…early play, early imagination and all that. (Coordinator Focus Group Participant)

This is really important work that is done…prior to children needing a service in disability…they're going to hit the ground running wherever they end up. (Coordinator Focus Group Participant)

A Dad…was praising our programme…[his child] had global development delay…the child has excelled so much, and for the parent to see the child's ability growing and growing each time. And he has said only for ParentChild+…she wouldn't have…he said, 'what ye have taught us to bring on [child's] development'….she's an amazing little girl…he said, 'If I ever won three or 400,000 I'd give it to you…the impact you had in our lives…for what we thought you'd never do…it's all down to those visits'. (Coordinator Focus Group Participant)

Staff reported receiving feedback letters from psychologists once children had entered services, commenting on the unexpected performance and presentation of the child, significantly beyond that of their peers with similar diagnoses who had not engaged with the programme:

A child…benefited from our programme…but the levels of speech were very low. I got a letter out of the blue from a psychologist when [child] eventually got onto the list of CDNT to get a full assessment…the psychologist overwhelmingly praised the programme in that she knew straight away this child has had a high level of intervention, regular intervention, even though the child wasn't speaking, their emotional regulation was much better, their ability to take instruction, their attachment with her mother was better...and so she said, well done on early intervention...this child is way ahead of its equivalent peers with autism. (Manager Focus Group Participant)

Parents of children with additional needs reported improvements in their child's development as a result of the programme, including relating to fine motor skills and social interactions. This was often in the context of a lack of supports, including assessments, with parents reporting long waiting lists for psychology and CDNT:

Because it is a weekly programme…we can see how [child] is developing…She loves [puzzles]…it's kind of an achievement for her, (because fine motor skills are improved). (Parent Focus Group Participant)

My son…he's autistic and he has some social issues when we are going out…he would ignore people…at home he didn't like anyone coming over…But with the programme…he would be standing in the corner and he would look at her…then [after 2 weeks] he started coming towards her and he started engaging with her…there was a point where…he started hugging her and he would…sit in her lap. It was really lovely…for me that was really a big, a big step. (Parent Focus Group Participant)

Parents of children with additional needs spoke of learning how to follow their child's lead and appreciating home visitors' experience in working with children with additional needs:

I used to hear that a lot, to 'follow his lead'. I was trying at home, but it wasn't working…I wasn't following the correct steps, but with the visits…I learned a lot how to follow everything…it really helped [child]. (Parent Focus Group Participant)

They also referenced the value of the variety of toys brought by the home visitor which supported their child's development and broadened their preferences:

When I'm buying him toys as a parent, I'll buy him…what he likes…. I'll just keep buying the same kind of ones…out of habit. When [home visitor] comes she will bring in different ones. So then he gets the opportunity to try the different ones. And so that was very good. (Parent Focus Group Participant)

iii) Improved speech and language

Staff and parents reported improvements in children's speech and language, including vocabulary.

A lot of the times the speech improves, there's a lot of play, and the home visiting programme is perfect for it. (Manager Focus Group Participant)

The language development is probably the thing that [ParentChild+] helps the most, because…you're modelling the language…through the whole 92 visits, I have opportunity to repeat everything. (Home Visitor Focus Group Participant)

We can measure change in the children the project engages with...they were non-verbal before, the end of [programme], they're verbal. (Manager Interviewee)

A home visitor who had previously been a parent on the programme spoke of its impact on her own child's speech and language:

I love it, because…I can see how it works with my own daughter, she was waiting on speech language therapy… she loved [ParentChild+]…because everything was just broken down…she was hearing the same words over and over again…all those things that were pointed out to me…I can see how it's working. I know how it works. And seeing how much she's come on, leaps and bounds, it's just opened a whole new door…amazing. (Home Visitor Focus Group Participant)

Support with speech and language was also referenced as valuable to parents who spoke languages other than English and received advice from home visitors regarding having a strong mother tongue at home:

They [parents] say, should I say speak English or Chinese at home with a child…they want their children to speak English when they go to play school. Then we work as…you have to have one good language first…then add another. (Home Visitor Focus Group Participant)

Parents noted improvements in their child's speech and language as a result of the programme, including in the context of multiple languages:

Massively…when [child] first started the programme, he had no language, he was grunting and growling and absolutely nothing… his speech and language has come on in leaps and bounds like since starting the programme…you can understand what he wants more. He's communicating more. (Parent Focus Group Participant)

Amazing…he only started talking through the programme. (Parent Focus Group Participant)

I don't think that he would have talked as fast if it wasn't for the programme helping us through. (Parent Focus Group Participant)

Even the programme when we play a lot with her, like, in same level, and so we all the time produce pronunciation. (Parent Focus Group Participant)

Parents of children with additional needs also noted improvements in their child's speech and language and communication skills and attributed this to the programme and child's enjoyment of the visits:

He was diagnosed with autism when he was two and…it [programme] brought on his speech…an awful lot…doing the songs and everything really brought on his speech and…started his…even to this day, he…still does actions [he learned]. (Parent Focus Group Participant)

His eye contact has come on…because before that, [we] really struggled with his eye contact. But it was since [home visitor]…was coming to us…his eye contact started in from then… obviously from doing the songs and he was getting enjoyment from [visits]. (Parent Focus Group Participant)

Parents of children with additional needs also noted their children increasing their face to face communication and looking at their mouths while they were talking:

He looks at my mouth [now] when I'm talking which will hopefully bring on speech. (Parent Focus Group Participant)

iv) Improved attention and focus

Children's attention and focus was reported by staff and parents to have improved as a result of the programme.

They're much less chaotic…they're much more focused and structured. They're able to focus for…a lengthy period of time, for a half an hour, which is a lot for a little kid. (Coordinator Focus Group Participant)

It's helping my child, my child can play with different type of toys, he concentrates whilst they read to him…now he can concentrate when you read to him. (Parent Focus Group Participant)

Parents, including parents of children with additional needs, reported improved attention and focus of their child as a result of the programme:

We tried to make him play with puzzles, but he started spinning the pieces of puzzles and we [parent and home visitor] started doing that with him as well. So he started to look at us and communicate with us. Then he did the puzzle with us. Because we were helping him…it's a big step for him to do that…[before the programme] he wouldn't concentrate. He wouldn't play the way other kids do. But his concentration really improved. (Parent Focus Group Participant)

[Home visitor] got a piece of paper and was just drawing a tree and looking at the book…and he sat down with us and done it…the concentration, [home visitor] can really get him to focus. (Parent Focus Group Participant)

v) Improved social skills and interactions

Staff and parents noted children's improved social skills and related interactions and eye contact due to engagement with the programme. This was especially important for children who did not have siblings or regular visitors to their home.

I think that's [social skills] that's really what…I've noticed. (Parent Focus Group Participant)

[Child]'s social skills…it's been a really amazing difference in him…and eye contact. (Parent Focus Group Participant)

Staff noted the importance of the ParentChild+ programme continuing to engage with families during the COVID-19 pandemic to support children and families and maintain social contact:

Through COVID…the social skills…we're the only people that a lot of families were having any type of involvement with…we could see that we were the only people dropping off books and toys, doing it over the phone…we can see…socially, for kids that are isolated, that's huge. (Coordinator Interviewee)

Parents mentioned the importance of the positive relationship between their child and the home visitor to bringing about the improvement in their social skills and interactions with other children and their child's enjoyment of events organised by programme. Parents described the home visitor as understanding their child and how to bring out the best in them or the child's real self:

[Child] loves going to events with where [home visitor]'s there…and now he'll actually engage with other kids…now he's fully engaging. He's trying to talk to other kids and he's trying to play with other kids. (Parent Focus Group Participant)

[Home visitor] knew how to go about it…obviously she was able to bring things out of him that we just couldn't. It's like when he's seen a new face. He's kind of coming out more…She was very good with him. (Parent Focus Group Participant)

Parents of children with additional needs reported their child's improved social interactions with other children and that they no longer became distressed when visitors came to their home. They attributed this to the programme and the relationship with the home visitor:

Like if a friend came over or relative, he was like completely fine. He didn't care about it. So, it was…amazing…now he was…accepting everything. (Parent Focus Group Participant)

He would go up to her no bother…they did make a little bond. (Parent Focus Group Participant)

[Child] started interacting more with other kids. (Parent Focus Group Participant)

The relationship with the home visitor and improvement in social skills was especially important for only children:

Every time he sees [home visitor] coming in the door, he runs out calling her name. So, there is a big difference…including him sharing toys because he is an only child. (Parent Focus Group Participant)

A parent living alone in an IPAS centre with her child reported the particular benefit for her child in having a relationship with the home visitor in the absence of family or other visitors:

My child is used to me because I'm the only one with him. Normally I don't normally take him out all the time, so he's used to me, so he's now getting to know the home visitor. (Parent Focus Group Participant)

vi) Improved emotional regulation and behaviour

Staff and parents reported improved emotional regulation and behaviour:

I've noticed in my families, their tantrums have reduced. The parents have told me because they have that regulation. (Home Visitor Focus Group Participant)

[Before] he couldn't do anything without him having a big tantrum or you couldn't change any of his routines. You couldn't introduce anything new to him…now he's improved, especially in his behaviours. (Parent Focus Group Participant)

Looking at the CBTs and PACTS… child behaviour…I can see their numbers are growing. (Coordinator Interviewee)

Parents of children with additional needs reported improvement in their child's behaviour as a result of activities and massage in the context of long waiting lists for psychologists:

I'm gonna be two years waiting…[home visitor] helped me to…see what can calm him down…like bubbles…and the kinetic sands really helped him…she showed me this deep massage…and he loved it. (Parent Focus Group Participant)

vii) Improved confidence

Children's confidence levels were reported by staff and parents to have increased as a result of the programme and interacting with the home visitor as another trusted adult in their lives as well as the routine established for quality time with parents and the improved relationship between parent and child:

We set the routine for the parents…when we leave, they…continue…child knows that that's a special time for them, and the child grows in confidence…it gives them strength for adulthood. (Home Visitor Focus Group Participant)

Parents also reported their child's confidence levels having increased as a result of the programme:

I am seeing that he is more confident…his interaction with other people, and he's very, very willing to go up to somebody and or call out a little boy or girl, come up here and play with me. (Parent Focus Group Participant)

[Child] really had the confidence to [lead the session]. 'This is what I want to do'. (Parent Focus Group Participant)

viii) Improved mood, wellbeing, happiness and emotional resilience

Staff and parents reported improvements in children's mood and increases in wellbeing and happiness levels as a result of the fun and enjoyment they got out of the weekly sessions and related play and development in between sessions.

There are outcomes there at the end, but…in the middle of the process…you also can see that they enjoy [programme]…it is lovely for them, because they are playing. (Home Visitor Focus Group Participant)

[Child] really enjoys [visits] as well…he goes in, he sits down and he's ready. (Parent Focus Group Participant)

Emotional resilience was also attributed to sustained improved routines, practice of quality time and fun between parent and child as a result of the programme which supported them in dealing with transitions and difficult times following completion. Several home visitors who had been parents on the programme spoke of their child returning to books, toys or quality time with parents as a means to cope with starting primary school, issues with friends or other significant transitional events:

With my own child…even when we had finished the course, we continued on with that time. And it did make a difference…and some of the books that she had not liked or participated with…she has come back to…she's getting worried about primary school. She had taken out the feeling stuff the other day to talk about it, and she had picked it out…all her books are still on her little shelf and her little toys…we still have that time together. (Home Visitor Focus Group Participant)

All my children benefited from the programme…I'll give an example…child was around seven…she came back from school, she was so upset, something happened in school. Then she picked a book from the age when she was two…she wasn't upset anymore…she calmed down, and then she told me what happened…she initiated the way how to communicate. (Home Visitor Focus Group Participant)

Parents mentioned how their child's mood and emotional regulation had improved and how much their children enjoyed the visits and the one-to-one connection with the home visitor:

The one-on-one…he's very, very keen…asking …are we going to see [Home visitor] today? (Parent Focus Group Participant)

He's a different child. He really is. (Parent Focus Group Participant)

Staff and parents reported the importance that the visits were child-led and responsive to children's needs and preferences:

It's very responsive to the child. (Parent Focus Group Participant)

Because he's big into vehicles…that kind of stuff, it led into other…role play. (Parent Focus Group Participant)

Parents of children with additional needs felt that the programme had improved their child's mood and emotional regulation and had been tailored and designed according to their child's understanding and preferences. They also referenced the importance to their child of the relationship with the home visitor:

It [helped mood], because he used to get angry. (Parent Focus Group Participant)

It was an amazing programme, especially the thing that I like the most was that it was kind of designed for my child and…his understanding...the home visitors were really nice, they knew what to do, like following his lead…and, the way he plays…I felt like they [home visitor] were following him. What he wants. (Parent Focus Group Participant)

Of course [children feel that]…we all know when someone's enjoying our company…you just feel it. It's nice. (Parent Focus Group Participant)

ix) Improved educational outcomes and school readiness

Staff and parents perceived children's school readiness to have improved as a result of their improved development, especially in terms of literacy, communication and comprehension and social skills.

We know, the research shows, that it actually impacts on their life outcomes, on their secondary school outcomes, and in their life, educational outcomes. (Manager Focus Group Participant)

They're…really ready to go into preschool...and so all of that early work is done. (Coordinator Focus Group Participant)

This was echoed in interviews with staff:

> *[Programme]…helps the child with their literacy skills…preparing for school, with their English.* (Coordinator Interview Participant)

Parents reported being less concerned and feeling more positive and relaxed about how their child would manage in school. Parents of children going into pre-school reported that they were excited for this experience alongside the programme:

> *It set him up as well for a play school, for preschool…*to *prepare him…the social aspect and everything.* (Parent Focus Group Participant)

> *I'm excited to see…the lead in between the preschool and continuing on with [home visitor]… that's a great programme*. (Parent Focus Group Participant)

x) Improved bond and relationship with parents and other family members

Staff and parents reported benefits for children from the improved relationship between them, their parents and other family members as a result of engagement with the programme:

> *It's their [child's] moment where they can feel comfortable, and it's that trust that they've developed with you…They know that that's a real strong bond, moment where they your attention will be purely dedicated to that child.* (Home Visitor Focus Group Participant)

> *They [child] understands very early into the visits, after a few weeks…'this is for me…it's all about me'... it stays, it stays for life, because they have a bond now with the parent…they can always find that place…they can talk…discuss things that will come up in there.* (Home Visitor Focus Group Participant)

> *The impacts have been very strong in terms of the parent child relationship and the parent child interaction, the quality of communication improvement.* (Manager Focus Group Participant)

> *We're just strengthening the bond between the parent and the child in those two visits per week…I can see the benefits from my side and the benefit of me, and I can see the benefits for other families.* (Home Visitor Focus Group Participant)

> *Wow he's more engaged with everyone really. even with his sister…a lot more communication between the both of them.* (Parent Focus Group Participant)

Parents of children with additional needs also mentioned the improved relationship between them and their child, and improved relationships with other family members and siblings. They also referenced the importance for their child of quality time with them, especially where there were other siblings in the home:

> *[Before] He didn't particularly like his dad…it was a really stressful point in our marriage. Since starting the programme and [child] getting better, it has improved our relationship…me and the husband, me and his sister…[child] and his sister…[now] he loves his dad…can't get enough of his dad, which is great. Whereas in the beginning it was all about me. He was constantly attached.* (Parent Focus Group Participant)

> *[Sibling] thought [child] hated him…would never interact with [sibling] at all…blocking him out…but once he started doing [the programme], then [sibling] be singing the songs to him or doing the little book…it brought the two of them very close together which was*

brilliant…[sibling] didn't have that worry anymore, thinking his brother hated him. It's good. (Parent Focus Group Participant)

It was his little special time…it's very good. I would recommend. (Parent Focus Group Participant)

Outcomes for other children in the home and wider family networks

It was additionally reported that other children benefited from the programme and the improved routine it instilled in homes, as well as the individual child participating in it, including siblings and cousins. Many participating families were living together with extended family networks. In the case of participating Traveller families, staff reported that cousins were often present during visits and were included in the visit and in the related activities undertaken by parents in the intervening time between visits.

The impact on other children that they have and the subsequent children that they may have. (Manager Focus Group Participant)

Also it's siblings as well...it's not just the children that you're working with…you might have two or three other siblings or the grandparents or the cousins. You don't know who's going to be there…but you're facilitating all of them…the whole household, an extended family. (Home Visitor Focus Group Participant)

It's a total game change my whole family…it affects the whole family. It's not just that parent and child…if they go on to have other children…they share the wealth and the knowledge that they've learned. (Manager Focus Group Participant)

I can see the benefits for the families…I have a few families that were going 'oh we had a cousin over the other day and [child] was showing her the…book. And they were playing the games that we had played. They came up with other games'…they were all excited…to show me what they had come up with during the week. (Home Visitor Focus Group Participant)

The benefits for other children and for the whole family were reiterated by staff in interviews:

It's not just about the child, it's about the whole family…with the modelling of the books and the toys, you're not just doing it for a child, you're doing it for a family…everyone's skill is being built… developing through the programme…not just the child's development…whoever is on the visit…whole family reaching their potential. (Coordinator Interviewee)

It has an effect on a family level, because they go into the home…by going in and working in the way they work, that has a direct impact on a family unit and family dynamic, especially if there are higher behavioural needs and additional needs of a child, because that is a significant draw of time and energy and focus of parents and families. (Manager Interviewee)

[Programme] affects [parents'] engagement with other children within the family…so…you support a child, but you support the family…extended family, yeah, and the other children in that family. (Manager Interviewee)

Parents similarly noted the positive impact of the programme on their other children:

[Sibling] was interacting in and getting involved [with the programme] as well. (Parent Focus Group Participant)

4.1.3 Outcomes for parents

Staff and parents cited the impact of the programme for parents in both their parent role and other personal and professional development. All staff and parents reported outcomes for parents resulting from engagement with the programme. These included:

i) Enhanced parenting skills, practices, and understanding of how to best support their child

Staff and parents reported enhanced parenting skills, practices, and understanding of how to best support their child as a result of the programme. This included improved awareness that they are their child's 'first and best teacher'; of the importance of play and reading and how to utilise books and toys in fun and engaging ways; and improved routine and sustained practices regarding quality time with their child.

> *The really important thing we see is the development of the parent from the programme…they've learned, now I see how important it is to play with your child, and the play is your education…the start of your child's education. That is like a light bulb moment.* (Manager Focus Group Participant)

> *[Parents] have changed in their behaviour,…attitude to the child,…connection to the child…they see the impact of the changes that they've made has really had a big impact on the child's development…that really reinforces the idea of you are your child's best teacher, and…things are…going in the right direction for both of you…they're interconnected, without the parent making changes, the child wouldn't.* (Coordinator, Focus Group Participant)

> *A parent fed back that…[ParentChild+] helps you to remember the importance of play and brings you back to playing with your children…the busyness of life…takes you away from…that one to one time with your child…with [ParentChild+] they have that dedicated two sessions a week for a year and a half to two years…then they're more than likely going to keep it up, because it becomes a routine.* (Coordinator Focus Group Participant)

> *Parents…started off…sitting in a chair or a table, and you see them changing over the few weeks and…sitting down beside you on the floor and getting stuck in, it's great*. (Home Visitor Focus Group Participant)

Staff echoed these sentiments in interviews, noting parents' increased awareness of the importance of their role and getting down on their child's level to play:

> *It's about kind of bringing that awareness into the home [to] show parents that whilst we say they are their child's first and best teacher…you don't have to be the most educated person in the world to implement it.* (Coordinator Interviewee)

> *You can see how it's different, how the parents, instead of sitting back, are down with their children playing…they've realised, 'I'm making a difference here'*. (Coordinator Interviewee)

Parents reported home visitors modelling behaviour towards their child and teaching them about and demonstrating additional skills and practices. Parents reported being increasingly aware as a result of how to translate the learning from the programme into their everyday lives with their children, to support their child with development, including speech and play, and let their child lead more:

For me…more aware myself of how we can bring everything that we've learned into everyday. (Parent Focus Group Participant)

I didn't realise there was that many ways [to play]…[home visitor] got a sheet of paper…just a small little thing and how focused [child] was. (Parent Focus Group Participant)

I've seen even what way to be interacting…what way to be playing with the toys or just sitting down…letting him lead the way, and then I'm…just helping him along the way then. So there's been a big difference…for myself…as well. (Parent Focus Group Participant)

It [programme] opens up your eyes to more stuff. (Parent Focus Group Participant)

By the time [child] was 21 months, he didn't even have two words…the programme gave me that time to help him…also you're sitting down with the professional that can go through stuff with you and kind of help you, what way to work things or what way to word things. You can also see what way they are working with the child, that kind of helps you pick up on little things. (Parent Focus Group Participant)

Parents appreciated learning 'cheap and cheerful' ways to engage their child:

> *[Home visitor] might have different ideas on how to do stuff…like I didn't know if you mix a little bit of fairy washing up liquid in with paint, it won't stain stuff…ideas or coming up with all the play stuff that's cheap and cheerful…like how to make play-doh and add the food colouring*…stuff that won't harm them…it's just hearing different things. (Parent Focus Group Participant)

One first-time parent who was living alone with her child in an IPAS centre reported the particular benefit for her in learning about play and communication:

> *I'm a first time mom…[programme] has exposed me to different ways of communicating to my child and understanding my child…with the help of the programme I've learned how to play along with him and…teach him how to use some of the toys…I've learned that I have to come down to his level when playing with him…through this programme I've got to know this kind of things formally. I didn't have any idea.* (Parent Focus Group Participant)

ii) Enhanced parenting skills and supports for parents of children with additional needs

Home visitors described supporting parents with communicating with their children who had speech and developmental delays or issues and giving them hope in the absence of other supports:

> *This particular child has…a speech and development delay…he communicates with hands, with gestures, with his smile, with his eyes. And [parent] says to me, 'I don't understand how you understand him'. And I just…try to explain…to communicate the best I can...sometimes it's not necessary to use words long words…space it out and just to come with idea…enter their world when they allow you to do so*. (Home Visitor Focus Group Participant)

> *Giving them some kind of positive outcomes…some positivity…so that they're not feeling helpless and hopeless…we might point out a few little differences that we notice in the child and some progress that maybe they might see, and it gives them some hope for the future as well.* (Home Visitor Focus Group Participant)

Parents of children with additional needs, many of whom were not receiving other supports, reported the positive impact for them and their spouse of enhanced parenting skills and increased awareness of how to play with and support their child:

> *It is a really good programme, because it helped us as a parent. It's my first child, so it was a long time (since)...I was a child…I kind of forgot how to play with, I (learned) how to connect with our child again…this programme helped me a lot to introduce me in her world and connect to her with some activities and the way that I should talk or play with her…it has been, really helpful…not just for me, but even for my husband…he always join as well the visit…everybody's great.* (Parent Focus Group Participant)

> *I think the programme helped us. It helped it (development) happen in a better way. And I am becoming more conscious about these, this process and these achievements…because of the programme…try to interact in another way and see the results.* (Parent Focus Group Participant)

> *We both are learning to observe more…as we are observing more…noticing more progress.* (Parent Focus Group Participant)

> *It was really beneficial…especially helped me how to play with my child because he wasn't having any support…It was great for me…I learned a lot of things.* (Parent Focus Group Participant)

> *[Child]'s more hands on. So paint…that's how I learned…it was [home visitor] that showed me that.* (Parent Focus Group Participant)

Parents mentioned understanding how to adapt to their child's preferences, including one parent who realised through the programme that her child loved to paint and could then relate their painting to the book:

> *[Home visitor showed me all the different things…before…if he wouldn't read the book, we'd just leave it up where I never knew that he could…put in paint and connect the book and the painting together.* (Parent Focus Group Participant)

They also mentioned that they had continued the practices following completion of the programme:

> *I kept it up then doing it.* (Parent Focus Group Participant)

> *Then when [home visitor]'s gone, you're still…continuing it*. (Parent Focus Group Participant)

One parent who had two children with additional needs spoke of the value for her in reminding her of practices to use:

> *I found it really, really good…*it *was very interesting…I'm 42 and [child] is autistic and doesn't sleep…I know all the things I should be doing…but when you know someone is calling, you…get going and make more of an effort…you do need the reminder, you forget…you're meant to be on the floor doing face to face with any child. But it's even more important with my children…I'd be on the ground with [home visitor]*. (Parent Focus Group Participant)

Parents mentioned the importance of the programme as a source of motivation for them.

> *The biggest thing for me…was the motivation…I had a structure that I had to follow for me and I needed that…this is happening today and I need to get myself going.* (Parent Focus Group Participant)

They reported that prior to the programme they had been researching online to try to support their child but that this had not been successful:

> *When I was searching online, I didn't know what I'm looking for. I was just looking for something to help my child socialise.* (Parent Focus Group Participant)

Staff reported improved outcomes for their children with additional needs through the programme which had been life-changing for them as parents:

> *My [child] has additional needs…I was a single parent…you kind of have all the skills in the world, that doesn't mean you know how to engage with your own child…the home visitor started coming in, and I started seeing my child progress…amazing...30 minutes twice a week…a bit of engagement every day…has changed my whole life.* [Coordinator, Interviewee]

iii) Improved awareness of the importance of reading

Staff and parents reported improved awareness of the importance of reading and better understanding how to read to their child:

> *After the visit…one of the mommies…says to me, thank you very much…'I have learned how to read to my child. I don't read like I used to read to him'…when you start putting this emphasis, and you start doing in a in a different voice, you interpretate…you are awakening this imaginary developing in their heads, like, for example, a brown bear coming alive. And then you start seeing the actions.* (Home Visitor Focus Group Participant)

> *Because I'm a first-time mom, there are certain things that I don't know…like communicating with him and how to read to him.* (Parent Focus Group Participant)

> *I was just really watching what way the visitor was asking [child]…about the books…I wouldn't have really gone into all that detail before…it's just the way she does everything.* (Parent Focus Group Participant)

Staff mentioned in interviews parents telling them that they had previously avoided books with their children because of their own literacy issues and encouraging them to talk about the pictures:

> *There's some parts of the programme where they mightn't feel their literacy skills are able to comprehend. I just say, talk about the pictures. You know what that picture says.* (Coordinator Interviewee)

iv) Improved relationship, interactions and quality time with their child

Staff again mentioned the benefit for parents in sustained practices around positive routines of having quality time with their child and the improved relationship and bond with their child as a result:

> *Because of the routine and set time…parents are actually slowed down to be able to focus in on their child, because it's very hard when you say, 'oh yes…I'm going to do that now. I'm going to play'…life gets in the way…somebody is coming to the house, you're almost forced to drop everything…Don't look at the laundry…it's an appointment with your child…it'll just be a natural thing that will come to those parents.* (Home Visitor Focus Group Participant)

> *One of the parents said that they were doing yoga with the child…because they were to communicate better. They had a better bond. They had a better trust, tantrums were reduced…She could sit back and observe, she saw what the child liked and that there's a*

connection there…they both like the same things…and they started doing those, outside of our appointments. (Home Visitor Focus Group Participant)

I noticed the relationship [between parent and child] can be come really stronger after we've done the programme with the parent and child. (Home Visitor Focus Group Participant)

It's changed. It has made a big impact. It…gave you that extra one-on-one time with your child as well throughout the week…sometimes with working and busy schedules…100 different things going through your mind…you feel like you don't give them enough time. That also kind of blocks that out twice a week that you have that extra bit of time just with them. (Parent Focus Group Participant)

Staff in interviews also reported improved interactions and parents' improved behaviours positively influencing their child's and relationships improving as a result of parents' increased confidence:

More positive interactions…the change comes when the parent's behaviour changes towards their child, and then the child's behaviour changes towards the parent, and that's really evident. (Coordinator Interviewee)

Parents realise that they're impacting on [child development], their confidence grows so their relationship with their child improves because they understand. (Coordinator Interviewee)

Ultimately, by working with the child in the home, it's not just the children that benefit from the engagement with the worker and the home visits. It's the parents…it's the parents dynamic…with the child…all of it is improved positively by the engagement. (Manager Interviewee)

Parents also reported improved relationships and interactions with their child as a result of the programme in the context of additional needs and complex health issues:

These interactions will really help us to interact with her…see how she's developing and reach her goals. (Parent Focus Group Participant)

[Better relationship] because he gets his own time with me…if it wasn't set up like that my daughter or son would be in on top of me. But with [home visitor] coming in, it's kind of more kind of official: We're doing this now. (Parent Focus Group Participant)

v) Improved confidence and sense of empowerment

Staff referenced parents' improved confidence and sense of empowerment as a result of engagement with the programme, including through positive affirmation of their parenting by home visitors:

Sometimes [parents] feel invisible…not included…negative feelings because they don't feel their worth…but being a part of our programme, the confidence that they gain as a parent...we may be the only positive role model in their life to say that they are doing a good job. (Coordinator Focus Group Participant)

The confidence of parents…to actually try maybe a parent and toddler group in the area. And the confidence…to look at their child from a strength point of view, instead of like looking at what he or she can't do…I think that's so important that we really look at that piece around the parent side of it…the lovely feedback from parents about how they have felt on the programme, or how they've grown. (Coordinator Focus Group Participant)

The numbers have rose and rose, and their confidence as well…to see that is amazing. (Coordinator Focus Group Participant)

It's about the beautiful glimmer moments…you sit back…observe, wait and listen…interactions caught between parents and child…to affirm that and…mention it…I normally…drop a text message…to say…they are doing amazing work…they're doing such an incredible job with their children…I know, as a parent, I don't always see that…to have someone come in and notice that and say, 'I loved how you you've done that, I love how he's looking at you there'… they really don't realise how fabulous they are. (Home Visitor Focus Group Participant)

Staff mentioned the empowerment and reassurance resulting from home visitors gently reaffirming parents:

It's…empowerment…parents are second guessing themselves an awful lot…it's just affirming things that they are doing already…having them…be a bit more confident in their role and in their play with their child. (Home Visitor Focus Group Participant)

It's that reassurance to a parent…that builds them up…it's basically…scaffolding…we're beside them…we encourage them and give them the confidence…that you can do it… [parents] have that newfound confidence…you can see them flourishing, which is just the greatest thing. (Coordinator Interviewee)

Staff referenced observing increased confidence and the parent increasingly leading visits as their relationship with their child also improves:

You might go in on the first visit and there's no real interaction between the parent and child, and parents is kind of lacking that confidence to feel like they can have an impact on their child…then as the programme progresses, you can see the relationship building…parents get more confident…by the time you're finishing…the parent is nearly leading the visits…we can just…take a step back…the two [of them] do their own thing...That's lovely to see. (Home Visitor Focus Group Participant)

Staff similarly reported observing increased confidence levels in parents:

I can see the difference in how parents are engaging with their children…how they're…realising now 'I'm a bigger role than what I taught'…I think that's amazing. (Coordinator Interviewee)

I can see that confidence, and that's how I know the programme is working. (Coordinator Interviewee)

Parents also reported increased confidence as a result of engagement with the programme and increased knowledge about their child's development, including in the context of additional needs:

Yeah, more knowledge about a child's development. (Parent Focus Group Participant)

It's a very good programme that helps you with so much and they're very supportive with playing and they showed me so many different ways to play…I got more confident with myself because [home visitor] showed me so much different ways to play. (Parent Focus Group Participant)

Parents of children with additional needs similarly reported feeling motivated and empowered by the programme:

It got me to do the things I…knew I should be doing…but when you're tired. You have other children…I found it very good. (Parent Focus Group Participant)

Parents mentioned the sense of achievement when their child graduated from the programme:

It [graduation] was so cute…It was really a moment, I suppose, for me. (Parent Focus Group Participant)

vi) Reduced stress and worry about their child and increased wellbeing and feelings of reassurance

Staff and parents reported reductions in parents' stress and worry about their child and increased feelings of reassurance and understanding of normal expectations for their child:

It's just giving them that little bit of guidance, that little bit of reassurance that they're doing the right thing, and that is just making the world a difference in them at the end of the day. (Coordinator Focus Group Participant)

There's so many benefits to the child, but…parents do also say how much it's helped them, and they didn't realise how much they needed at the time… we're…noticing that what they're doing… is just amazing, and sometimes they might just need to hear it from someone else…the days when they're doubting themselves. (Home Visitor Focus Group Participant)

Just…normal…expectation of development that you don't need to be doing everything at this stage, this age…sometimes [child] will do it in their own time. (Home Visitor Focus Group Participant)

Staff also reported parents enjoying the activities and finding them a source of therapeutic reset and relaxation:

It's a reset…it's helpful for the parents as well…they needed that time to relax, parents enjoy the activity, it's like therapy for them, they're loving it, they're totally able to unwind. And they're doing that with their child. (Home Visitor Focus Group Participant)

Getting more comfortable…going back to being…childlike…enjoying doing puzzles and using crayons and using Play Doh and sitting on the floor. (Home Visitor Focus Group Participant)

Parents reported enjoying the visits and worrying less about how their child would manage in school and being able to look forward without getting stressed:

Look forwarding and…worrying less about how he'll get on…in the big bad world of school. (Parent Focus Group Participant)

It's a nice visit, it's fun…it's fun for everyone. (Parent Focus Group Participant)

Parents reported their own happiness levels had increased as a result of their child's increased confidence following the programme and the reassurance they received from being able to ask questions of the home visitor and get advice:

With his confidence, it's kind of made me a…bit happier. (Parent Focus Group Participant)

I just think it [programme] sort of gives a bit of reassurance…if you had any questions like it's good to have somebody that's working with kids all the time…it's just nice to have. (Parent Focus Group Participant)

In one situation, a parent had had to take a break from the programme and valued that the home visitor had kept in contact during this time:

> *Supportive because…I…had a bit of a hard time…And then I asked them could I take a break for a few weeks? And they're like, that's no problem at all. And [home visitor] still…kept in contact.* (Parent Focus Group Participant)

Parents of children with additional needs praised the support they received from the home visitor and that they would have been 'lost' without them and that the whole family were under less stress as a result of their child's improved language, communication and behaviour:

> *It was a massive weight lifted off my shoulders because it would it kind of play on…your mental health…you're worried…it [programme] made a huge difference.* (Parent Focus Group Participant)

> *We would have been lost without [home visitor] to be honest*. (Parent Focus Group Participant)

> *There was a lot of strain when [child] was younger, whereas now since he's improved, especially in his behaviours and…with his communication…The whole house is different now, like there's not as much stress…there's not much as pressure*. (Parent Focus Group Participant)

> *I was so worried about [child] because he had the few words and then they disappeared. And I was like, Oh my God, will he not talk again? When he started singing the songs and everything, the weight lifted off my shoulders because obviously that's such a worry…and then obviously the eye contact came along*. (Parent Focus Group Participant)

vii) Reduced social isolation and increased social integration and sense of belonging in the local community

Staff and parents reported outcomes of reduced social isolation and loneliness and increased social integration and sense of belonging in their local community as a result of engagement with the programme. Home visitors entering the home led to parents feeling seen, heard, and less isolated, with another trusted adult validating their experience.

> *When you have young children…a stay at home parent…it can be a lonely place to be…especially if you're just…with child and Peppa Pig most of the day…it can be a little bit overwhelming…I remember being there myself…from a 'I hear you, I see you, you matter' approach…I would work with that basis all the time. And I think the parents really appreciate that and feel heard*. (Home Visitor Focus Group Participant)

Staff reported home visitors informing parents about local parks and libraries and supporting them in attending local community events, such as parent and toddler groups, sometimes taking them; as well as events organised or supported by ParentChild+; and matching families from similar backgrounds who might wish to connect socially.

> *The home visitor, bringing them [parent] out into the community…taking them by the hand…it just makes it so much easier for Mom, then, to engage in other things that are in her community and just really flourishing as a parent.* (Manager Focus Group Participant)

> *Parents are now…looking forward to going out and about in the community with their child, whereas before they did not know what existed or what would they do. Need a little bit*

sometimes, some families that we work with just that bit of support to be like, come on. I'll go with you to the group. (Coordinator Focus Group Participant)

We…run the home from home programme in two of our local IPAS centres…it's lovely to see the parents…are now integrating out into the local community. (Home Visitor Focus Group Participant)

Sometimes [for] other cultures… Indian or Chinese or Ukraine…we have little library little days [to] bring the children, say for Easter…all these occasions, a parent [said] how lovely it was…when you come from a different country, how you feel so isolated and…husband might be working and to connect to the community…she found ParentChild+ brilliant…integration, everyone together, Irish families, everybody…when the children were playing, and…the mothers were talking…she said she loved that. (Home Visitor Focus Group Participant)

The impact [of the programme] is tenfold…because it gives [parents] the confidence to go out into a community, to join a group, to network, to come to events on their own, to go to a health centre…going to see their local park…[parents] didn't even know existed…it's getting them out, it's getting them moving. (Coordinator Interviewee)

Staff also referenced the importance of building parents' confidence in the context of feelings of unsafety as a result of recent incidences of crime, racism and anti-social behaviour in Dublin:

It's giving [parents] the confidence…some families might not feel safe to be honest with you, because everything that happened over the last year and a half…that's still fresh in some people's minds. So going out and venturing outside is difficult for them. (Coordinator Interviewee)

Home visitors also referenced supporting families to better understand Irish culture and explaining more to their colleagues about cultures families are coming from. Managers and coordinators referred to families being more 'anchored' in the community as a result of the programme.

I'm working with all the Chinese communities. The family are new to Ireland. They don't really know…so I introduce loads of culture, things like…Patrick's Day or Christmas or explain something like Chinese culture to all our colleagues…[so they] understand them a bit more. (Home Visitor Focus Group Participant)

I do see the families… new to the country…who graduate from the programme…they actually feel…more anchored…they feel heard or less isolated as a result of the programme. (Manager Interviewee)

Some staff referenced the particular importance of social contact with home visitors and the presence of a friendly, trusted adult for people who do not have family or people visiting their home:

They don't have family or anybody to visit at the house…even that regularity of somebody coming in that they're interacting with, talking with somebody, conversation, because they don't have that…so that's brilliant. (Home visitor Focus Group Participant)

The programme is really, really valuable for people, for families that are moving into the area and don't have anyone. I can see the benefits. (Home Visitor Focus Group Participant)

For families that are from other countries…you're being…a friendly person in the home…a trusted adult. (Home Visitor Focus Group Participant)

Staff noted increased social integration of families in IPAS centres because of engagement with the Home from Home programme:

> *We're seeing real changes in the dynamic of the communities that are living in those direct provision centres...they're really starting to integrate in the community…you can really see an awful lot of change, good things coming out of that short programme*. (Home Visitor Focus Group Participant)

A home visitor who had been a parent spoke of the significance of the social support she received from the programme:

> *I had just moved into the area…I had two small kids…all the support that I got from the home visitor was really, really valuable. I think isolation was a big thing…I didn't have any extended family or friends around me.* (Home Visitor Focus Group Participant)

Parents reported a positive bond with the home visitor and related positive interactions:

> *[Home visitor]'s lovely…she's very nice…we'll always be friendly with each other now…when we see each other*. (Parent Focus Group Participant)

Parents referenced the benefits for them in having met other parents through the programme:

> *You get to meet other people and other parents*. (Parent Focus Group Participant)

Parents who had moved to Ireland from other countries reported less social isolation from having the home visitor to speak to, especially in the context of limited contact with family and friends:

> *We come from a very big family and obviously being here and alone…does affect [me]…I was usually kind of waiting every week…to talk to someone and it's really nice. I like it…[to] see other people because we don't have families here.* (Parent Focus Group Participant)

These parents also reported improved social integration from opportunities to meet other parents as a result of the programme:

> *I've had the opportunity to meet other families as well…we enjoy the parties…Christmas parties and Summer parties…it's interesting.* (Parent Focus Group Participant)

viii) Increased engagement with other community services, programmes and activities

Staff mentioned the trusted relationship with home visitors often leading to disclosures from parents regarding mental health or domestic violence for which they were then able to signpost these parents to services and supports.

This was reported to especially be the case where ParentChild+ was operating within wraparound structures of supports within the same lead agency and ParentChild+ staff could refer parents where relevant.

> *I would find very kind of common in the role, especially with the families that I've worked with, that there could be other things that come out, you know, during your visits as well…areas of mental health…domestic violence issues…you do become that trusted…constant person in there…it's really good that you're trusted with that information.* (Home Visitor Focus Group Participant)

This was reiterated in interviews with staff mentioning the importance of referral of families to wraparound supports, including food banks, with needs perceived as having increased significantly since the COVID-19 pandemic, and the value of ParentChild+ in accessing families in need:

> *We have a wraparound services…there's a lot of families…since COVID…even more…that need the wraparound services…family support…signposted to where food banks are…ParentChild+ is brilliant…it gets you in the door with the free book or the free toy...for some families, that's all that's needed, but for a lot of families, it's more than that that's needed.* (Coordinator Interviewee)

> *I also see [programme] as a foothold into kind of given a more multi-dimensional support if it's needed.* (Manager Interviewee)

> *People who come in and who have experience with the programme, they're well set…more disposed…to avail of other services.* (Manager Interviewee)

Staff mentioned families in IPAS centres receiving valuable information through their home visitor that supported their engagement with other community services:

> *Parents are more integrated through the power of information and community and a lot of that information can come through their home visitor*. (Home Visitor Focus Group Participant)

ix) Increased social capital and likelihood of progressing on to training, education and employment

Home visitors who had been parents on the programme spoke of their engagement and seeing the benefits for their children as inspiring them to go back to education, obtain qualifications and work as home visitors before progressing to coordinator roles:

> *I was like, I need to know…how to work for this…I want to do this with my life…so I went back…I got my qualifications…I'm with ParentChild+…years now*. (Coordinator Interviewee)

In interviews staff reported parents' increased awareness of the importance of reading to their children leading to a new understanding of the importance of learning and education. This was referenced as especially important where parents had not had a positive experience with school. Sites which also had wraparound supports reported referring parents to literacy and other courses:

> *A Dad said to me, I've started to realise the importance of education…that blew me away*. (Coordinator Interviewee)

> *It's…wraparound approach…which makes it a good home for us…because it…means that with that literacy aspect, we can get funding for them to do that course*. (Coordinator Interviewee)

> *[We can] link [parents] in with our adult education programme, or another adult education [course].* (Manager Interviewee)

> *[Programme] sows the seeds for education, and it grows…a good effect*. (Manager Interviewee)

x) Administrative support regarding relevant schools, assessments, services and entitlements.

Staff and parents mentioned benefits from administrative support provided by home visitors regarding relevant schools, assessments, services and entitlements and related applications. This was

referenced as especially important for families who had recently moved to Ireland or who did not speak English well:

> *[Home visitors] helping them with their forms and their diagnosis or skill placements and so forth…it's invaluable to them*. (Coordinator Focus Group Participant)

> *Filling in forms that they don't have the confidence to fill in.* (Coordinator Focus Group Participant)

> I would introduce about…play school, how it works, how you register to go…help them to navigate…things like that are so different…because the language barriers. (Home Visitor Focus Group Participant)

Staff in interviews also reported providing this support and parents' need for it, with some families missing out on ECCE or SLT because of a lack of awareness of how to apply for supports:

> *Even reluctancy to put their names on speech and language list…[some parents] don't fully understand that if they're not on a list, [they] might never get anything. There's a lot of children that you see that should be availing and getting the two free years and they just don't have it.* (Coordinator Interviewee)

Parents referenced support with paperwork for school and other services and getting advice from the home visitor about significant changes in their lives:

> *If some changes came in our way, like for school or anything, it was like kind of nice to talk to someone.* (Parent Focus Group Participant)

4.1.4 Outcomes for communities

Staff also noted a 'ripple effect' impacted by the programme on wider communities characterised by intergenerational unemployment and socioeconomic deprivation and marginalisation as a result of improved social integration of patents, increased education and community employment, both through home visitors' employment, training and progression to formal education and through participating parents' enhanced confidence and increased likelihood to pursue further education and employment, and increased participation in community events and local libraries.

> *One of our home visitors, has now become the coordinator of the whole programme as a full-time employee…the idea would be, when I retire, that somebody will be ready and willing to sit in this chair…It's around that community development approach as well as a service approach.* (Manager Focus Group Participant)

> *[Home visitors]…and their families and parents have become champions of the programme after being part of it…building social capital…building up the capacity of the local community to lead around early childhood education, play and learning.* (Manager Focus Group Participant)

This was repeated by staff in interviews:

> *It has significant effect. On a multitude of levels…it has an effect on a community level, because it goes into areas of most need and makes a difference there*. (Manager Interviewee)

4.2Enabling factors

Staff and parents attributed the high performance and effectiveness of the programme in producing the outcomes to ten enabling factors:

1. The successful evidence-base underpinning the model and approach.
2. The commitment and engagement of participating parents.
3. The quality, training, skills and commitment of ParentChild+ staff.
4. Trusted relationship between parents and home visitor.
5. Effective staff relationships and team culture.
6. Community of practice and peer support across sites nationally.
7. Support and capacity-building from ELI and HVA.
8. Flexibility to adapt programme to needs of families and communities.
9. Community events organised or supported by ParentChild+.
10. Relationship with other community organisations and services.

4.2.1 Successful evidence-based model and approach

All staff cited the importance of the programme's successful evidence-based model. Several factors in particular were referenced as part of this model which facilitate the achievement of the outcomes outlined in section 4.1 above. These include the following ten enabling factors:

i) The home-based nature of ParentChild+

The home-based nature of the programme which enables home visitors to see families' circumstances and the issues they are facing which impact on the child and parent and also supported the formation and maintenance of a trusted relationship between home visitors and parents:

> *That work within someone's home has a different level and a different richness to it as well.* (Manager Focus Group Participant)

> *It's a very privileged role to be in someone's house on a constant, twice a week*. (Home Visitor Focus Group Participant)

Staff participating in interviews similarly commented on the importance of going into the home to understand how best to support families:

> *Going into the home… seeing the physical environment…where [families] lived…what type of accommodations that other people wouldn't have knowledge on…that gave me definitely more empathy and more like, 'Oh, these need to be supported, that bit more'…it gives a perspective where you're actually in their space…you know more about the family.* (Coordinator Interviewee)

Parents praised the home-based nature of it and its capacity to motivate them:

> *As much as you know what you're meant to be doing, you're tired and you're sitting on the chair and you're kind of procrastinating…Where she's coming in now. So I have the house ready because obviously I want to clear space. I'm ready for it.* (Parent Focus Group Participant)

ii) The evidence base and related available research on the programme

The extensive evidence base and body of research on the programme, both from the US and Ireland from over 50 years in operation, as outlined in section 1.

[The programme] has been well researched, and because the programme is around so long…absolutely makes sense. (Coordinator Focus Group Participant)

It works really well and it's research based as well. (Coordinator Focus Group Participant)

iii) Supervision and reflective practice and related support and peer learning

The extensive supervision and reflective practice for staff through two-hours of weekly supervision was reported as a key enabling factor. This enabled home visitors to receive support from coordinators for any issues arising, facilitated staff to support and learn from each other, and provided an opportunity for staff to give feedback about the programme, their roles and any related challenges.

Our home visitors are the most supervised staff in the whole of [the organisation]…they get two hours supervision every single week. (Manager Focus Group Participant)

The two-hour supervision every week is…a really super way where they're connecting with all the other home visitors and learning from their experiences. Little issues get ironed out. (Coordinator Focus Group Participant)

I do think [supervision is] one of the reasons why [programme] works so well…it's unheard of in any other social care setting and any care type of job that you would have weekly supervisions… you're able to deliver a good quality programme, because you're getting the support and whatever training that you need in order to be able to do that. (Home Visitor Focus Group Participant)

Staff mentioned the importance of supervision for fidelity of the programme and for sharing learning, including on optimal ways to use VISMS for children with additional needs:

With the fidelity…that's what supervision is for. We discuss different ways of using the VISMS…discuss different ideas with each other…make sure that we're all using the VISMS in the same kind of ways…if a child is non-verbal…it can be challenging…we're trying to share ideas on how can I use this VISM, because the traditional ways aren't working. (Home Visitor Focus Group Participant)

Staff in interviews similarly emphasised the importance of supervision and reflective practice:

Reflective practice has a big part to do with it…in supervision, we can see what we did, what the parent did, what the child did. (Coordinator Interviewee)

iv) Non-judgmental approach

The programme's non-judgmental approach to meeting and working with parents and families 'where they are at' in child-led, parent-led, strengths-based ways. This distinguishes ParentChild+ staff from other agencies interacting with them and enables rapport, trust and the formation and maintenance of relationships between home visitors and parents.

We are not imposing our views. (Home visitor Focus Group Participant)

As the programme progresses…they [parents] see that we're not like other services going in, there's no pressure, and we're not judging them…they even comment that…they don't feel uncomfortable or under pressure when we come to do the visits, it's a completely different atmosphere…they feel more at ease with us compared to other services coming in. (Home Visitor Focus Group Participant)

Some of them might feel a little bit intimidated…by somebody coming…another person in a uniform, or from an agency…they do trust, after a while, that we're there for their benefit and for their child's benefit, and not to judge at all. (Home Visitor Focus Group Participant)

Staff in interviews also posited the non-judgmental affirmative approach with realising positive outcomes for parents and children.

We utilise…a strengths-based approach this programme…that carries on…like the parents would get that into them without even realising. (Coordinator Interviewee)

We send text messages [after visits]…tell parents 'you did really well. I could see how [child] engaged…on [child's] level…brilliant'…it's praise to know what they're doing right…I really think that contributes to the success. (Coordinator Interviewee)

The…ethos is significant and the way the home visitors and…coordinator approach things and engage…they're very not judgmental…they take children and families as they find them. (Manager Interviewee)

Parents who had involvement from social workers in the past spoke of their initial reluctance before realising that the programme was different from other services they had interacted with:

First, I was like, oh God, I don't want to do this…but then when [home visitor] started coming…it wasn't what I expected…I thought it was going to be like just another…parents course or something…but it's lovely…It worked really well. (Parent Focus Group Participant)

v) Model of local people working as home visitors in their own communities

The model of local people working as home visitors in their own communities, many of whom were themselves parents on the programme enables shared culture and relationship-building between home visitors and parents. This model also promotes and provides progression routes for staff, leading to increased community employment, social capital, and can brake cycles of poverty and disadvantage. This community development approach also benefits from home visitors as trusted role models for parents and families in the community.

We employ…local [people]…[many] of those have gotten their level six qualification as part of the initiative. (Manager Focus Group Participant)

It is really our commitment, and…our understanding…we're building local capacity. (Manager Focus Group Participant)

That kind of local capacity part…you really do see how Mams from the community really connect differently with other Mams who are from the community….the relationships that are built are so lovely…and I think that's a really important part of our programme. (Manager Focus Group Participant)

They [home visitors] are champions of the community. (Manager Focus Group Participant)

This repeated by staff in interviews:

People they feel have an understanding of the path they walk, an empathy to their situation. It can be more powerful…peer led support and peer led learning is significantly strong…especially in marginalised communities. (Manager Interviewee)

I firmly believe the programme works, because it's local people visiting the local community, yeah, and that's where the relationship built up. (Manager Interviewee)

vi) Structure, length and content of the programme

The structure, content and length of programme provides consistency, routine, and appropriate and evidence-based sequencing of VISMS in line with child development, with VISMS intertwining and learning constantly repeated, reenforced and enhanced through home visitors modelling. This structure also includes the practice of following up with parents to reenforce learning, give feedback, praise engagement, and support them in understanding and preparing for next session. This structure and content are also suitable for low parental literacy and families where English is not the first language.

> *There's no other service that goes into a home that engages with the parent twice a week routinely for almost two years…from my point of view, that's extraordinary…that, to me, is core to it.* (Coordinator Focus Group participant)

> *We do get a lot of families that have complex needs…that may have a lot going on in their lives…their appreciation of the programme…the repetition and the constant in their lives*. (Home visitor Focus Group participant)

> *The support that you're giving to parents and the constant in their life…when you're doing it for a certain amount of time, and you actually get a full family through the programme…you see the benefits of it and how it's helped them*. (Home Visitor Focus Group Participant)

> *The toys and books…all intertwine with each other…in two weeks…a toy will match back to the book…the repetition…it's constantly being reinforced...[child] is making the connections from play to the books and from the books to play as well, which is excellent…it's super*. (Home Visitor Focus Group Participant)

Staff at interviews mentioned the importance of communication with parents before visits to help them prepare for and understand the upcoming visit and also follow up communication to praise them afterwards, as reference above regarding the non-judgmental approach:

> *We always text…add in a little something we're going to do…it just gives the parents a little bit of prep… they're not coming into the unknown…they know what's going to happen…which is really important…eliminates fear and it builds trust.* (Coordinator Interviewee)

Parents also praised the consistency in contact the model afforded in the form of visits twice weekly:

> *It's really important to have this contact, this frequency with…the visitor, because it helps us to create this environment for the child*. (Parent Focus Group Participant)

vii) The timing of the programme and capacity for PEI support

The timing of programme between 18 months and three years means that it is ideally positioned to identify delays or developmental issues and support child and parent with these.

> *ParentChild+ is positioned beautifully…at a point where parents…have very poor confidence themselves and maybe [are] aware that their child is not doing as well as they'd like them to do…they're not talking, or they're not playing…their attention, their focus or concentration, is really poor…it's positioned right at the point where they need it*. (Coordinator Focus Group Participant)

Staff in interviews praised the importance of the that fact that the programme engages with children before school and before they reach five years:

> *Zero to five is when your brain is maturing the most and growing the most in the whole lifespan…By the time they've gone to school, the brain is developed…parents will say, we'll leave it to school…we're after missing so much stimulation, so many opportunities, to enhance their development in all the five areas, because we've left it to school.* (Coordinator Interviewee)

viii) Free high quality toys and books

The high quality toys and books which are given free of charge, and which remain in the home, is attractive to and appreciated by parents who may not otherwise be able to afford them or know which would best support child development and also engenders trust between the parent and the home.

> *A lot of the homes that we're going into literally have nothing, and the parents wouldn't be in a position to buy toys, and they wouldn't be members of the library.* (Coordinator Focus Group)

> *One Mom [said] 'you're bringing in all of the things that I really wanted for [child] to have, but I could never get them. And now you're bringing them to me, and…you're showing me what to do with it'…it helps the parents to see…rather than just buying toys randomly, that there is sort of a…developmental sequence, to the toys and the books that you're bringing in.* (Coordinator Focus Group Participant)

> *The fact of leaving the books and the toys in in the house tells the parents that you trust them…as people who really want to use these in a positive way with their children…as you've modelled for them, in the days in between [visits]…that's really critical*. (Coordinator Focus Group)

Staff in interviews also referenced the importance of the free resources which parents can keep:

> *The parents get to keep the books and toys, which I think is really important. There's no cost involved...a lot of parents don't have the money to buy these things*. (Coordinator Interviewee)

> *Bringing the toys makes a massive difference to families that have often a large number of children, and learning how to utilise that toy for the benefit of your child.* (Manager Interviewee)

ix) Voluntary nature of the programme

The voluntary nature of the programme means that families want to engage and enjoy it, differentiating ParentChild+ from other mandatory services.

> *These families that join this programme want to join.* (Manager Focus Group Participant)

Staff in interviews also reported the importance of engagement being a voluntary commitment given the number of visits involved:

> *I think it's really important it's voluntary…that parents [are not] pushed into this, it is a commitment. It's 92 visits…this isn't a quick fix. This is trying to change a whole environment and create a learning environment.* (Coordinator Interviewee)

x) Credibility, reputation and trusted and recognisable 'brand' of ParentChild+

The credibility and reputation of the programme in communities, with parents and former parents acting as ambassadors for the programme, assisting in recruitment and resulting in parents self-referring due to word of mouth. Staff are identifiable because of uniform and the brand has positive and trustworthy connotations.

> *[Parents] are like ambassadors going forward for us in relation to the value of the programme for their family, which is fantastic, it's great.* (Manager Focus Group Participant)

> *Word of mouth is key…we have positive results…Traveller families [are] telling other members of the Travelling community, 'this support is here, and it's benefited me'…so people want to be on it.* (Manager Interviewee)

4.2.2 Commitment and engagement of parents

The commitment and engagement of parents was cited as a significant enabling factor in achieving outcomes for children, parents and families:

> *It's [commitment of] the whole family that's involved.* (Coordinator Focus Group Participant)

> *The commitment of the parents, they've really shown up…when they linked in…they've really, really committed to it…their commitment to the child's development*. (Manager Focus Group Participant)

> *I really think it's the commitments from the parents.* (Manager Focus Group Participant)

Commitment and engagement of parents included not cancelling or missing visits and preparing well for visits:

> *The parents' commitment…they're engaged…they don't cancel the visit…they know the importance…they prepare, they're waiting for you…preparing the room…you can see their progress.* (Home Visitor Focus Group Participant)

Staff especially admired and saw benefit from the commitment of parents in complex circumstances:

> *I really admire the families that have so much going on that are consistent…with the programme, and see the benefits in the programme.* (Home Visitor Focus Group Participant)

Staff spoke of observing the impact of the work parents did with their children, using the toys and books, in between visits:

> *It's so nice to see when you go back for the review and you see…a bit of scribbles on the book…it's such a nice thing to see that the book was used…we model, but they [parents] are doing the work in between the videos.* (Home Visitor Focus Group Participant)

This was reiterated by staff in interviews:

> *It's the commitment of the families. It's one thing, you know, and I think we're always saying that here in our group, just to say like, you need to praise and empower the parents as much as you do the child, because it's the parent that opens the door to you every day.* (Coordinator Interviewee)

> *I see a huge difference…because I can see the consistency of the families.* (Coordinator Interviewee)

4.2.3 Quality, training, skills and commitment of ParentChild+ staff

Staff and parents reported the quality, training, skills and commitment of all staff, including home visitors, coordinators and managers, as integral to the success of the programme and its outcomes:

> *It's the commitment of the home visitor and then the support of the coordinators, and then the support of the managers…it's a whole team effort*. (Coordinator Focus Group Participant)

> *They [home visitors] have had a plethora of training from circle of security to peep to baby massage to Sully Hall training and so on.* (Manager Focus Group Participant)

Parents praised the commitment of staff to the role, their positive disposition and skills and passion regarding working with children:

> *[Home visitor] is lovely with children. She just loves children…She's mad about it and wanted to do the job and is enjoying her job*. (Parent Focus Group Participant)

Parents of children with additional needs appreciated home visitors' training and experience in this area:

> *[Home visitor] looked very experienced [with additional needs]…I'm very comfortable and my son is very comfortable.* (Parent Focus Group Participant)

4.2.4 Trusted relationship between parents and children and the home visitor

The trusted relationship between parents and home visitor was considered significantly enabling. Staff referenced the importance of the coordinator matching parents with home visitors to support the development of a positive dynamic and to match skills to families' needs.

> *That bond that they've [parent] actually built with the home visitor, how it's…helped them as a parent and a person.* (Coordinator Focus Group Participant)

> *You build up that relationship with them [parent].* (Home visitor Focus Group Participant)

Staff mentioned this trusted relationship as often leading to disclosures of issues they could support parents with:

> *Sometimes there's other areas of support that are brought out and noticed and spoken about during your time with the family. And I do think it's just all down to building that trust, yeah, and having the respect there*. (Home Visitor Focus Group Participant)

This was echoed by staff in interviews:

> *The relationship building, how important that is.* (Coordinator Interviewee)

> *If the relationship building happens, there'll be less cancellations…visits will happen if they have a connection with the home visitor…anything that can…help them make the connection stronger is what sustains them on the programme*. (Coordinator Interviewee)

Staff mentioned the particular importance of building trust with Traveller families who had had negative experiences with services previously. Some sites reported Traveller families making up half of their intake and 60% of their waiting lists:

> *I did an event last week with [Traveller organisation], and I'm really connected with them…there was…a lot of Traveller mothers…and I love to see it because, to be honest, it took me a long time to build that trust*. (Coordinator Interviewee)

Parents reported valuing the trusted relationship and supportive atmosphere with the home visitor which enabled their child to talk and engage well:

> *Our lovely facilitator is great and [child] talks to her really, really well…it's just a very, very supportive atmosphere*. (Parent Focus Group Participant)

4.2.5 Effective staff relationships and team culture

Staff referenced the importance of team culture, respectful relationships and a peer learning environment where feedback was asked for and any issues addressed in a timely way:

> *Any issues we'd address quickly…there's a great feedback mechanism…often things are identified before they become an issue.* (Manager Interviewee)

> *A sense of mission around the team…there's a really good ethos, like a work ethic*…it's actually the culture [coordinator] has created. (Manager Interviewee)

Some coordinators mentioned that it was important they were also still home visiting and bringing their own challenges or learning to discuss with their team:

> *This team is good at that…taking ideas and not feeling that someone's telling you how to do it…sharing of the knowledge…not defensive…because I'm still home visiting and I come with my challenges…I'm still learning too.* (Coordinator Interviewee)

> think a sense of mission around the team. They were very, I don't know how I use mission, kind of to mean the purpose for why we're here, yeah, but there's a, there's a really good ethos, like a work ethic,

4.2.6 Positive relationships, community of practice and peer support across sites

Staff cited community of practice and peer learning across sites nationally as enabling them to develop in their roles and enhancing their capacity to deliver the programme. This included in-person community of practice events by ELI at NCI for coordinators three times a year; CPD provided by ELI and webinars made available by the Home Visiting Alliance (HVA). In addition to the formal community of practice structures, managers and coordinators referenced the importance for them of informal structures for peer support, including WhatsApp groups. These groups were a source of shared knowledge regarding practices and tips, training resources and information concerning sourcing equipment:

> *What helps…is that the coordinators…have regular community of practice as well, which helps with [fidelity]…and strategies around, maybe some difficult situations…they…have commonality around.* (Manager Focus Group Participant)

> *I think what's really important for all of us is the relationships…we have…the coordinators, the support.* (Manager Focus Group Participant)

> *The WhatsApp coordinators group…the support and…resources…they put up videos and all sorts of stuff on that…if…I'm finding it difficult to source a book or toy…within 10 minutes, another coordinator from a site is on saying, we use this supplier.* (Manager Focus Group Participant)

> *When the community of practice days are on…it's a lovely…when the girls all meet together and thrash out…any challenges.* (Manager Focus Group Participant)

Staff participants in interviews echoed their appreciation for this community of practice and sharing of resources:

> *You'll always link in with…other coordinators…someone will have come up with it before and give you an idea…there's always someone who'll answer the phone…or the WhatsApp group, or you'll find it on the SharePoint [documents]…I think it's the first job I've ever had where you haven't had to literally start something from scratch*. (Coordinator Interviewee)

> *People [across sites] are always sharing things and sharing knowledge…although it is…a job I'm doing in this building…I never feel like that, because there's always someone there*. (Coordinator Interviewee)

Staff also mentioned positive relationships supporting the reassignment of families who moved accommodation to transition with ParentChild+ at other sites:

> *We have such good relationships…we've had families that maybe have moved homeless hubs…they can move from a PC plus programme into a PC plus programme…we've been really lucky…because of those relationships, we're able to do that.* (Manager Focus Group Participant)

4.2.7 Support and capacity-building from ELI and HVA

Staff praised support and capacity-building from ELI and the Home Visiting Alliance (HVA). Staff cited support and capacity-building from ELI as significant in enabling them to deliver the programme. This was considered to be increasingly important as the programme is scaled further and new sites established. The approachability and 'open door' policy were especially praised by coordinators and managers:

> *There is so much continuous professional development. I think that's a core piece of this programme. I think the connection with NCI, the strength of that connection, is just incredible for [staff]…the community of practice*. (Manager Focus Group Participant)

> *You're never unsupported in the role…that's great…with the community of practice down in ELI and all the training.* (Coordinator Interviewee)

> *One of the positives of the programme is there is good communication and connection between ELI…NCI and ourselves…very approachable…very open, very direct…that makes life very easy…because you know you can pick up the phone.* (Manager Interviewee)

Staff valued capacity-building support from the HVA in terms of information and training webinars and praised the fact that they could request topics to be covered which were then actioned comprehensively:

> *Training and connection with the Home Visiting Alliance…I think all of that has added hugely to the professional nature of the home visiting that happens in this programme. And I think that's fantastic, very positive.* (Manager Focus Group Participant)

> *I do think it's brilliant what they're doing with their Home Visiting Alliance and the webinars…certain topics that have been suggested have been done, and they've been done really well, so now that's a massive plus, it's great.* (Coordinator Focus Group Participant)

4.2.8 Flexibility to adapt programme to needs of families and communities

Staff mentioned the importance that there was some flexibility to change to adapt the programme to parents' needs. This included focusing on issues in visits that might be particularly challenging in that moment for parents and children such as teeth, toilet training, or outside play:

> *If we felt something strongly needs to be changed, nobody would block it*. (Coordinator Interviewee)

> *Fidelity in terms of the programme, how its delivered…we absolutely do, but I do think you have to…it comes from the States…you have to adapt a bit culturally, but you can do that without losing the essence.* (Manager Interviewee)

4.2.9 Community events organised or supported by ParentChild+

Staff and parents mentioned the importance of events led or supported by ParentChild+ in the community as referenced above regarding improved social integration:

> *It's them kind of events that bring people together*. (Coordinator Interviewee)

> *Community events are amazing…families come from across the community, and the feedback is brilliant.* (Manager Interviewee)

4.2.10 Relationship with other community organisations and services

Staff reported the significance of ParentChild+ being embedded in the community and strong relationships with other organisations as well as ParentChild+ led or supported events within the community:

> *Another really important aspect is that we are very embedded in the community…I…have good, strong relationships with PHNs, PPFS, teams, etc. So, when it came to introducing this new programme…everyone was enthusiastic and excited…so we didn't have any difficulty getting referrals for it.* (Manager Focus Group Participant)

4.3 Experiences of replication and fidelity of the programme

4.3.1 Experiences of replication and fidelity

All staff reported positive experiences with replication and fidelity of the programme. They understood the rationale for fidelity and that it was grounded in research and considered it to be essential to the functioning and scaling of ParentChild+. Staff described fidelity as 'very important'; 'very positive'; 'key'; and that it 'makes sense'.

> *It's a go to…everyone [staff] is aware, because they do their refresher training. They do their training at the beginning…they're fine with that.* (Manager Focus Group Participant)

> *It [fidelity] works really, really well...we certainly don't have a problem with this.* (Coordinator Focus Group Participant)

> *I feel it's been well researched, and because the programme is around so long…most of the stuff absolutely makes sense…those rules and regulations…have been well founded.* (Coordinator Focus Group Participant)

> *It's rare that we adapt, we're very strict in keeping to the fidelity…the list is up in the wall, and there's tick box in terms of what comes next.* (Manager Focus Group Participant)

They emphasised the importance of fidelity being based on research and evidence and being comprehensively explained to staff and reported that this had been the case for them. Fidelity was seen as key to support staff in remaining true to the focus of the programme and 'in the lane'. Especially positive aspects of fidelity referenced included the structure of the programme and deliberate evidence based order of VISMS; the provision of training and regular refresher training and CPD; paperwork and reporting requirements; and the rule regarding home visitors not chatting or accepting tea which was perceived to maintain important boundaries and the integrity of the role of home visitor, protecting staff and families.

> *Fidelity…over the years that I've seen the programme grow and get bigger…to many, many sites now throughout Ireland…it's key the programme…it's keeping us in the lane.* (Manager Focus Group Participant)

> *It [fidelity] reinforces the boundaries...it's definitely a priority*. (Manager Focus Group Participant)

> *It can be quite hard to hold the boundaries...not being able to accept a cup of tea on visits, wear uniforms. The visits are very structured…it's incredibly important to…be able to hold that boundary at all times…knowing that the programme was set up, it's evidence based…researched…even the nature of…VISMS lists…they're all structured…for a reason…you have to deliver the programme as the programme was intended…it protects families, and it protects us as home visitors*. (Home Visitor Focus Group Participant)

Staff reported that some flexibility existed to adjust the programme to child and parent needs, including for children with additional needs, and to local context and praised ELI for their approachability, willingness to discuss issues sites were having, and taking time to explain the rationale:

> *It has already evolved slightly with the fidelity of the American version to make it our own in Ireland.* (Home Visitor Focus Group Participant)

> *If there's a change [ELI] make us well aware of it before it comes…then they tell us the reason why. It's not just, 'no, you have to do this'…there's a reason why*. (Coordinator Interview Participant)

> *[ELI] are always open for…discussion…what challenges we have…looking at it…[explaining] this has to be done, and this is why it has to be done*. (Coordinator Interview Participant)

Some referenced initial minor changes which were made to the US form regarding not asking financial questions and changing the colour of uniforms which had been implemented without issues. Others referenced additional changes which were implemented, including home visitors now having more input annually regarding the selection of VISMS.

> *It's flexible in the sense that obviously we don't have the same books or toys…within each area and locality*. (Coordinator Focus Group Participant)

> *We're…bound by rules and fidelity to the programme, but actually, when we go into the home…we're delivering the flexibility of that…to the child and the parent. It's just amazing that we have that flexibility and the ability of the home visitors to do that, that they know exactly how to reach that child.* (Coordinator Focus Group Participant)

Lots of us expressed the concern about VISMS for children with additional needs…that don't have diagnosis and are struggling…so we created the additional VISMS list…we found toys that work really well. (Home Visitor Focus Group Participant)

Staff mentioned that where they did adapt it was to 'add on' practices, including additional training:

In relation to fidelity, we never take anything away, if anything, we add more in, like…Circle of Security…Sully Hall…reflective supervision training. (Manager Focus Group Participant)

4.3.2 Challenges regarding replication and fidelity

No participants in the staff groups comprising of managers, coordinators and home visitors, reported encountering any challenges regarding replication and fidelity. Some staff mentioned some suggestions and issues they would like to see considered, including longer shadowing periods for home visitors, challenges sourcing some toys and books and the need for VISMS designed for children with additional needs. These are detailed in section 4.4 below.

4.3 Current challenges

Challenges were identified regarding the operation of the programme and in relation to external variables impacting on programme delivery and on families engaging with the programme.

4.3.1 Challenges regarding funding and staff retention

Staff cited current challenges they were experiencing regarding the operation and delivery of the programme. Confusion and disappointment were expressed that what staff had seen as a government commitment to home visiting, following its prominence in the First Five policy document had not translated into increased funding from their perspectives. This was reported as particularly disappointing given the effectiveness and high performance of the programme. A significant challenge reported by staff was the insufficiency of current funding due to increased costs of running the programme, including increased resources for equipment and salaries. Staff reported costs of VISMS had increased due to inflation up to 33%. Staff also referenced high demand for the programme, with many families on a waiting list, and that they would like to expand deliver to more families but had been unable to source additional funding:

The price of the books and toys…has increased dramatically…the last couple of years…gone up about 33%...we used to say €10 per item, but that's…not feasible anymore. (Manager Focus Group Participant)

We see more and more increase in the cost of the VISMS…with the same money you cannot buy the same things anymore. (Manager Focus Group Participant)

This was repeated in interviews with staff who cited the success of the programme and the need for more funding:

That'd be number one [challenge]…we've tried absolutely everything we can think of…I've been on radio station, I've done podcasts…it's unbelievable [waiting list], and a lot of them are in the travelling community…I'm delighted that they want to do it …but there's nothing I can do. (Coordinator Interviewee)

Funding is an issue…in relation to providing this for more families…I've only 10 families, and I cannot get the funding anywhere… my waiting list is huge and I can't keep up with the referrals…it's really hard, I had a Traveller mother ringing me last week, and she's like, 'when is my space coming up?' I said, 'I'm so sorry. I don't know'. (Coordinator Interviewee)

I have to come back to some parents and say, 'I'm really sorry the funding wasn't there, so therefore your child is actually out, they're not in the age limit. We'll never get it completed'…and the disappointment at that. It's actually horrible. (Coordinator Interviewee)

There is a massive need for the programme here…we're working with the people in the most need…the funding is very poor…you could quadruple the funding, and we still won't meet the need like but it t is quite low, funded…[sites] have cut back to the bare minimum…that is driven by budget. (Manager Interviewee)

[The programme] is a tonic…I'm delighted that we have it as part of what [we] offer. I would like to see it growing. (Manager Interviewee)

Despite increased salaries, these are considered relatively low which is impacting on staff retention as staff increasingly leave for better paid roles that align with their high levels training. Some staff spoke of the importance of providing training in a timely manner to ensure retention:

Some [home visitor]…this might be their stepping stone into employment…they might want to move on. Yeah, so, you know, you have to support that…others…want to really upskill, and it's about when they're ready to upskill, you need to get in there and support that straight away, or else you lose them. (Coordinator Interviewee)

Due to additional training home visitors are now increasingly skilled in areas other than home visiting, including facilitation and training as part of other programmes. Managers and coordinators referenced challenges in recruiting home visitors for contracts of ten hours per week and that home visitors were beginning to leave for higher salaries and more hours:

That's tricky enough…to get somebody to do 10 hours. (Manager Focus Group Participant)

The employment activation side of [the programme]…has waned…traditionally…the programme was for those who…didn't have a qualification…now because of the development…all the training, we have very qualified home visitors…very skilled…in not just home visiting, but…they facilitate [other programmes and training]…it's brilliant…it has been an opportunity, but it's also a challenge. (Manager Focus Group Participant)

The funding of the programme initially was on…minimum wage…a little bit above…now [home visitors]…are really evolving…away from social protection dependency into the world of work, and yet, I don't have a programme that can fund them to the level…there's a HR challenge. (Manager Focus Group Participant)

[Home visitors] get to the stage where, 'oh, I'm really getting into this. I want to do more'…obviously, they're looking at pay rises, in other services like childcare…and they're like…'I could go there and get this amount…and the hours that suit me. (Manager Focus Group Participant)

The wages is an issue. They [home visitors] would get more working somewhere else. (Coordinator Interviewee)

Staff in interviews also raised the issue of limited hours and the impact on retention:

10 hours each, and they're so committed…they started off with more, but I had to cut them due to budgets. (Coordinator Interviewee)

Eventually the goodwill is going to run out on behalf of the home visitors…they're putting everything into it for 10 hours, and at some point they're gonna say, 'I just can't do this anymore'…that's just a reflection on funding and budget. (Coordinator Interviewee)

In addition to retention issues, managers expressed concern that there were ethical issues also relating to the need for increased salaries to reflect training levels as well as the work undertaken by home visitors:

Not just retention…there's an ethical issue as an employer as well…how we have the funding to pay a staff member who has a high level of competency…the retention has happened because we've provided training. (Manager Focus Group Participant)

[Home visitors] need to be paid to do the work that they're doing. This is a very, very high-level interactions with parents and very important work…they definitely need to be paid…it is an ethical issue. (Manager Focus Group Participant)

[Home visitors] do massive work…they pour their heart and soul into it. They put up with a heap of hassle. They're paid just above minimum wage, and they deal with traumatic life events on a daily basis…you couldn't ask more of people, they're absolutely amazing. (Manager Interviewee)

Also linked with calls for higher funding, at sites delivering additional programmes, managers referenced the importance of parity of esteem between home visitors for ParentChild+ and other staff in similar roles delivering other programmes:

There's a whole salary review and pay scale review within the organisation…they [home visitors] feel that they are the same as anybody else on the team…move up exactly like anybody else. (Manager Focus Group Participant)

Staff referenced the significant quantity of staff time currently taken up by fundraising activities which would be addressed by increased funding. They also praised ELI for support with identifying funding streams they could apply to:

The funding has stayed the same, and over the last five years, of six years and salaries have increased, so that's a huge thing. (Manager Focus Group Participant)

I am regularly applying for funding and sourcing, piecemeal bits of funding…[ELI] would regularly be sending out information around funding streams and avenues and ways to do it. (Manager Focus Group Participant)

A lot of the time is always, always trying to look for more money…it takes up an awful lot of time. (Coordinator Interviewee)

Staff referenced the other parts of the programme in addition to home visiting, including workshops, events and groupwork. Staff also expressed their preference to extend current service delivery to more families in the current context of increased demand and related waiting lists for the programme.

The constraint to the programme is lack of funding…I could do a double programme here…even as it is, we're borrowing and begging…to make sure that the programme is sustained. And all the additionalities of the programme, it's not just the home visiting, it's the workshops, the community-based work, it's the supporting of families…engagement with groups and in parenting programmes and so on. (Manager Focus Group Participant)

Managers referenced further issues with constraints on what funding could be used for including rules around not using it for staff costs, and being prevented from applying for grants due to the annual turnover of lead agencies which was not reflective of ParentChild+ funding:

> *If I do get an option of extra funding, it may not be for wages…I can't increase [home visitors'] hours*. (Manager Focus Group Participant)

> *If funding was available, if it's not for wages, it can be really hard to manage*. (Manager Focus Group Participant)

> *We have funding…at the moment, but that funding cannot pay for a worker, that has to be used in kind of resources and programmes*. (Manager Interviewee)

> *Our issue from a managerial perspective…a lot of funders will fund programmes such as ParentChild+…but [lead agency's] annual turnover is in excess…which is an illusion…you can't access this…it directly impinges our capacity to apply for some grants…it's frustrating for [home visitors] and for me…to go to a funder…and be told no.* (Manager Interviewee)

Staff also referenced issues regarding perceived inequality and inconsistency of funding across sites and the lack of long-term core funding which hampered service planning and staff security. Staff also reported confusion and disappointment where some home visiting services were funded by Tusla and others were not:

> *[The funding] is unequal…compared to other sites, it seems very unfair to me.* (Coordinator Interviewee)

> *It seems to be not a problem for Dublin, but a big problem for [sites] outside of Dublin…So that's really tough when I'm working really hard and I really believe in it. And the home visitors…they're amazing* (Coordinator Interviewee)

> *The PFSN Manager has chosen to support another home visiting programme…but that's only in [other area]…so I've had to come to the Tusla manager and tell [them]…'I can't take families that you're giving in to me because I don't have the money'*. (Coordinator Interviewee)

> *[Funding] is not uniform across the country*. (Manager Interviewee)

4.3.2 Challenges regarding high numbers of referrals of children with additional needs and lack of specific training

Staff reported that the high numbers of children with additional needs to the programme was proving challenging as the programme was designed for neurotypical children. Some staff referenced having had to modify some VISMS and expressed concerns that while children with additional needs did benefit from the programme they also required specialised supports which was outside of what ParentChild+ could deliver:

> *We had to…modify some of the VISMS, which is a challenge...we take advice on some of those, because not all of them were suitable*. (Manager Focus Group Participant)

> *Neurodiverse needs…that is beyond the scope [of the programme]…now the [home visitors] will work with them…they'll do a mighty job, but you need to be a professional service working in neurodiversity.* (Manager Interviewee)

[Children with] additional needs [have] gone through the programme. The behavioural side of things has improved. But really, they need a service that can support that. (Manager Interviewee)

This also had implications for the workload and wellbeing of staff:

As a manager, it's really minding your staff…if [home visitor] has three really high-end targeted families…you're watching burnout…we're just really mindful of making sure that our staff are looked after…they have their own homes to go to. They have their own family. (Manager Focus Group Participant)

4.3.3 Challenges related to current training for home visitors, need for additional training and progression routes to further education

Staff cited the insufficient training and practical preparation for home visitors, as well as the need for other compulsory training on additional needs and other areas.

It's a bit of a shock because…there was no training to help you with and additional needs. (Coordinator Focus Group Participant)

I feel…that it is a challenge because…not all [sites] are up to date with…special needs, and not all staff are trained in special needs. (Coordinator Focus Group Participant)

The three days training at the start, it doesn't really…tell you the true job…that's just very basic training…I do think that could be a little bit different, because the needs have changed. (Coordinator Interview Participant)

There's an awful lot more children with additional needs being referred to the programme…but the training [hasn't] changed to [reflect] that…and I know we're not specific to that…but that's the cohort we're getting in. (Coordinator Interview Participant)

Staff, managers and coordinators, were critical of recent changes discontinuing evening training options which home visitors had previously utilised to complete training while in their roles. It was now not possible to train while working as a home visitor in the programme. This was perceived as having a negative impact on the progression and educational and professional development of home visitors, as well as undermining the community employment activation element of ParentChild+:

Home visitors are the ones out on the street. They're the ones knocking on doors, getting into families. Without the home visitors, the programme wouldn't exist…the level five was provided for staff, and that's how we excelled and got opportunities within the organisation to move up into a different position. But…now they're not in a position because [has to be] full-time…that's really, really hard for the staff who want to excel. (Manager Focus Group Participant)

[Home visitors] can't access that part time anymore…like it was the level five…it's not sustainable to hold down and work as well. (Coordinator Focus Group Participant)

With the change [in removing part-time training option], that's very difficult. (Manager Interviewee)

4.3.4 Challenges regarding awareness of the programme, referral and interagency collaborative relationships

Staff and parents reported a lack of awareness among members of the public and other organisations and agencies, hampered by high turnover staff in these organisations. Staff reported

the challenge of high turnover rates in other services negatively impacting referrals to ParentChild+ and the need for more collaborative links with existing services to enable cross-referring. While there were waiting lists for the programme, staff reported a lack of collaborative links with other services negatively impacting on referral rates from some organisations.

> *There could be a new staff member…within the services, and it's more of a challenge.* (Coordinator Focus Group Participant)

> *I'd love to see it being known by the local community services and bodies…as a service.* (Manager Interviewee)

4.3.5 Challenges sourcing equipment

Staff also reported difficulties in sourcing some VISMS, especially quality wooden toys:

> *It's harder to source a lot of stuff now…you have to do all that yourselves…you don't want to be putting in a book or toy that is not of good quality, because you want that to last. You want the family to enjoy it… as long as possible.* (Manager Focus Group Participant)

> *Sometimes it can be challenging to source the books…or the toys.* (Manager Focus Group Participant)

4.3.6 Challenges relating to the external environment characterised by poverty, increased and complex needs and lack of services and supports for children and families

Finally, challenges were identified in relation to delivering the programme in the context of the external environment characterised by poverty, increased and complex needs and a lack of PEI and other services and supports for children and families. This external environment including the high prevalence of poverty and long-term unemployment, lack of sufficient early intervention supports for children and families; the homelessness crisis; and challenges supporting transient communities including families living in homelessness and direct provision centres. All staff referenced increased needs in communities and increased complexity of these needs. These needs included crime, addiction, disability, domestic and sexual violence, mental health issues among parents and children, child protection concerns and children being taken into state care, increased homelessness and higher numbers of families in direct provision. Some sites reported having more families engaged with the Home from Home programme than the general ParentChild+ programme.

> *[Home visitors] engage with people who have a lot going on…it's very rare that you have a family that…don't have compound…multi-dimensional issues…often social deprivation, language barriers, marginalisation, exclusion, long-term unemployment, substance abuse….the environments…are very complex and dynamic…and often that affects the child.* (Manager Interviewee)

> *A lot of the lots of families that engage with us would have wicked problems…multi-dimensional problems where there is no real one solution to the problem.* (Manager Interviewee)

> *In these areas you have high criminality…massive social deprivation, marginalisation and exclusion…high number of Traveller families…new communities…generational unemployment…way above the national average, and…high disability…about a third, would identify as having a disability.* (Manager Interviewee)

Coordinators and managers were aware of how difficult this had sometimes made home visitors' jobs:

> *[Home visitors] have a really tough job…we've faced a lot of difficult issues here…that I don't think a lot of sites would necessarily face in relation to rape…addiction…and kids were taken into care…we've been through an awful lot…two of our families have lost their kids now after completion of the programme...it's heartbreaking for the home visitors that are trying to help.* (Coordinator Interviewee)

> *We've had a lot of challenging situations, domestic abuse in the home…the mother's face has been swelled when I got [there]…that's happened numerous at times…I will get missed visits, because [mother] doesn't want me to see so she would wait until things start to [heal].* (Coordinator Interviewee)

> *It's [domestic violence] horrible...it really was impacting me. I didn't know how to deal with it, and then I got the tools…I've done training, I send around a message [to parents], if anybody needs any supports, I'm trained in this now…and give [mother] that opening... I've learned a lot about domestic abuse…in relation to the right things to do for the parent* (Coordinator Interviewee)

In some instances, coordinators reported having to take on families whose needs were especially high and complex. Staff also reported children in homes where there was domestic violence displaying violent behaviour towards other children leading to them being excluded from early years settings and increasing their isolation:

> *[Programme] is [child's] one bit of happiness, because…[child] got took out of playschool for his behaviour…I had to take [family] off the home visitor because they were too high need…now he's at home and no playschool, no nothing, and all he has is me twice a week for a half hour…that child wouldn't have any sort of stimulation developmentally if I wasn't in there right now.* (Coordinator Interviewee)

At times, a lack of basic services, including PHNs, was reported by staff.

> *In some areas…no PHNs…coming into [ParentChild+] Mam feels like she didn't do enough… totally overwhelmed by the situation that she's facing…even though there was services in the area that should have had more links…it's not there to pick up if there is other issues…that's…something in our area that that we're…struggling with*. (Manager Focus Group Participant)

> *In our area that I work in, there's no public health nurse at the moment…even though it's not technically our role, we do seem to be bridging a gap in those respects to some of the ParentChild+ families that we work with*. (Home Visitor Focus Group Participant)

> *The needs are so high, the parents are needing just as much support as the children and, and we're kind of outside the box of what PC plus began with. It's bigger now… and without that support…families would probably feel even more lost*. (Coordinator Focus Group Participant)

As mentioned above, some staff reported Traveller families making up half of their intake and 60% of their waiting lists and that relationship building had taken time especially in the context of literacy issues or mistrust of schools and other services:

> *We have a high Traveller [intake]…50% of our families and 60% on our waiting list…it's took me a long time to build that with them…because a lot of these parents only have Junior cert*. (Coordinator Interviewee)

Staff reported families' need for the programme and challenges supporting transient communities and families in homeless and IPAS accommodation who could be moved to other centres with very little notice. Some staff reported having more families in the Home from Home programme than in the general ParentChild+ programme:

> *IPAS centres and the constant movement of families to the area and out of the area, mostly out of the area…we've connected families on programmes…and then they tell us, 'Oh, I have got a letter. I'm going next week'... So for us that's a huge challenge*. (Manager Focus Group Participant)

> *This morning, I got an email…all the families are being moved to [other county] by the end of the week…there's no programme [there]…it's reintroducing trauma…they're going to be displaced again…these families have gone through so much.* (Manager Focus Group Participant)

> *There's so much going on in their life…for a family to sign up for the home from home…to commit to 12 weeks or 24 weeks…[they] think they're going to be out of the centre in 12 weeks…God bless them. They're going to be here for a long, long time…to even think of joining a programme and trying the best for their child…that just speaks volumes to me.* (Manager Focus Group Participant)

> *We also happen to be in a kind of epicentre of direct provision centres…we probably have more families in our home from home programme…than we do ParentChild+.* (Home Visitor Focus Group Participant)

Staff also reported increased numbers of children with additional needs generally and increased referrals of these children to ParentChild+ in the absence of other supports or long waiting lists which could mean waits of up to two to three years.

> *The list…could be, could be two years long*. (Manager Focus Group Participant)

Some staff referred to increased inequality and a cohort of children whose needs were only becoming apparent following the COVID-19 pandemic:

> *We're seeing…huge change…I certainly think…there's a legacy from Covid…an underbelly… life has got so complex that needs aren't getting met…they didn't get identified for so long…assessment is way behind where it needs to be…equal opportunities for children…we're way back from that.* (Manager Interviewee)

Parents spoke repeatedly about their experiences of waiting for years on waiting lists:

> *[Child] is query autism. But that's another story and another battle…we're waiting on CDNT…for him again*. (Parent Focus Group Participant)

> *I'm gonna be two years waiting to see a psychologist*. (Parent Focus Group Participant)

Some staff estimated the percentage of children with additional needs to be 30-40% of their overall intake check. Planning this intake was reported as challenging as due to the timing of the programme, children do not have a diagnosis on intake and managers and coordinators were

conscious of ensuring home visitors skills specific to working with children with additional needs and supporting parents, planning the workload of home visitors and preventing burnout.

> *We have to be really, really cautious of burnout and self care for our staff…you don't want to be giving a home visitor eight children that are either waiting for an assessment or have been diagnosed* (Manager Focus Group Participant)

> *I would be very conscious to monitor that as programme manager, yeah, to make sure that everyone is okay.* (Manager Interviewee)

Some staff felt that children with significant additional needs perhaps should not be accepted as the programme was not designed to suit their needs or that they should not be accepted in such high numbers:

> *It wouldn't be fair to the children that we can work really, really well with to take on children who are so challenging and require a different level of service, that actually our staff becomes stressed, or we have to spend ages on training.* (Coordinator Focus Group Participant)

> *We have to be really careful that this programme is not just for children [waiting for] their assessment…It could easily become the programme that people get referred to because they can't get an assessment…I think that's unfair to the programme, the parent and the child.* (Manager Focus Group Participant)

> *There is a risk of the programme becoming a mainstream for children with disabilities…it's not that we're excluding children with disabilities, and nor do we have a screener to define that, a lot of our referrals come in, and the child…is on a waitlist for some kind of an assessment…we actually had an information session with the PHNs, to reiterate that this is a universal programme for all children.* (Manager Focus Group Participant)

> *Every child can benefit from [ParentChild+], but there is some children that need a different kind of intervention…I hate to think that you're taking the programme from another child, but there is some children that have to have a certain intervention that our home visitors are not trained in. They are a home visitor, yeah, they're not an OT or a SLT…it's vital that every home visitor realises that, because they're going in with the tools and the experience as a home visitor, not as something else*. (Manager Focus Group Participant)

As a result of the lack of available services and waiting lists, staff at all levels, managers, coordinators and home visitors, repeatedly spoke of feeling that they were 'filling a hole' and 'plugging a gap' and that they felt an onus to support children on waiting lists in the absence of any other supports:

> *We felt at one stage we were plugging a hole. That's how we described it.* (Manager Focus Group Participant)

> *We have limited numbers that we can take on board…but the services…reach out…and they're dependent on you, the PHNs, SLTs, CDNT…they feel you're their go-to now of supports for families…for me to be brave enough and say…'we can't do it all for you'…you don't want to let them down…I feel like a failure to them*. (Coordinator Focus Group Participant)

> *We're kind of filling in for early intervention a lot with our families…we're getting some referrals from PHNs because families are waiting too long for early intervention …we're filling that gap*. (Home Visitor Focus Group)

They referenced feeling like they had to increase their offering to compensate for the lack of other supports and what a relief it would be if they could just 'deliver the programme'.

> *I feel like it's the other services around us that could be improved…ParentChild+ is…trying to fill the gap…for other things…it would be lovely to just go in and do the ParentChild+ as a programme…we feel like we have to offer additional support to parents because they're not getting the support that they need at that moment.* (Home Visitor Focus Group)

Coordinators and managers referenced home visitors at times feeling overwhelmed at the extent of issues families were facing and that supporting them and signposting to other supports took away from ParentChild+ on occasion:

> *Home visitors…feel so overwhelmed going into a particular family…when you're talking to a mother or father [who]…don't know where to turn...[they] try and direct or signpost but it then takes away from ParentChild+…then sometimes…you're sitting in their living room and you're not…playing, or…having that…one on one really special time that we're there for.* (Coordinator, Focus Group Participant)

> *We're getting referred more children with additional needs…we're doing a lot more than we should be within the home visits…We're guiding them pathwaying them to other services… our home visitors and myself, we're doing a whole lot more…so…to acknowledge that as well.* (Coordinator, Focus Group Participant)

Some staff expressed the view that despite the high needs of families they were working with, it was important to focus on the delivery of ParentChild+ and not 'dilute' this contribution by trying to extend to other roles and supports:

> *They're well trained as home visitors. They're well supervised, all of that is in our priorities in the delivery of the programme…So I feel that that that's an extra addition that they couldn't be asked to deal with.* (Manager, Focus Group Participant)

> *It's such a hard one to be honest with you, it really pulls on the heart's strings…But ultimately, we're home visitors for ParentChild+…and that's the programme we're supposed to deliver. But there's also grey areas…to be honest.* (Coordinator, Focus Group Participant)

> *Why is it that ParentChild+ should step into the breach? We should be really proud of what we do in ParentChild+. It's a really good programme. It's really effective and…not to stretch to do things that we can't really do, either because we don't have the training or the background, or…it's not within our remit, because when you start to do that, you dilute what you are doing*. (Coordinator Focus Group Participant)

This was repeated in interviews:

> *More and more external referrals are trying to refer in additional needs…we had to make a very focused decision around…we're behavioural needs, educational.* (Manager Interviewee)

Staff from ABC sites referenced the benefits in having wraparound supports which they could refer parents onto. However, staff from non-ABC sites did not have access to these and spoke of finding discharging families with complex needs very difficult in the context of this absence of supports.

In this context, staff referenced the challenge of staying true to the programme, understanding where their role ended and not becoming a form of family support. In this context, some staff

mentioned the importance of staff not attending case conferences, especially where home visitors were from the local area, to ensure discretion and protect their trusted relationship with parents.

> *It's really important for me as the manager, to manage my staff and to support them, that they don't get sucked into a family support role…sometimes they're working with families, where Tusla are involved, and they could be quite high end. We've had to put in more child protection referrals over the last couple of years that we've ever done…though [home visitor] wants to support Mam, sometimes I've had to maybe say no to a home visitor attending a case conference…they're from the area.* (Manager Focus Group Participant)

4.4 Suggestions for the future development of the programme

In light of the challenges summarised in the previous section 4.3, staff and parents made some suggestions for the future development of the programme. Staff made several suggestions relating to the operation and future development of the programme to address issues regarding funding, home visitor training, additional training.

4.4.1 More funding for the programme, enhanced transparency regarding funding of ParentChild+ sites, and more long-term multi-annual to be made available

The challenges related to insufficient funding outlined in section 4.3 above led to staff calling for increased programme funding. Staff referenced the documented impact the programme was making to child development, school readiness and parental support and called for it to be better funded. Specifically, staff called for more funding to: i) enable the provision of the programme to more families due to increased demand and current long waiting lists; ii) to raise the salaries of existing staff to recognise staff training and skills and address staff retention issues and parity of esteem with other personnel working with families; iii) to recruit more staff; and iv) to support sites with increased costs of VISMS and other equipment.

> *I would look into the budget more…there's a lot of price increase in the VISMS*. (Home Visitor Focus Group Participant)

> *Funding is the key. It's the cornerstone. The model of the programme is brilliant…and the delivery of the programme is brilliant. It is the capacity of the programme to deliver that support which is directly affected by budgets…increased funding would enhance the…quantity of service…if we get up to 20 families…the difference it would make in the community is amazing.* (Manager Interviewee)

> *More multi annual…five years…that would that help with planning and…with staffing in terms of retention and a feeling of belonging and motivation*. (Manager Interviewee)

> *I'd love to grow it…I think we're well placed*. (Manager Interviewee)

> *More funding, it would just alleviate a lot…it would be amazing*. (Coordinator Interviewee)

Staff also called for funding to comprise of core funding which was long-term and multi-annual in nature. This would be a recognition of the successful performance of the programme and assist service planning and staffing and provide security for staff, improving retention and improve staff morale and sense of belonging and being valued. This is an issue across the sector and is part of HVA advocacy activities. Staff further called for funding to be more equal across sites; to be more reflective of local needs; and for enhanced transparency with regard to funding across sites.

Commitment to longevity of the programme, commitment to increased funding and strengthened funding…it would show that the programme is valued. And a lot of this is about feeling valued. (Manager Interviewee)

4.4.2 Reestablish access routes for home visitors to engage in part-time training

Staff called for previous progression routes to be reestablished to enabling staff to train part-time for further qualifications and keep role as home visitors.

My goal would be to get the [home visitors] to get some form of training completed that's recognised…they came in with the intention to do it and then it was all changed. (Manager Interviewee)

Unfortunately…getting a level five is really hard now…because the way they've restructured it, it's a big challenge. (Coordinator Interviewee)

4.4.3 Extend home visitors' initial training to include more real-life scenarios, longer shadowing periods, and more in-person training

Home visitors reported at times feeling unprepared for the role and that longer and in-person training and more practical incorporating real-life scenarios and workshop formats would be helpful in improving their preparedness. While some sites did online training, others delivered in-person. Some staff reported that prior to the focus groups for this evaluation, they had not realised that they could deliver in-person training. Similarly, while some home visitors at some sites participated in shadowing, some wished to lengthen the period of this. Others did not have this practice and felt that it would be a positive way of ensuring preparedness of home visitors:

I would like to see a change in the training for home visitors when they initially start. I don't think the online week is enough. (Coordinator Focus Group Participant)

Instead of…online training, I'd love to do one or two of the days in person. I'd love to do role play scenarios or a workshop…what does that actually look like when you go into a house and a parent does something… what do you do in certain situations...just to be really realistic…the more knowledge the better equipped [home visitors] are to deal with things. (Coordinator Focus Group Participant)

I didn't do at the start when I came on…shadowing of a home visitor…I know some sites do that…I know I'd like to change things…if I was taking on a new home visitor now…I wouldn't like for them to do the training and then go straight into it. (Coordinator Focus Group Participant)

The only thing that we might change going forward…because of the quite kind of complex families and the higher need families that we're tending to work with…we may…have a slightly longer shadowing period. (Manager Focus Group Participant)

For that half hour in the home…maybe a bit more training about that…things that come up. (Home Visitor Focus Group Participant)

Actually face to face training, I think would be amazing. (Home Visitor Focus Group Participant)

4.4.4 Increase compulsory additional training, VISMS and resources for children with additional needs and their parents

Staff requested additional training and skills to support them in working with children with additional needs and supporting their parents.

> *I definitely think some sort of training in…special needs, or filling in assessment of need forms, or dealing with SENO for kids moving on to primary school, helping them link in with their local SENO… and doing their forms would be…invaluable to the parents, because if the parents don't know where to look and staff don't know where to look…then they're just a bit lost*. (Coordinator Focus Group Participant)

They suggested additional VISMS be incorporated that are designed for children with additional needs.

> *It would be nice to have another list [for children with additional needs]…would welcome that, would be helpful*. (Home Visitor Focus Group Participant)

> *The list with the visions for additional needs, that's a good change that needs to be done*. (Home Visitor Focus Group Participant)

> *It [ParentChild+] isn't really designed for somebody with advanced needs…that evolution will…happen, I think…when we…work with more and more…undiagnosed neurodiverse children, and their families.* (Home Visitor Focus Group Participant)

They further recommended a toolkit or brief guidance document which they could share with parents if children with additional needs to support them in the absence of specialist support and long waiting lists for assessments. This toolkit or document would ideally include local, regional or national information relating to supports available to parents and tailored information on milestones for children with additional needs and tips and exercises to support their development.

> *My biggest hope would be that we could incorporate some kind of gentle parenting [support], along with…the visits…[it] can be very long for children with additional needs…you might get two or three minutes of an interaction…the parents are looking for advice…on how to deal with specific issue or that's arising for them…they've really built up a great relationship with us…putting them off to someone else…puts them off. So, I'd love if we had a little tool box of nuggets of information that we can give to them that's well verified…services and different websites.* (Home Visitor Focus Group Participant)

> *Parents are begging for this extra support...more than just modelling the play…it doesn't sit well at me that I say go back to the public health nurse…it could be a simple itinerary, little goals that they can reach…we have that massive novelty of seeing them twice a week, other professionals don't have that…it'd be fantastic for the parents that are really asking for the help…they're crying...feeling they could be doing more for their child.* (Home Visitor Focus Group Participant)

> *Would be good to have…a leaflet made by ParentChild+…explaining…tips to how to talk…and improve the language, ideas…small things that…could help the parents…very simple…the different stages, milestones…[how to] navigate the system…something graphic…visual.* (Home Visitor Focus Group Participant)

Some staff called for compulsory training on child development:

> *I would actually love if…we could get Child Development mandatory…because I just think that's important*. (Coordinator Interview Focus Group Participant)

4.4.5 Provide additional training on child protection and parent relationships

Some staff called for more compulsory additional training on a range of areas, including child protection and relationships with parents:

> *Particular training…is really, really important for working with the families that we work with…like…Circle of Security, Sully Hall…it's not specifically ParentChild + but it's around parent relationships, the relationship with the child…it's really good to have your toolbox a little bit fuller*. (Coordinator Focus Group Participant)

4.4.5 Increase awareness of the programme and strengthen collaborative working between ParentChild+ and other services

Both staff and parents referenced a lack of awareness of the programme. Staff referred to high turnover in referral agencies and high numbers of referrals of children with additional needs. They recommended more proactive outreach activities, including to schools. This would raise awareness and increase referral rates. This could also serve to broaden the profile of referrals, widening the stakeholder base for referral to the programme. This would ensure that all children can equally be referred to the programme, rather than a majority of children with additional needs as this impacted on staff capacity, skills and possible burnout.

> *There are less referrals coming in from the PHNs, community workers…I think we need to up the ante as well…possibly do road shows again. What we used to do in the local schools.* (Manager Interviewee)

Parents similarly noted a lack of awareness among the public and parents about the programme and suggested it be advertised more extensively:

> *I don't think it's advertised as much….there's a lot of people that don't know about it…[would suggest] advertise it more.* (Parent Focus Group Participant)

> *I think a lot of people don't know about the programme*, *I think it could be more widely advertised.* (Parent Focus Group Participant)

> *Maybe if it was advertised more…in the schools or preschools…the question is mentioning it a lot more to parents because it is brilliant and it makes a huge difference*. (Parent Focus Group Participant)

Staff called for further development of collaborative links and relationships between ParentChild+ and other services to facilitate more referrals between them.

> *I would like to see other community services…involve ParentChild+ a bit more…people should be working more closely together.* (Home Visitor Focus Group Participant)

> *I think there could be better collaboration between the wider network.* (Manager Interviewee)

Summary

Findings from this evaluation confirm that ParentChild+ is working well, that scaling has been successful regarding fidelity, and the programme is achieving positive outcomes for children, parents, and families due to a range of enabling factors. Challenges were also identified regarding

lack of funding, need for additional training and external factors regarding high complex needs in community and issues facing families in the absence of appropriate services and supports for parents and children. The following section summarises and discusses these findings.

Section 5: Discussion: Key findings, enablers, challenges and suggestions for future development

This section presents the key findings of this evaluation process, as well as the enablers, challenges, and suggestions for future development regarding the optimal functioning of the ParentChild+ programme.

5.1 Key findings

The seven key findings of this evaluation have been the following:

5.1.1 ParentChild+ is viewed as highly effective by staff and parent stakeholders

There were high levels of satisfaction with the programme among all parents engaging with it and all staff, including managers, coordinators, and home visitors, who delivered the programme. All participants in the interviews and focus groups perceived the programme to be performing well and highly effective in bringing about positive outcomes for children, parents, families, and the wider community. This aligned with previous evaluative research on the programme (Share et al, 2011; Traynor, Kent and Darmody, 2019; O'Neill, 2023; Ryan, 2025). Parents reported that the programme had exceeded their expectations. A majority of parents reported that outcomes for their children, themselves and their family would not have been possible without the programme. The recent scaling of the programme nationally was widely welcomed and viewed as successful regarding fidelity and performance. Participants called for the sustainability and further expansion of the programme, both to increase the number of families engaged at the site level and to increase the overall number of sites.

5.1.2 ParentChild+ is resulting in improved outcomes for children

Participants reported the following ten improved outcomes for children as a result of the programme: i) improved overall child development; ii) Improved development for children with additional needs; iii) improved speech and language; iv) improved attention and focus; v) improved social skills and interactions; vi) improved emotional regulation and behaviour; vii) increased confidence levels; viii) improved mood, wellbeing, happiness and emotional resilience; ix) improved educational outcomes and school readiness; and x) improved bond and relationship with parent and other family members. Improved outcomes were also reported for other children in the home and wider family networks.

Improved overall development in the programme's five focus areas of physical, intellectual, language, social and emotional, gross and fine motor skills development. Early detection of developmental issues was also reported due to engagement with the programme and it's the timing of its interaction with families when the child is eighteen months to three years. Improved development was also reported for children with additional needs. Due to the timing of the programme, ParentChild+ was often delivering supports to children and their families before any assessment or diagnosis had taken place and often and in the absence of other supports. When children did ultimately receive diagnoses and supports other professionals, including psychologists, considered them to be ahead of their peers due to their engagement with the programme. Improved mood, wellbeing, happiness and emotional resilience for children included reported longer-term emotional resilience by home visitors whose children had completed the programme and were now in primary and secondary education. Finally, improved outcomes were reported for other children in the home

and wider family networks, including other siblings and cousins who had participated in the visits, benefited from the VISMS, practices, and routines in the home and from improved relationships and atmosphere in the home and family dynamic.

5.1.3 ParentChild+ is resulting in improved outcomes for parents

Improved outcomes for parents were reported by parents and staff. These included: i) enhanced parenting skills, practices, and understanding of how to best support their child and the importance of play; ii) enhanced parenting skills and supports for parents of children with additional needs to best support the specific needs of their child; iii) improved awareness of the importance of reading; iv) improved relationship, interactions and quality time with their child; v) increased confidence and sense of empowerment; vi) reduced stress and worry about their child and increased feelings of reassurance; vii) reduced social isolation and increased social integration and sense of belonging in the local community; viii) increased engagement with other community services, programmes and activities; ix) increased social capital and likelihood of progressing on to training, education and employment; and x) administrative support regarding relevant schools, assessments, services and entitlements.

Parents and staff reported that improved parenting skills and related practices and routines learned through the programme were continued after children had graduated, leading to sustained changes in protecting quality time, positive interactions, and improved relationships and family dynamics. Parents of children with additional needs were often not receiving any other supports at the time of engagement with the programme. Parents and staff reported changed behaviour and increased awareness of reading. This included learning practices to read and act out stories in an engaging way and to tell stories through pictures using books with less text where there were literacy issues. Parents and staff reported becoming members of their local libraries for the first time through the programme. Parents and staff reported reduced stress and worry about their child and increased feelings of reassurance as a result of ParentChild+. Often this was due to advice and guidance received from the home visitor and positive affirmative support regarding their parenting. Parents' worry about their children also decreased due to the improved outcomes that were achieved for their child and their development as part of the programme, including improved language, social and emotional skills and school readiness.

Parents and staff reported reduced social isolation and loneliness and increased social integration and sense of belonging in the local community as a result of ParentChild+ home visitors being a trusted adult they could talk to, and being linked with other families and social groups and peer networks through the programme. Some parent peer support networks were established as a direct result of participation in the programme and related networking support. This was especially significant for families who had recently moved to Ireland, who had limited family and friends visiting their homes, limited English and limited opportunities to socialise. The programme was also considered an important way to introduce Irish culture to families and to involve them in intercultural and diverse communities. Parents and staff reported becoming more active in their local communities and availing of increased supports as a result of ParentChild+, including attendance at community events. Increased engagement with other services was particularly reported by staff working within wraparound contexts who could cross-refer parents to other relevant supports within the same lead agency. Parents and staff reported confidence and sense of empowerment as a result of the programme. This confidence related to their role as parents and empowerment regarding

potential future opportunities in terms of further training and education and employment. Home visitors who had been parents spoke of their participation in programme as being the catalyst for them to undertake training, education and employment. Finally, administrative support for parents regarding relevant schools, assessments, services and entitlements assisted parents in navigating systems and supports and was especially important for parents who had recently moved to Ireland, had limited English or had additional needs.

5.1.4 ParentChild+ is resulting in improved outcomes for the social integration and social capital of communities

This evaluation has found, in addition to outcomes for children, parents, and families, that ParentChild+ is also exerting a 'ripple effect', producing improved societal outcomes for the wider communities in which the programme is delivered. These communities are characterised by intergenerational unemployment, socioeconomic deprivation, and marginalisation. Outcomes identified for these communities included: i) improved social integration and cohesiveness as a result of the social integration of parents and families; and ii) increased education and community employment, both through home visitors' employment, training and progression to formal education and through participating parents' enhanced confidence, increased likelihood to pursue further education and employment, and increased participation in community events and local libraries. ParentChild+ has been operating for several years in many sites and in some communities since 2008. This longevity, linked with its model of employing and upskilling local people as home visitors, and in some cases, coordinators and managers, means that the programme has developed intergenerational links with families and extended family and community networks.

5.1.4 Scaling and fidelity of ParentChild+ is working well

Scaling and fidelity of the programme is working well. All staff reported positive experiences with replication and fidelity. Staff:

- Understood the rationale for fidelity and that it was grounded in research.
- Considered it to be essential to the functioning and scaling of ParentChild+.
- Described fidelity as 'very important'; 'very positive'; 'key'; and that it 'makes sense'.
- Viewed fidelity as protecting staff and families and providing appropriate boundaries.
- Identified fidelity as also allowing for some flexibility.

Staff were also satisfied that some flexibility exists to adjust the programme to child and parent needs, including for children with additional needs, and to local context. Staff mentioned that where they did adapt it was to 'add on' practices, including additional training.

5.2 Enabling factors

A range of enabling factors were identified as part of this evaluation which have fostered the successful performance of the ParentChild+ programme and related levels of satisfaction. These include the programme's successful evidence-based model and approach and additional factors enabling its effectiveness.

The successful evidence-based model and approach applied by the programme was seen as unique and a significant enabling factor in achieving outcomes for children, parent, families and communities and differentiating ParentChild+ from other services families may be interacting with. Specifically, enabling elements of this model and approach included the programme's: i) home-based

nature; ii) evidence base and related research on impact; iii) supervision and reflective practice and related support and peer learning; iv) non-judgmental approach; v) model of local people working as home visitors in their own communities; vi) structure, length and content of the programme; vii) timing and capacity for PEI support; viii) free high quality toys and books; ix) voluntary nature; and x) credibility, reputation and trusted and recognisable 'brand' in communities in which it operates.

In addition to the programme's model and approach, other enabling factors identified were: i) the engagement and commitment of parents; ii) the quality, training, skills and commitment of ParentChild+ staff; iii) the trusted relationship between parents and home visitors; iv) effective staff relationships and team culture; v) positive relationships, community of practice and peer support across sites; vi) support and capacity-building from ELI and HVA; vii) flexibility to adapt programme to needs of families and communities; viii) community events organised or supported by ParentChild+; and ix) relationships with other community organisations and services.

The engagement of parents was considered essential to the functioning of the programme. Their continued engagement was especially important given the long timeframe of the programme's 92 visits. The high quality, training, skills and commitment of ParentChild+ staff, including home visitors, coordinators and managers were identified as enabling factors in the successful delivery of the programme and achievement of related outcomes. It was considered essential that this is protected through effective staff retention as outlined in 5.4 below. The trusted relationship between parents and children and the home visitor was considered key to the success of the programme and was closely related to aspects of the model identified in section 5.2.1 above, including the programme's home-based nature, the consistency in contact which facilitated the formation and maintenance of a relationship as well as the non-judgmental and strengths-based approach applied. Effective staff relationships and team culture were important enabling factors and were facilitated by the model's supervision and reflective practice. Positive relationships, community of practice and peer support across sites were cited as key for manager and coordinator roles. This community of practice was not referenced for home visitors. Support and capacity-building from ELI and HVA were found to enable effective operation of the programme as well as its continuous expansion and improvement through dissemination of training and resources to promote best practice. This support was found to be responsive to emerging needs and to incorporate feedback from sites regarding current challenges or training and learning needs.

Notwithstanding the overarching importance of fidelity to the ParentChild+, there was also some flexibility identified which was considered to enabling staff to dynamically tailor the programme to optimise outcomes and relevance of support for children, families and communities. Community events organised or supported by ParentChild+ were enabling in further bolstering parents to access supports or to make connections with other families in their communities. Finally, strong interagency relationships between ParentChild+ staff and other community organisations and services was considered a key enabling high quality of ParentChild+ staff and management in terms of educational and professional qualifications, professional experience, commitment, and passion regarding PEI and supporting families was evident as an enabling factor and one that needs to be protected through improved retention as outlined below.

5.3 Challenges identified

Challenges were also identified as part of this evaluation process. These relate to challenges in terms of the operation of the programme as well as challenging external contexts in which the programme is working.

Firstly, challenges were identified by all staff regarding funding of the programme and perceptions that current funding is insufficient. This was partly due to increases in running costs and equipment due to inflation, with VISMS reported to have increased in price by 33%. Staff called for funding to be increased to provide for these increases and to increase salaries. This would reflect the high performance and proven outcomes the programme is achieving and to enable its expansion to more families to address high needs in their communities and related waiting lists for ParentChild+. Managers and coordinators were critical of the significant quantity of time they spent on fundraising activities, as well as challenges sourcing funding. Staff spoke of finding it difficult to source funding for staff costs and that lead agency overall budgets could prevent them from applying for certain grants, despite not having access to these budgets. Staff expressed disappointment and confusion that government commitment at policy and strategy level to home visiting had not, in their view, been translated into increased funding and longer-term core funding models which would assist in service planning, improve retention and improve morale. Staff salaries were considered relatively low, which was impacting staff retention, resulting in an increasing number of staff leaving for better-paid roles which aligned with high levels of training. Managers and staff called for increased salaries to improve retention and to ethically renumerate staff for their work, reflecting their levels of training and ensuring parity of esteem with staff in similar roles delivering other community-based early years and parent support programmes. Staff were critical of inequality, inconsistency and a lack of transparency of funding across sites. Some staff also referenced challenges sourcing VISMS, especially high-quality wooden toys.

Staff also identified challenges regarding the increasing and high numbers of referrals of children with additional needs, which constituted approximately 40% of their intake, and a lack of specific training in working with these children and a lack of VISMS for them. Staff also reported challenges regarding the need for more practice-based in-person training for home visitors to appropriately prepare them for the role, longer shadowing times, and additional training on child protection and relationships with parents. Managers and coordinators were also critical of recent changes, which had meant that it was no longer possible for home visitors to train part-time for qualifications while staying on in their roles, and that advocacy efforts with the ETB had so far been unsuccessful. These changes have meant that while home visitors were formerly able to complete Levels 5 and 6 in the evening while working as a home visitor, this is no longer possible due to the discontinuation of evening courses. This was seen as especially problematic in the context of the community sector being endemically underfunded, with the vast majority of home visiting carried out by women. These recent changes further prevented women from accessing progression routes to training and education, and limited the community employment activation arm of ParentChild+, which is considered a particular strength in breaking cycles of disadvantage. Finally, challenges were identified regarding a lack of awareness of the programme among some services and organisations, which hampered referral, and the need to strengthen interagency collaborative relationships.

Staff also referenced challenges relating to external contexts, including poverty, high and complex needs and lack of sufficient supports for the families they are working with. All staff reported that they had never seen needs as high and as complex as those families were now presenting with. These included increased numbers of children with additional needs, a lack of services and supports, and significant waiting times; high levels of criminality; addiction; domestic and sexual violence in the home; mental health issues among children and parents; increased homelessness; high needs of Traveller families, comprising up to 50% at some sites; and families in direct provision accommodation. Of particular concern were the lack of basic PHN services and extreme delays reported by parents and staff in terms of waiting lists for assessments and supports for families, including SLT, OT, CDNT and psychology and mental health supports. Given the timeframe of this

programme, focusing on children aged 18 months to 3 years, they generally do not have a diagnosis and the majority of parents and families engaging with the programme are not receiving specialised supports. This is hugely problematic, especially in the context of research outlined in Section 1, confirming the importance of early intervention in improving child outcomes, which is in line with government commitments to the PEI approach. This also risks over-burdening home visitors who, while highly trained in child development, are not experts in supporting children with additional needs. ParentChild+ staff felt they were 'plugging a hole', 'filling a gap', having to constantly do more and expressing their wish that they could simply deliver the programme as designed with families rather than also having to address these serious issues. They felt increasing pressure to accept referrals in the absence of other supports for families and struggled to maintain a balance in the profile of children they were working with.

5.3 Suggestions for future development of the programme

Staff called for the following to support the future development and sustainability of the programme: i) more funding for the programme, enhanced transparency regarding funding of ParentChild+ sites, and more long-term multi-annual to be made available; ii) the reestablishment of access routes for home visitors to engage in part-time training; iii) the extension of home visitors' initial training to include more real-life scenarios, longer shadowing periods, and more in-person training; iv) increased compulsory additional training, VISMS and resources for children with additional needs and their parents; v) additional training on child protection and parent relationships; vi) increased awareness of the programme and proactive outreach to widen stakeholder base for referral to the programme; vii) strengthened collaborative working between ParentChild+ and other services.

Summary

This section has outlined the key findings, enablers and challenges identified through this evaluation process as well as participants' suggestions regarding the future development of ParentChild+. The following section concludes this report and presents recommendations for the operation of the programme going forward.

Section 6: Conclusion and recommendations

6.1 Concluding remarks

This evaluation process has been systematic and encompassed several different perspectives. It has highlighted the effectiveness of the ParentChild+ programme which has led to significant impact, achieving outcomes for children, parents, families and communities. ParentChild+ is consistently viewed as highly effective by both parents and staff, with clear improvements in children's early literacy, language, and social-emotional development, alongside stronger parenting skills and home learning environments. Benefits also extend to other children in families, and the programme is resulting in parents' increased confidence, enhanced skills and practices and improved interactions and engagement with their children. The programme is also reducing social isolation and building social capital in communities, including trusted networks and peer support. The significant importance of engagement with the programme for families was clearly evidenced by staff and parent participants and this engagement has been intensive and continuous, including throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

The scaling of the programme has been successful, and related fidelity has been sustained, while sites are also afforded flexibility to respond to local needs. Expansion of ParentChild+ across Ireland has been largely successful, with high fidelity to the model, strong commitment to training, and consistent outcomes and quality replicated in new sites. Staff perceptions of fidelity were overwhelmingly positive, understanding its rationale and considering it key to the success and future integrity and development of the programme. This is hugely positive, especially considering the time-consuming nature of some tasks associated with fidelity and should be safeguarded to ensure ongoing quality assurance as further sites are established. The successful operation of the programme and related outcomes have been driven and facilitated by its evidence-based model and approach which prioritises reflective practice; the high quality, training and commitment of staff; positive working relationships within teams at site and across sites through community of practice and peer support and interagency relationships between sites and other services supporting families; the commitment and engagement of parents and trusted relationships between parents and home visitors; and CPD and capacity-building support from ELI and HVA.

However, there are persistent systemic and environmental challenges. The programme faces major barriers of underfunding, reliance on short-term grants and funding streams leading to issues with staff retention issues and a lack of parity of esteem with other staff. ParentChild+ outcomes are especially critical in the context of acute – and often unmet – needs in the communities in which ParentChild+ sites are operating. These include increasing levels of homelessness, deprivation and poverty; domestic violence; Traveller and migrant family needs; high needs of families in homeless and IPAS accommodation; and under-resourced health and social care and services for children and families (Children's Rights Alliance, 2025). Parents reported spending years waiting for psychological, mental health, SLT and OT assessments, services and supports. There are increasing referrals of children with additional needs to the programme, with staff reporting these referrals now constitute up to 40% of their total intake. This is exerting pressure on staff, especially amidst limited external supports for families facing complex challenges. Staff reported feeling, at times, undertrained and under-resourced. They reported feeling that they were 'plugging holes' and 'filling gaps', having to go 'above and beyond' the programme to support families while they on these waiting lists and in the absence of other supports. Challenges identified concern these external needs and lack of provision, as well as operational issues relating to the perceived insufficiency of funding, increased costs of equipment and relatively low salaries compared to other similar roles, and need for additional

training to initially prepare home visitors and also to facilitate their career progression and upskill them in specific areas. Staff and parents called for increased awareness of the programme among members of the public and other services and organisations in communities. Staff also identified uneven interagency collaboration, gaps in referrals and the need for enhanced collaborative relationship to ensure cross-referral and wraparound supports for families. These are addressed in below recommendations.

6.2 Recommendations

This section presents recommendations across nine areas for the future development of the ParentChild+ programme arising from the findings of this evaluation. The recommendations are cognisant of ELI's Strategy 2020-2025 and related scaling plans, as well as funding commitments as outlined in Section 1. The recommendations are for action by ELI, and in some areas, also for attention by national policy-makers, as detailed below:

1. **Ensuring long-term sustainability of funding for the ParentChild+ programme**

Recommendations for ELI:

i) Improve transparency of funding across ParentChild+ and sites nationally.
ii) Increase capacity within sites regarding future fundraising, funding and related grant application processes.

Recommendations for policy-makers at the national level:

Establish a mechanism for further exploratory discussions regarding funding options to secure the long-term sustainability of the ParentChild+ programme. This could include the setting up of a national committee with membership from sites nationally, and from ELI and NCI. This group or forum should explore options regarding:

i) Securing sustainable funding through multi-annual, core national funding streams for ParentChild+, building on the advocacy work already undertaken by HVA;
ii) Increasing staff salaries to ensure parity of esteem and improve staff retention;
iii) Increasing funding for the home visiting programmes' resources, including ParentChild+ VISMS, in line with inflation.
iv) Improving transparency and equity of funding across home visiting programmes and sites nationally.

2. **Supporting children with additional needs engaging with ParentChild+ and staff working with them.**

Recommendations for ELI:

i) Increase training for home visitors on working with children with additional needs.
ii) Consider other ways to support staff working with children with additional needs, including potential introduction of VISMS for children with additional needs and the development of a guidance document or toolkit for parents of additional needs. This could include signposting to local, regional and national supports, services and assessment processes and guidance regarding potential milestones and ways to best support their children in a strength-based way.

Recommendations for policy-makers at the national level:

i) Support the development of national guidance and protocols for working with children with additional needs as part of home visiting services.
ii) Ensure access to resources and training linked to early intervention, assessments, and wraparound supports for home visitors working with children with additional needs.
iii) Ensure sufficient resourcing of specialist assessment, services and PEI support for children with additional needs, including CDNT, psychology, SLT and OT supports. National attention must be focused on appropriately resourcing staff within these services to ensure that current waiting lists and gaps in assessment and related services are addressed to support children and families.

3. Safeguarding fidelity during future scaling to maintain quality and trust in ParentChild+.

Recommendations for ELI:

Continue to ensure a commitment to safeguarding fidelity during future scaling to guarantee ongoing quality assurance, which is identified as key to the future development of the programme. This should include continued commitment to the model and related enabling factors such as reflective practice and maintaining trusted relationships with parents and families, while allowing flexibility for sites to respond to local needs.

4. Enhancing initial and additional training for home visitors to enhance preparation and support educational and career progression.

Recommendations for ELI:

i) Encourage in-person initial training for home visitors where possible, and increase training in workshop format to further prepare staff. This should include interactive training to encompass role play and real-life scenarios that home visitors are likely to encounter.
ii) Explore ways of furthering advocacy and related collaboration with ETBs to reinstate access routes for home visitors to complete training. This should include options for part-time and evening training with a view to ensuring community employment and education activation as part of ParentChild+.
iii) Enhance training on child protection, parent relationships, and addressing additional needs, as referenced in area 2 above.

5. Establishing and supporting a community of practice for home visitors

Recommendation for ELI:

Expand the community of practice to enable home visitors, as well as coordinators, to participate in events or further support sites' capacity to conduct regional community of practice days or events for home visitors. These would ideally be in-person and would allow home visitors to engage and benefit from peer learning across sites as coordinators are three times per year.

6. Increasing awareness of ParentChild+ and strengthening collaborative relationships across services

Recommendations for ELI:

Promote further awareness raising of the programme among parents and other services and agencies working with families. This could include outreach activities to schools and community

organisations and annual showcase events. Such efforts would help to strengthen awareness of the programme among parents, families and organisations and services working with them to increase referrals and broaden the referral base and pathways for the programme.

7. **Supporting families and ParentChild+ staff regarding domestic violence in home visiting contexts**

Recommendations for ELI:

i) Support sites in developing and implementing protocols, policies and procedures to support home visitors and families in contexts of domestic violence
ii) Provide practical guidance and training on domestic violence for ParentChild+ staff.

Recommendations for policy-makers at the national level:

i) Develop specialist guidelines and protocols for home visitors on addressing and supporting families with domestic violence.
ii) Develop policies and procedures for domestic violence, including guidance on safety and mandatory reporting requirements. This could include partnering with national organisations supporting survivors of domestic violence regarding best practice ways to support staff encountering violence in the home and the families impacted by this.

8. **Increasing awareness and transparency regarding the role of ELI**

Recommendation for ELI:

Increase awareness and transparency regarding the role of ELI, its scope, and how it can support sites, and the limits of this role. This should include transparency regarding ELI's role in relation to funding arrangements for programme delivery and ways it can support and guide regulation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation, capacity-building and CPD.

9. **Supporting and sustaining peer support networks of parents who have engaged with ParentChild+**

Recommendations for ELI:

Support the establishment, maintenance and sustainability of parent-led peer support networks of parents who have engaged with ParentChild+, and build capacity within sites to do so, to further long-lasting change and social connections among parents and families.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Consent forms

A.1: Parents Consent form

ParentChild+ External Evaluation 2025

Parents Informed Consent Form

Welcome! Thank you so much for agreeing to take part in the ParentChild+ External Evaluation. This evaluation is looking at what is working well in the programme and what could be improved on in the future. The final evaluation report will be completed in November 2025 and we will send it to all participants.

The evaluation is being carried out by independent researchers, Sarah Murphy and Dr Jane Pillinger and involves ParentChild+ staff and parents who are receiving support from ParentChild+.

This evaluation includes online or in person focus groups. These consultations will be carried out in line with research ethics of confidentiality, anonymity and respect. The length of focus groups will depend on your availability and it will be possible to take breaks if required for any reason.

With your consent, these consultations will be used to inform the final evaluation report. All responses will be confidential and you will not be identified in the report. All recordings of the focus groups will be stored securely. Transcripts and related documentation will be destroyed once the review has been completed. Under data protection legislation, you have the right to access the transcript from the researcher within one calendar month of receipt of the request, if required.

Participation in this evaluation is voluntary and it is possible to withdraw from this study at any time within 6 weeks of participating by emailing sarahclairemurphy@gmail.com.

☐ I have been fully informed about the aims of the evaluation.

☐ I consent to participate in the consultations and understand that all information provided will be confidential.

Name…….
Signature…….
Date…….

Many thanks for your participation. For further information please contact:

Sarah Murphy:

By email: sarahclairemurphy@gmail.com;

By phone: xxx xxx xxxx

A.2: Staff Consent form

ParentChild+ External Evaluation 2025

Staff Informed Consent Form

Welcome! Thank you so much for agreeing to take part in the ParentChild+ External Evaluation. This evaluation is looking at what is working well in the programme and what could be improved on in the future. The final evaluation report will be completed in November 2025 and we will send it to all participants.

The evaluation is being carried out by independent researchers, Sarah Murphy and Dr Jane Pillinger and involves ParentChild+ staff and parents engaged with ParentChild+.

This evaluation includes online or in person interviews and focus groups and observation visits to some sites. These consultations will be carried out in line with research ethics of confidentiality, anonymity and respect. The length of interviews and focus groups will depend on your availability and it will be possible to take breaks if required for any reason.

With your consent, these consultations will be used to inform the final evaluation report. All responses will be confidential and no individual will be identified in the report. All recordings of the interviews and focus groups will be stored securely. Transcripts and related documentation will be destroyed once the review has been completed. Under data protection legislation, you have the right to access the transcript from the researcher within one calendar month of receipt of the request, if required.

Participation in this evaluation is voluntary and it is possible to withdraw from this study at any time within 6 weeks of participating by emailing sarahclairemurphy@gmail.com.

☐ I have been fully informed about the aims of the evaluation.

☐ I consent to participate in the consultations and understand that all information provided will be confidential.

Name…….
Signature…….
Date…….

Many thanks for your participation. For further information please contact:

Sarah Murphy:

By email: sarahclairemurphy@gmail.com;

By phone: xxx xxx xxxx

Appendix B: Participant Information Sheets

B.1: Parents Participant Information Sheet

ParentChild+ External Evaluation 2025

Participant Information Sheet

Welcome! Thank you so much for considering taking part in the ParentChild+ External Evaluation.

What is the purpose of this ParentChild+ External Evaluation?

This evaluation is looking at what is working well in the programme and what could be improved on in the future. Parents receiving support from ParentChild+ have been asked to participate in focus groups.

Who is doing this evaluation and when will it be completed?

The review is being carried out by independent researchers, Sarah Murphy and Dr Jane Pillinger, between January and November 2025. The final evaluation report will be completed in November 2025 and we will send it to everyone who has taken part.

What will be covered in the focus groups?

In the focus groups we will ask some questions about how you think the programme is working, what is working well and what could be improved on. We will ask if the programme has had an impact or results for your child and what you think has helped make this happen. Finally, we will ask you if you have any suggestions for future improvements or anything else you would like to mention about ParentChild+. Focus groups will be online and will take

If you decide you would like to take part take part in these focus groups, you will be provided with more information about these questions before the focus group takes place.

For further information

If you have any further questions about this evaluation and these focus groups, please contact: Sarah Murphy by email at: sarahclairemurphy@gmail.com; or by phone: xxx xxx xxxx.

B.2: Staff Participant Information Sheet

ParentChild+ External Evaluation 2025

Participant Information Sheet

Welcome! Thank you so much for considering take part in the ParentChild+ External Evaluation.

What is the purpose of this ParentChild+ External Evaluation?

This evaluation is looking at what is working well in ParentChild+ and what could be improved on in the future. This evaluation follows on from the critical review of the programme conducted in 2018/19.

This evaluation includes online or in person interviews and focus groups and observation visits to some sites. ParentChild+ staff and parents engaged with ParentChild+ have been asked to participate.

What will be covered in interviews and focus groups?

The research will be about these two main questions:

1. Is ParentChild+ having an impact on children's development and identify what factors contribute to the outcome?
2. Regarding the scaling of ParentChild+; is replication is working to the same extent across sites and what factors contribute to the outcome?

If you decide you would like to take part in interviews or focus groups, you will be provided with more information about what will be asked in advance.

How will the review be carried out?

The review is being carried out by independent researchers, Sarah Murphy and Dr Jane Pillinger, between January and November 2025. The final evaluation report will be completed in November 2025 and will make recommendations for the future development of the ParentChild+ programme. This will be sent to all participants.

For further information

If you have any further questions about this evaluation and the research process, please contact: Sarah Murphy by email at: sarahclairemurphy@gmail.com; or by phone: xxx xxx xxxx.

Appendix C: Staff interview schedule

ParentChild+ External Evaluation

Stakeholder Interview Schedule

Researcher: Sarah Murphy, Independent Research Consultant

Contact Details: Email: sarahclairemurphy@gmail.com

Tel: xxx xxx xxxx

Welcome! Thank you so much for agreeing to take part in an interview for the ParentChild+ External Evaluation. Staff of ParentChild+, including managers, coordinators and home visitors, have been requested to participate. This evaluation is looking at what is working well in the programme and what could be improved on in the future. The final evaluation report will be completed in November 2025 and we will send it to all participants.

Below are some questions which will be asked during the interview. Interviews will take place in person or online. Interviews will take approximately 40 minutes, depending on your availability. With your permission, interviews will be recorded and all information will be stored confidentially and anonymously. No individual will be identified in the evaluation report. You do not have to answer all research questions. There will also be time for you to raise the issues important to you about the ParentChild+ External. You can 'pass' on or skip questions that are not appropriate for you.

Thank you again for your participation in this research. Your time and participation are very much appreciated.

Research questions

The following are examples of research question which will be asked in relation to the main areas of focus for this evaluation. Again, it is acceptable to skip questions if you would rather not answer and you can also speak about any areas relating to ParentChild+ that may not have been covered.

	Focus Area	Example of research question
1.	**Introductory questions regarding role with the ParentChild+ programme.**	• What is your current role with ParentChild+? • How long have you worked with ParentChild+?
2.	**Impact of the ParentChild+ programme.**	• What is your overall view of the effectiveness and impact of the ParentChild+ programme on children's development? How well do you think it is working? • What specific outcomes, if any, have you observed? • If you have seen impact and outcomes, can you identify what factors have contributed to this?
3.	**Replication, fidelity**	• What is your experience of fidelity in the operation of the programme? • Have you experienced any challenges in this regard? • Do you have any comments regarding fidelity?

4.	**Future development of the ParentChild+ programme**	• How do you think the ParentChild+ programme could be strengthened or improved upon in the future? • What main recommendations would you make?
5.	**Other issues, concerns or achievements relevant to the ParentChild+ programme**	• Are there any other issues, concerns or achievements relevant to the ParentChild+ programme you would like to raise?

Appendix D: Focus group schedules

D1: Parents Focus group schedule

ParentChild+ External Evaluation

Parents Focus Group Schedule

Researcher: Sarah Murphy, Independent Research Consultant

Contact Details: Email: sarahclairemurphy@gmail.com

Tel: xxx xxx xxxx

Welcome! Thank you so much for agreeing to take part in a focus group for the ParentChild+ External Evaluation. You have been asked to participate as a parent receiving support from this programme. This evaluation is looking at what is working well in the programme and what could be improved on in the future. The final evaluation report will be completed in November 2025 and we will send it to all participants.

Below are some questions which will be asked during the focus group. Focus groups will take place in person or online. Focus groups will take approximately 1 hour, depending on your availability. With your permission, focus groups will be recorded and all information will be stored confidentially and anonymously so that you will not be identified in the report. There will also be time for you to raise any issues important to you about the ParentChild+ programme. You can 'pass' on or skip questions that you would rather not answer.

Thank you again for your participation in this research. Your time and participation are very much appreciated.

Research questions

The following are examples of research question which will be asked in relation to the main areas of focus for this evaluation. Again, it is acceptable to skip questions if you would rather not answer and you can also speak about any areas relating to ParentChild+ that may not have been covered.

	Focus Area	Example of research question
1.	**Introductory questions about your support from ParentChild+ programme.**	• How long have you been receiving support from ParentChild+? • How did you happen to be linked in with ParentChild+?
2.	**How the ParentChild+ programme is working for you and your child**	• How do you think it is working from your perspective for your child? • Have you noticed changes in your child and in yourself? • If you have seen any changes, what do you think has made this possible?

		• If you have seen any changes, do you think that these could have happened anyway, without the ParentChild+ programme?
3.	**Future development of the ParentChild+ programme**	• How do you think the ParentChild+ programme could be strengthened or improved upon in the future? • What main suggestions/ recommendations would you make?
4.	**Other issues, concerns or achievements relevant to the ParentChild+ programme**	• Are there any other issues, concerns or achievements you would like to raise about the ParentChild+ programme?

D2: Staff Focus group schedule

ParentChild+ External Evaluation

Staff Focus Group Schedule

Researcher: Sarah Murphy, Independent Research Consultant

Contact Details: Email: sarahclairemurphy@gmail.com

Tel: xxx xxx xxxx

Welcome! Thank you so much for agreeing to take part in a focus group for the ParentChild+ External Evaluation. Staff of ParentChild+, including managers, coordinators and home visitors, have been requested to participate. This evaluation is looking at what is working well in the programme and what could be improved on in the future. The final evaluation report will be completed in November 2025 and we will send it to all participants.

Below are some questions which will be asked during the interview. Interviews will take place in person or online. Focus groups will take approximately 1 hour, depending on your availability. With your permission, interviews will be recorded and all information will be stored confidentially and anonymously. No individual will be identified in the evaluation report. You do not have to answer all research questions. There will also be time for you to raise the issues important to you about the ParentChild+ External. You can 'pass' on or skip questions that are not appropriate for you.

Thank you again for your participation in this research. Your time and participation are very much appreciated.

Research questions

The following are examples of research question which will be asked in relation to the main areas of focus for this evaluation. Again, it is acceptable to skip questions if you would rather not answer and you can also speak about any areas relating to ParentChild+ that may not have been covered.

	Focus Area	Example of research question
1.	**Introductory questions regarding role with the ParentChild+ programme.**	• What is your current role with ParentChild+? • How long have you worked with ParentChild+?
2.	**Impact of the ParentChild+ programme.**	• What is your overall view of the effectiveness and impact of the ParentChild+ programme on children's development? • What specific outcomes, if any, have you observed? • If you have seen impact and outcomes, can you identify what factors have contributed to this?
3.	**Replication, fidelity**	• What is your experience of fidelity in the operation of the programme? • Have you experienced any challenges in this regard? • Do you have any comments regarding fidelity?

4.	**Future development of the ParentChild+ programme**	• How do you think the ParentChild+ programme could be strengthened or improved upon in the future? • What main recommendations would you make?
5.	**Other issues, concerns or achievements relevant to the ParentChild+ programme**	• Are there any other issues, concerns or achievements relevant to the ParentChild+ programme you would like to raise?