

Policy Review - Special Educational Needs

TORFAEN COUNTY BOROUGH COUNCIL

EARLY INTERVENTION

Introduction

This report is a brief summary review of the key elements of early intervention identified by the Association of Directors of Education in Wales as essential elements of good practice. This paper supplements the issues paper already received by the committee; reference ELL (206203) from the SEN reference group.

Background

ADEW is strongly of the view that early intervention can make a substantial difference to the life chances of individuals in raising their achievement and enhancing their general development. Early intervention is a key element in promoting social inclusion within education and is also cost effective in offsetting the need for expensive remediation later in a child's life. It is however important that the quality of early intervention should be high and based upon an appropriate curriculum, well trained staff and good relationships between staff and parents. Authorities are challenged however, in targeting sufficient resource to the early years. The re-orientation of resources within an overall limited budget is difficult.

Key Issues

Multi-agency Working

Multi-agency working is critical to effective early intervention. Multi-agency working is founded on:

- i. The effective sharing of information between agencies.
- ii. The coordination of assessment practices across agencies to avoid unnecessary duplication and the exposure of parents to burdensome assessment and information gathering.
- iii. Ensuring that multi-agency working should as far as possible be client orientated through the development of single contact points and one stop shop approaches. Integrated early years centres can provide a basis for co-location which can support this multi-agency working.

Working with Parents

Parents support varies from pre-school play to working with children in school contexts to support literacy, numeracy and behaviour. Early intervention pre birth can also be effective in working with young mothers to develop breast feeding to support bonding between mother and child. Sure start programmes which address play and behaviour support programmes also provide important ways for parents to bond effectively with their children and support the development of pro-social behaviours amongst children. Parents also require appropriate information on child care facilities and advocacy services where their children may have additional needs.

Training

Early intervention can only be effective where staff are appropriately skilled. There is a relative shortage of expertise in identification of additional needs amongst early years practitioners. There is a training requirement within the voluntary sector in this area. Special Educational Needs Coordinators and Educational Psychologists can also provide specialist support in the area of early identification of pre-school children.

Specialist Provision

Where agencies are co-located in one stop shop arrangements early intervention can be more effective. Specialist provision such as school nurture groups for infant aged children can help offset later child development problems. There is a potential role for special schools in supporting children in the mainstream and in pre-school opportunity groups whereby the special school staff can use their expertise in such areas as autism, physical or sensory impairment and provide programmes for voluntary sector settings and pre-school groups.

Complex Learning Difficulties & Sensory Learning Difficulties

Good multi-agency links and high quality screening by specialist staff are important if such issues as sensory impairment are to be detected early. With the introduction of newborn hearing screening a higher proportion of children will be identified. This will have significant implications for expansion of services as early identification without early intervention is potentially a retrograde step. In this context access to speech therapy an important element in early intervention can sometimes be hindered by the difficulty of prime responsibility being located with Health and ultimate responsibility residing with the Local Authority.

Other aspects of Early Intervention

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services

Where children are experiencing significant mental health problems such as depression, anxiety, school

phobia, eating disorders or hyperactivity, tier one (child and adolescent mental health) services need to be active. Child and adolescent mental health staff working in close cooperation with schools and Education Psychology Services would provide a stronger early intervention model than currently exists. No advice to schools in Wales on CAMHS has been issued, although such advice has been published in England.

Statutory Assessment Procedures

In some respect statutory assessment procedures can be unhelpful. By-passing these formal assessment procedures and ensuring that appropriate resources are targeted to children who need them as quickly as possible in the form of behaviour support or Specialist Educational Psychology advice could be a more effective method of early intervention.

Conclusion

Early intervention both for children who are very young as well as rapid intervention for older children who need additional support are critical elements in any local authority strategy. There is a case for a strategic realignment of resources more towards the early years to combat later disadvantage and the consequent disproportionate resource demands that these can make.

Mike de Val

DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION

17 November 2003