



Summary of an evaluation of the impact and reach of the Growing Minds project

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Introduction

Growing Minds aims to help close the attainment gap in two Oxfordshire communities which have high indices of deprivation and where children are at risk of educational underachievement. Despite being renowned for educational excellence, Oxfordshire performs significantly below the national average on the percentage of children with free school meal status achieving a good level of development at the end of Reception. ¹ Growing Minds was launched in January 2020 as an ambitious, seven-year project which families would come to trust as part of the fabric of their community, with their needs and voices at its heart. There was also the aspiration to provide a model which could influence policy and practice nationally.

Growing Minds is based on research which shows that the quality of parent-child interactions and the quality of the learning environment which children experience at home are important for all children, but can help children from less advantaged backgrounds to do well, not just in school, but in life. A universal offer in each area, Growing Minds provides a continuum of support for families from birth to school with the aim of enhancing school readiness. It has three core components; one-to-one holistic family support, a book-gifting service (Dolly Parton's Imagination Library), and the Peep Learning Together Programme, all intended to complement and enhance the provision made available to families by Health, Education and Social Care or other local stakeholders. Families can access any combination of the core components, free of charge, according to their interests and level of need.

Growing Minds is led by a partnership of three established third sector delivery organisations; Peep, Home-Start Oxford and the Berin Centre. It is being delivered in Berinsfield, a rural community with a settled, multigenerational population and in Littlemore in Oxford, an urban area which is ethnically diverse and more fragmented. Growing Minds works closely with other local stakeholders including the John Henry Newman Academy, Abbey Woods Academy, Oxfordshire Health Trust, and the Oxfordshire Birth Registration Service.

Although, almost from the outset, Growing Minds was significantly disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic, it is now firmly established in both communities. However, the need for support has increased due to the extraordinary pressures that families have faced during the pandemic; for example, the percentage of pupils at John Henry Newman Academy (Littlemore) achieving or exceeding the expected standard at the end of Reception fell from 57% in 2019 to 11% in 2021, and from 70% to 50% at Abbey Woods Academy (Berinsfield).

The evaluation

The purpose of this evaluation was to assess the progress of the project against its original goals in terms of impact and reach. It was carried out from September 2022 to March 2023. It took a broad view of the project since its inception, with a particular focus on 2022-2023 and the resumption of the originally planned interventions following the disruption to the project caused by Covid. The evaluation assessed progress in delivering project outputs, the effectiveness of the project in contributing to school readiness and positive

¹ <https://fingertips.phe.org.uk/static-reports/public-health-outcomes-framework/at-a-glance/E1000025.html?area-name=Oxfordshire>

change in the lives of families, the level of reach and engagement achieved across the two communities, and the key successes, challenges and lessons learnt.

It comprised a quantitative analysis of progress against key performance indicators and milestones, a review of data emerging from existing project monitoring processes, and an in-depth qualitative study of impact and reach. The latter was carried out through the observation of group sessions, semi-structured interviews and focus groups with parents (25 families), and interviews with project staff (6) and community partners (5). The aim was to capture the direct voices of parents and carers, particularly those with high needs or likely to be facing barriers to access, especially cultural or linguistic.

Findings

Barriers to school readiness: Over the past two years the families of pre-school children have faced two major challenges to their home learning environments, parents' ability to cope, and ultimately to school readiness. Firstly, the impact of Covid with many families continuing to experience the effects of isolation, loss of support networks, disruption to support services (in particular Health Visitors), and often a resulting lack of confidence in their own parenting skills. Secondly, the on-going cost-of-living crisis which has led to financial pressures with consequences for the mental health of some parents. For families with complex needs, these pressures may come on top of other existing challenges associated with deprivation including mental ill-health, economic hardship, substance abuse, child protection issues, domestic abuse, single motherhood, and children with additional needs (often autism and ADHD).

Short-term project outputs: By December 2022, Growing Minds had enrolled 376 children across Berinsfield and Littlemore since the start of the project, each one receiving an Imagination Library book every month. 172 of these children had participated in at least one Peep Learning Together group session. 20 families had received sustained 1:1 family support.

Medium-term impact/outcomes: the medium-term aims of the project are to improve the home learning environment for pre-school children, and to build the coping strategies/capacities of families.

- **An improved home learning environment:** There was evidence from different sources that parents who attended Peep Learning Together group sessions became more proactive and engaged in home learning activities with their children (85%); shared books more than three times a week with their child (97%); understood how to create learning materials from everyday objects; were more aware of local activities and opportunities for their children; had a better understanding of normal patterns of learning and development, and greater ability and confidence to assess their child's development within that framework; and had better parenting skills and higher quality parent-child interactions (e.g. positive communication, dealing with challenging behaviour, managing stress).

"As new mum's we're flying blind. The group helps me be proactive like with walking and singing, and understanding that it's worth reading to babies even if they're too young to talk"

"I understand now that all kids develop at different paces and ages, so I don't get so anxious about his development now".

All of these changes constitute important building blocks for parents to support their children's school readiness.

- **Stronger coping strategies/capacities for parents.** Support to strengthen coping capacity has been primarily, but not exclusively, provided for families facing multiple vulnerabilities, risk factors and deprivation. However, the additional impact of the Covid and cost-of-living crises meant that supporting the coping capacities of a wider group of parents, including meeting their fundamental, practical needs (e.g. food, nappies), had to become an (unanticipated) priority. Support for children's learning and development and school readiness had to take secondary priority. As one community partner said: *"It is not possible to progress the goals of school readiness, child development, parent-child relationships and the home learning environment with parents who are overcome with anxiety, sleeping and eating problems, and worries about their children's health."* The impact of this type of support on struggling families was very significant. Some described it as a 'life-line', enabling them to survive practical and emotional stresses. It helped some to emerge from isolation and start socialising again, for others to rebuild their self-esteem and trust in professionals; some said it prevented them losing their children to Social Services; it enabled others to aspire to study or take on volunteering roles. 100% of those receiving 1:1 support felt they were coping better at home as a result.

"Since Growing Minds has been in my life, my mental health has improved a lot. To have someone to listen, to be there for you, just to give a bit of advice, a bit of encouragement"

"What matters most to me is that my kids can see a difference in me. I'm so much calmer now. I have the headspace for them. I nearly lost them. I can see a real difference in them too. They're more settled and confident and are doing really well at nursery and school. I feel like a good mum and that makes me really proud. I'm so grateful to (my support worker). I couldn't have done it without her. It's really changed my life for the better"

In Littlemore, practitioners described the project's most important achievements to date as building peer support networks between parents, a sense of community, and safe spaces for families to interact. All of these achievements are important for enabling parents to build the confidence and skills of pre-school children to prepare for entering school.

Longer-term impact: the long-term goal for the project is to increase school readiness for all children in the two communities. Once the first cohort of Growing Minds children enter school in September 2023 it will be possible to make an objective assessment of improved school readiness. Progress will be assessed at the end of their first school year. The key measure of success will be an increase in the percentage of children achieving a *Good Level of Development* at the end of the Early Years Foundation Stage indicating that they are 'school ready'. The project's original goal was that at least 75% of Growing Minds children would achieve this. Given the aforementioned disruption to educational achievement caused by Covid in 2020/21, the project may need to re-evaluate the attainability of this target in the immediate term and consider adjusting it, and perhaps differentiate it between the two very different communities. In the meantime, reports from parents and observations by project staff indicate improvements in the following areas, all of which will be contributing toward school readiness: language and communication (e.g. sharing of books and singing), literacy (e.g. mark-making, drawing), maths (e.g. counting steps), physical development (e.g. visits

to the park, often for the first time), social and emotional development (e.g. social confidence, independence, curiosity). Several parents described participation in Growing Minds as an '*essential stepping stone*' for their children between the isolation of home during Covid and entering nursery. Given the evidence that quality nursery provision enhances school readiness, at this early stage of the project, a proxy indicator of potential school readiness could be defined as the project facilitating a child's entry to nursery and ability to cope with nursery life. "*He couldn't have gone to nursery without Growing Minds*" is a powerful statement of impact.

Overall impact: The project is benefiting families considerably at all three levels of engagement: Imagination Library books, Peep Learning Together group sessions, and 1:1 sustained family support. All parents and community partners interviewed were extremely positive and encouraging about the benefits of the project. It is meeting a real need in these two communities, particularly in the context of the Covid and cost-of-living crises. The project is still in a post-pandemic recovery phase but is broadly on track to return to its original goals. In Berinsfield it has been possible to begin to return to the Peep Learning Together groups earlier than in Littlemore. The progress so far has largely been in building the capacity of parents to prepare their children for school. Systematic measurement of actual improvements in school readiness can begin from 2024. This will be an important step in assessing the potential for replication and scale up of the project.

Key enabling factors for success: the project defines three components that will enable it to be scaled and up and replicated elsewhere. Each of these were explored and found, in the following ways, to be fundamental to project achievements to date.

- *A preventative early intervention approach:* contact is made with all families early on through Birth Registrars; those with multiple vulnerabilities, risk factors and deprivation are identified early through working with partners; there is an immediate offer of tangible resources (books, baby massage); sustained 1:1 support is offered for a year for those in particular need; and the continuum of support to families from birth until 5 provides a safety net for 2-5-year-olds who can easily slip off the radar of services between the last Health Visitor check and entering school.
- *Evidence-based and flexible interventions:* the combination of different interventions enables families to engage at any of three levels according to their need, interest and confidence; direct face to face support with structured activity, peer support, and opportunities outside of the home were highly valued by parents; the approach is flexible and responsive, including delivering tangible goods to meet fundamental needs as a first step where needed.
- *A collaborative, local community, partnership approach:* the trusting relationships built up between parents and Growing Minds professionals were exceptionally strong and a key enabler for parental engagement; the creation of peer networks between families helped to break isolation, build friendships & foster mutual support; strong local partnerships, particularly with Birth Registrars, Health Visitors and local schools have been essential for getting referrals into the project and need continuous effort to build and maintain.

Challenges, key issues and recommendations

External factors: beyond the Covid and cost-of-living crises, the lack of capacity in both statutory and Third Sector specialist organisations for taking referrals from the project has been a major challenge, in particular, the high threshold for accessing mental health services and the difficulty of accessing Health Visitor support. Growing Minds is left 'holding' these families for long periods while they await specialist support.

Increasing the number of referrals into the Growing Minds project: Recruiting new families is an on-going challenge, with Littlemore a little behind target for the year in December. The post-Covid resumption of the referral route from Birth Registrars gives confidence that almost all families of new-borns have now been contacted by Growing Minds. Referrals from Health Visitors continue to function less well than anticipated because of the pressures on that service. Greater support is sought from Health Visitors, Birth Registrars, and other agencies to promote Growing Minds and make referrals to it. Good progress has been made with raising awareness about the project in the community using virtual means (Whats App, Facebook), but parents also called for more traditional means of promotion in the community (e.g. leaflets in schools).

Increasing the number and range of families accessing group sessions: while the number of families attending group sessions exceeded targets in the past year, there are more children in the communities who could benefit from groups. The reasons range from lack of confidence or knowledge about the groups to practical issues of timing. The most obvious barrier is that children of working parents are in nursery, pre-school or childcare during Growing Minds session times. A review of the timing of sessions is recommended to explore alternative timings e.g. groups on Saturdays, school holidays, or different times of the day. In addition, outreach work in communities could reinforce the message that groups are inclusive and safe spaces where children with additional needs are supported and welcomed, that the project is independent of social services, and of its universal offer to all families. The participation of more fathers and male carers could be encouraged by engaging some male staff or volunteers.

Peep Learning Together content in the Stay and Play sessions in Littlemore: In Littlemore it is taking longer than Berinsfield to return to the originally planned structured Peep Learning Together sessions. This is because the continuing priority post-Covid has been to rebuild parents' confidence to interact socially and to meet fundamental needs, and also due to restricted capacity for group work (number of families and availability of space). Peep content is therefore used loosely to drop learning and development ideas into discussions during large Stay & Play sessions or in one-to-one conversations, role-modelled, or explained in leaflets. As the confidence and capacity of families to engage in the sessions strengthens over the coming year, hopefully it will become feasible to re-introduce more structured Peep content into the Stay & Play sessions. In order to run Peep Learning Together sessions as in Berinsfield, capacity issues would need to be addressed: smaller groups and a greater number of group sessions would be needed, and this would require more staff and volunteers and a dedicated project space.

Increasing the numbers of families receiving sustained 1:1 family support: the target for 2022-2023 was to support 16 families. By December, 9 families (19 children) were being supported, so the project was a little behind target. It appears there is considerable unmet need for this service in both communities, and there is some capacity, at least in Littlemore, to take on more families. Many of these are families facing multiple vulnerabilities, risk factors and deprivation, for whom time is needed to build enough confidence and trust to engage with the project. Consideration could be given to how achievable current Key Performance Indicators are given that this is work that cannot be rushed. More active referrals into the project from other agencies would also help.

Staffing, time and funding: the evaluation did not address project management and staffing issues specifically, but when asked about the greatest challenges facing them, project staff highlighted the need for

more time, funding and staffing. They needed more time to plan group sessions, more capacity to provide 1:1 family support in Berinsfield, and more volunteers and staff to run the large group sessions in Littlemore.

Widening access to other ethnic minority and language groups

- *Language*: language was not raised as a barrier to accessing the project, but outreach work would be needed to establish whether there are families with English as an Additional Language who do not know about the project or feel unable to attend because of language. It is recommended that some of the Growing Minds leaflets are translated into the most commonly spoken local languages, that a small budget for interpreting is held, and a small library of multi-lingual books made available to families.
- *Ethnicity*: In Littlemore, families attending group sessions were very multi-cultural and representative of the local community. In Berinsfield this was not so: there is a fairly sizeable South Asian population in Berinsfield, and indications of a possibly sizeable Eastern European population, who are barely represented amongst Growing Minds families (20% of school children in Berinsfield are 'not white British', and 5% of the population is Asian/British Asian). It is recommended that investment is made to investigate whether and how the project could be made more accessible to all ethnic groups within the community.

Monitoring and evaluation: it may be helpful in future project planning to identify more clearly the project outputs (short-term deliverables), outcomes (medium-term impact) and goals (longer-term impact) as this evaluation summary has attempted to do. The use of a Logframe (Logical Framework Approach) to articulate these, the flow between them, indicators, risks and assumptions may be worth considering.

Conclusion

Despite the massive disruption to the project caused by the Covid-19 pandemic, and despite continuing in a phase of post-pandemic recovery, the project is now firmly established in Berinsfield and Littlemore. There is clear evidence of positive outcomes in terms of improving the home learning environment and strengthening the coping capacity of families, and significant positive impact on the lives of many of the participating families. These achievements are forming the building blocks for improving school readiness and closing the disadvantage gap in the longer-term. Establishing systems to measure and monitor school readiness will be important over the next year in order to provide evidence of a model of effective practice which can be scaled up and replicated in other areas of Oxfordshire and beyond. It is hoped that the findings of this evaluation will contribute to the evidence of impact, distillation of learning, and articulation of the model which can underpin that scale up, and widen the influence Growing Minds within the sector.

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