

## **Development of an overarching measure of impact for Home-Start UK: a feasibility study**

### **Executive Summary**

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Voluntary and public-sector providers of family support are increasingly expected to provide quantifiable evidence of outcomes for service users at both national and local level. Yet the effort and costs of designing and carrying out evaluation studies to collect this information are substantial, and the results are often inconclusive.

This report describes the results of an innovative methodological development project to develop evaluation methods, conducted in collaboration with Home-Start UK, a substantial voluntary organisation providing befriending and support to vulnerable families, local Home-Starts in Northern Ireland, Deborah Ghate<sup>i</sup>, and the Centre for Effective Services (CES)<sup>ii</sup>. The aim of the project was to explore whether it was possible to develop a simple, overarching measure of the impact of Home-Start's work with vulnerable families, to use as a low cost evaluation tool. The project was conducted between 2010 and 2012, with fieldwork carried out in Northern Ireland during 2011.

This short summary of key findings is intended for practitioners and policy makers. A fuller technical summary for researchers and those interested in the methodological aspects of the project is available on the Colebrooke Centre website at:  
[http://www.cevi.org.uk/docs/Impact\\_Summary\\_2.pdf](http://www.cevi.org.uk/docs/Impact_Summary_2.pdf)

#### **Purpose of the project**

The purpose of the project was to identify and test a short, quantifiable measure of impact that could be administered easily to capture the core goal or 'essence' of Home-Start services. The intention was to develop a 'big picture' measure that would apply to the widest possible proportion of the diverse group of families who use Home-Start. It was also intended that the measure we developed could be used by other comparable community-based family support services, and that the methodology we used could be replicated to produce alternative measures for other organisations with different goals.

## Background to the project

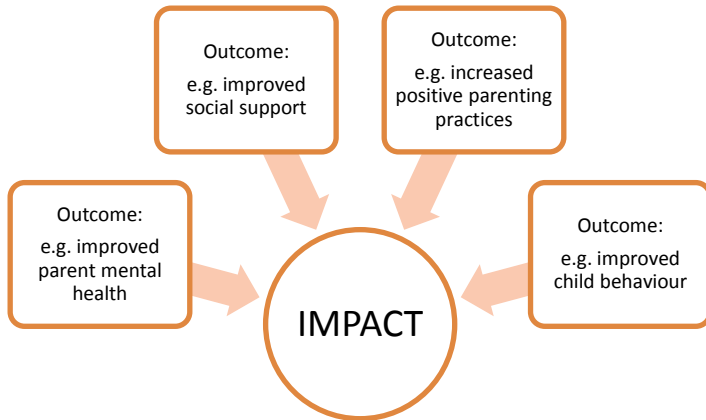
Home-Start UK is a substantial voluntary family support organisation. It has worked across the four nations of the UK since 1973 through self-governing local schemes (known as 'local Home-Starts'), providing volunteer support and befriending to families experiencing stress, who have children under five. In 2010-2011, local Home-Starts worked with around 17,000 volunteers and provided support to around 36,000 families with 77,000 young children. The dominant route by which families reach Home-Start is through referrals by health visiting, social work or other health and social care staff, although a substantial proportion of parents refer themselves. The service is based on universal access principles (ie, is not targeted on specific groups but open to all), and there are no fixed eligibility criteria that parents must satisfy in order to receive a service. The kinds of stresses experienced by parents vary widely, for example living with disabilities, living in poverty, or having inadequate social or family support.

Home-Start provides a service approach that is responsive, *user-led*, and tailored to individual parents' needs. Although the nature of the service provided to each family is underpinned by common principles of working with families, the precise help delivered by volunteers and the duration of this help is negotiated individually, and varies from one family to the next. This is an approach typical of many established family support providers across Europe, in contrast to more formal models of intervention that use programmed, *theory-led* delivery that aim to deliver a more standardised package of support to service users.

Because of the variability in the service provided to families, measuring outcomes using quantitative research methods is especially challenging for services like Home-Start. Quantitative indicators sometimes show little or no change, even when qualitative methods find that the service is extremely helpful to parents. This can be observed in some of the mixed evaluation findings for Home-Start itself over the years, and in many other instances in the wider family support evaluation literature.

Recognising these challenges, we made a distinction between *outcomes* and *impact*. Our aim was to identify a measure of *impact*, which we define as the overarching, high-level effect of a service that may be targeting a number of specific subsidiary outcomes. Impact can be thought of as the 'core change' that a service is trying to achieve, or the 'sum of the parts' of multiple outcomes. We were not attempting to measure *outcomes* themselves, which we define as changes over time in specific areas of learning, behaviour or life circumstances (e.g, parents' knowledge of child development, parents' methods of discipline, children's behaviour, mothers' mental health, increased social support).

**Figure 1 A model for the relationship between outcomes and impact**



## Methods

The project had five key stages, which are described in more detail in the report and summarised in the box below:

### **Box 1 Methodology for the project**

1. Literature review and consultation to identify the key aspect of the service to be measured (the overarching change that Home-Start hopes to achieve, which could best capture the overall impact of the service)
2. Literature review and consultation to develop the methodology, including exploring the advantages and disadvantages of simple as opposed to complex measurement approaches
3. Consultation and development of three alternative measures to be tested, involving adapting existing, widely used measures
4. Testing of measures by 12 local Home-Starts in Northern Ireland, with a sample of 76 parents, and three waves of data collection over a total average follow-up period of 23 weeks
5. Data analysis of results, and feedback from Home-Start co-ordinators on the process of administration, to explore the way the three measures worked
6. A final stage of further testing on one of the measures that proved most successful

## Defining 'impact' for Home-Start

Desk research and consultation with key stakeholders was undertaken to identify the single most important aspect of parenting or family life that Home-Start was seeking to change through its help, which could be said to best capture the overall impact of the service. We were looking for an indicator of impact that was readily recognisable to the organisation's leadership, staff and volunteers as reflective of their intentions; applied to the widest possible group of parents who use the service; and closely reflected the direct, on-the-ground support that Home-Start volunteers give to families. To be practical for evaluation purposes, this 'change goal' should lend itself to simple quantitative measurement.

The review and consultations with stakeholders pinpointed the concept of parenting 'self-efficacy', and the plainer English construct of 'coping with being a parent' as most closely matching these criteria. Self-efficacy (sometimes called 'self-agency') in relation to

parenting concerns the belief that a parent has of his or her ability to organise and carry out the tasks of parenting. Research shows that higher self-efficacy is associated with better quality of parenting. It is also closely related to coping, which is the ability to manage situations, tasks and the wider role of being a parent in the face of background stresses. Consultations with Home-Start stakeholders confirmed that enabling parents to manage stressful situations better, to feel more confident in their abilities as parents, and to take more enjoyment in parenting were key goals of the support offered.

### Developing the measurement approach

A second review focused on the literature on research methods to identify quantitative measures with features that made them both practical to use, and scientifically robust. During this phase we also consulted with colleagues with expertise in measurement. We were looking for measures that were simple to understand and acceptable to Home-Start parents and volunteers (which generally meant, not strongly 'deficit' focused); brief and easy to administer at low-cost; suitable to be self-completed by parents; pre-tested preferably in larger or general population samples to give comparative data and the comfort of knowing the measures 'worked' in the field; and with good measurement properties, including *validity* (how well it measures what it sets out to measure) *reliability* (how reproducible or stable the findings are) and *responsiveness* (how well the measure detects change over time).

In addition, the relative advantages and disadvantages of single as opposed to multiple-item measures were assessed, since our goal was to identify the shortest, simplest and least burdensome measure possible. Although it remains a gold standard to use multiple measures in evaluation research, we found no compelling evidence against the use of well-constructed single item measures in appropriate contexts. The literature also indicated these may even have advantages, in certain circumstances, over longer or more complex measures.

### Selecting and field testing the measures

On the basis of the two reviews, three measures were identified. After consultation with Home-Start Co-ordinators these were agreed for testing, with adaptations where necessary:

- A. *The Parenting Self-Agency Measure (PSAM)*<sup>iii</sup> - a five item scale measuring parenting self-efficacy, developed in the USA but previously used in the UK, with a five point scale response format
- B. *Enjoyment of Parenting* – a single item measure on a five point response scale, widely used by various authors and a feature of many longer scales
- C. *Parent Coping Scale (PCS)*<sup>iv</sup>, adapted from a measure developed for a national study of parenting in Britain and widely used since – a single item 'global coping scale' that we modified into a five point scale

The three measures were combined into a short questionnaire, and twelve Local Home-Starts in Northern Ireland agreed to participate in field testing. Co-coordinators at each local Home-Start approached all parents starting Home-Start services from October 2010 to April 2011, seeking their consent to participate in the pilot study. Of 88 parents approached, 76

agreed, a response rate of 86% at Baseline, with characteristics representative of the wider population of Home-Start service users.

The short questionnaire was given by Co-ordinators to parents in the form of a self-completed booklet, which parents completed and then return to the Co-ordinator in a sealed envelope identified only by a serial number. This process was repeated at three time points, each approximately 10 weeks apart: Baseline (Time One): during an 'initial assessment' meeting; at a 10-week review meeting (Time Two); and at a 20-week review meeting (Time Three). In practice, the average total follow-up period was 23 weeks, and over time the numbers of participating parents reduced as families ceased to receive Home-Start services, or were unavailable for other reasons. This reduced the numbers to 51 at Time Two (67% of Baseline sample) and 34 at Time Three (45% of Baseline).

## Results

All three measures were found to be acceptable to parents, and two of the measures (A and C) detected statistically significant<sup>v</sup> change over time. *Enjoyment of Parenting* (Measure B) was found to be unsuitable for measuring change, due to a pronounced 'ceiling effect' (i.e. that proportions at the top of the scale at Baseline were already so high there was little room for improvement).

Measure A, the *Parenting Self Agency Measure*, showed modest change in a positive direction between all three time points, but the changes were statistically significant only between Baseline and Time Two. Measure C, the *Parent Coping Scale*, showed the greatest change in a positive direction between all three time points, with strongly significant differences detected by the final follow-up, despite the reduced number of parents providing responses.

## Process feedback from Home-Start Co-ordinators

Although the Co-ordinators confirmed the overall validity of the constructs being measured, they also identified a degree of response bias ('faking good') by parents, especially at the Baseline stage. This was possibly due to parents being unwilling to disclose the real extent of difficulties at this initial stage of relationship-building with Home-Start, and being unclear about the purpose of the data being collected, given that Co-ordinators themselves were themselves distributing and collecting back the questionnaires. Inspection of the results tended to confirm this, especially for Measure A, which showed some evidence of a bias toward 'faking good' compared to data obtained using the same measure in other studies. Measure C showed Home-Start parents reporting more plausible levels of coping difficulties compared to a general population sample. However, response bias could also not be ruled out entirely for this measure.

Co-ordinators also confirmed that the methods of collecting the data must very simple and streamlined so as not to delay and interrupt the flow of work for co-ordinators, and to minimise the burden on participating parents. It was also apparent that for some, the process of administering the measures interfered unhelpfully with the complex process of establishing trusting relationships between Home-Start and the parents who use the services.

## Conclusions and recommendations

This collaborative project was innovative in a number of ways, first in its attempt to develop a measure of high-level impact rather than focusing on domain-specific outcomes; second in the rigorous approach we used to identify, validate, develop and field-test alternative measures in collaboration with local Home-Starts; and thirdly in our use of feedback on the process from the staff who deliver the services.

The project has satisfactorily demonstrated that it is possible to develop and use a simple, low-cost overarching measure of impact for an open-access, user-led and community-based family support service delivered by volunteers across the UK. We were able to develop and implement a measure that was compatible with the service's broad intentions, acceptable to parents and staff, and satisfactorily robust as a measure of change over time. Two of the three measures tested proved able to detect change over a follow-up period; one, the *Parent Coping Scale*, showed greatest sensitivity to change and holds particular promise as a simple, low-cost measure that could be used by Home-Start and potentially also by other community-based services with similar high-level goals. The project also has much wider applicability, in having developed a workable methodology for the development of other measures, in the case of services that seek other, different kinds of overarching impact.

A limitation of the project is that the measures were not tested against a comparison group. This means that we do not know how the three measures might have performed in a group of parents who were not receiving Home-Start's services. It is possible that these measures would pick up the same degrees of change (or lack of it) irrespective of whether parents were receiving a service, or irrespective of whether that service was Home-Start or something else. It is also the case that a single overarching measure of impact is not a substitute for the more detailed and fine-grained evaluation of outcomes in specific domains of parent and child functioning. However, where time and resources are limited, or where services need to assess their own high-level performance on an ongoing basis without access to external research support, this method may be an important complement to more comprehensive approaches to evaluation. Well-constructed measures of impact may also help towards the bridging of the disconnection that often emerges when qualitative and quantitative research are employed together to assess the results of family support services.

### Specific recommendations

For future measurement of overarching, high level impact of Home-Start's services we can recommend the use of the *Parent Coping Scale (PCS)*, which, of the three measures tested, appeared to achieve the best balance between practical, theoretical and scientific considerations. The *PCS* provides a global measure of 'coping with being a parent', and improving parents' sense of coping with parenting stress is recognised by Home-Start's stakeholders as a valid indicator of the broad intentions of the service. 'Coping' has a plain English meaning readily understandable to parents of all social and educational backgrounds. It is closely related to constructs such as self-efficacy and self-agency that have been shown in many research studies to be related to better and more confident parenting. Future development of the measure should ideally test its behaviour in a comparison (non-service) group.

Full details of the *Parent Coping Scale (PCS)*, psychometric results from additional testing completed after the study, and how to use it, are available on the web at: [http://www.cevi.org.uk/docs/Parent\\_Coping\\_Scale](http://www.cevi.org.uk/docs/Parent_Coping_Scale).

We also recommend that future use of the *PCS* should explore the use of telephone rather than face-to-face administration methods. This would remove the need for local Co-ordinators or other Home-Start personnel to administer the measure, reducing burden on the service and increasing confidentiality for parents. Co-ordinators would still need to seek permission for ongoing telephone contact, but data could then be collected centrally, by an independent researcher or telephone research unit. This would allow for more accurate timing of follow-ups, and also allow collection of data from parents who have completely ceased to use the service. Longer follow-up periods could also be employed, increasing the size and usefulness of the data-set for monitoring the longer-term impact of the service. All of these factors, if implemented, may yield new insights into the workings of the *PCS* and will contribute to the further refinement of the methods described in this study.

<sup>i</sup> Deborah Ghatte is the Chief Executive of the Colebrooke Centre for Evidence and Implementation, a UK-based independent not-for-profit centre for implementation science and practice, focusing on the implementation of better services and systems for children and families. She was the founding Chief Executive of the Centre for Effective Services, between 2008 and 2011.

<sup>ii</sup> CES is an independent not-for-profit centre for the promotion and support of evidence-informed policy and practice in child, family and community services in Ireland and Northern Ireland.

<sup>iii</sup> Dumka, L., Stoerzinger, H., Jackson, K., and Roosa, M. (1996) Examination of the cross-cultural and cross-language equivalence of the parenting self-agency measure. *Family Relations*, 45, 216-222.

<sup>iv</sup> Ghatte D. and Hazel N. (2002) *Parenting in Poor Environments: Stress, Support and Coping* London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers

<sup>v</sup> 'Statistically significant change' means change that is substantial enough to be unlikely to have occurred by chance.

**For further information, see:**

**Full Report:**

***Development of an overarching measure of impact for Home-Start UK: a feasibility study***

Moran P and Ghate D (2013)

available on the web at:

[http://www.cevi.org.uk/docs/Impact\\_Measure\\_Report.pdf](http://www.cevi.org.uk/docs/Impact_Measure_Report.pdf)

[http://www.home-start.org.uk/about\\_us/what\\_we\\_do/policy\\_practice\\_research](http://www.home-start.org.uk/about_us/what_we_do/policy_practice_research)

<http://www.effectiveservices.org/our-work/homestart>

**Technical Summary for Researchers:**

***Development of an overarching measure of impact for Home-Start UK: a feasibility study - technical summary for researchers*** Ghate D and Moran P (2013)

available on the web at:

[http://www.cevi.org.uk/docs/Impact\\_Summary\\_2.pdf](http://www.cevi.org.uk/docs/Impact_Summary_2.pdf)

**The *Parent Coping Scale*: background and technical information** Ghate D and Moran P (2013)

available on the web at:

[http://www.cevi.org.uk/docs/Parent\\_Coping\\_Scale.pdf](http://www.cevi.org.uk/docs/Parent_Coping_Scale.pdf)

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***This project was undertaken as a collaboration between Home-Start UK, Deborah Ghate and the Centre for Effective Services***



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