Meitheal and Child and Family Support Networks Work Package
Final Report

Key Findings

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Development and Mainstreaming Programme for Prevention, Partnership and Family Support (PPFS)

This is a programme of action being undertaken by Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, as part of its National Service Delivery Framework. The programme seeks to embed prevention and early intervention throughout the culture of its operation and Tusla. The UNICEF Child and Family Research Centre, NUI Galway has undertaken an evaluation study focusing on the implementation and impact of the PPFS Programme. The study’s overall research questions are:

1. What is the Meitheal and Child and Family Support Work Package?

Meitheal refers to an Irish early intervention and prevention practice model that is used when children and young people are at risk for serious behavioural issues or emotional needs; but do not threaten the threshold for intervention. Meitheal is coordinated by a Lead Practitioner. The family’s strengths and difficulties are identified by the Lead Practitioner and their partners changing such that services are provided on a continuous basis.

2. What is the focus of this report?

This report details the findings of the Meitheal and Child and Family Support Networks, Children’s Participation, Parenting Support and Parental Participation, Public Awareness and Commissioning study. While stand alone studies in their own right, each Work Package contributes to the overall assessment of the programme.

What is the Meitheal and Child and Family Support Work Package?

Meitheal presents findings on a number of themes including the strengths and difficulties of people from a number of agencies with relevant expertise is brought together to work with the parents of children or young people and if necessary other family members. Regular meetings are held to review the process and discuss possible new actions. Child and Family Support Networks are multi-agency networks developed to improve access to support services for children and their families.

What is the focus of this report?

This report details the findings of the Meitheal and Child and Family Support Networks Process and Outcomes Study which examined a body of evidence that evaluated the experiences of parents or guardians and their children, or young people, and families engaged with Meitheal. The aim of this report is to give a full picture of families and Lead Practitioner experiences of the Meitheal programme. The nature of families’ participation in it and the impact it has had on families is varied. The study highlights the strengths and weaknesses of the model and the need for continuous improvement. The study concludes that Meitheal is improving family outcomes suggesting that supporting mothers is key to supporting families.

How was the research conducted?

The information was collected from children and young people, their parents or guardians, and from practitioners who are currently involved in a number of agencies with relevant expertise. The information was gathered through interviews and tools that measure changes in families’ outcomes and their strengths and difficulties from the perspective of 85 families is presented in the study. Tusla performance data on its activities with these families was compared to the outcomes and findings were presented. The data on the CFSN model around the country to understand their views.

WHAT ARE THE KEY RESEARCH FINDINGS?

1. The impact of the Meitheal and CFSN model on outcomes for children, young people, and families.

- Meitheal is improving family outcomes over time, particularly from the perspective of mothers, showing the potential of Meitheal and its capacity to support families in an indirect way by providing support and access to services through integrated support and local coordination of services to effectively respond to complex needs.

2. Implementation of the Meitheal and CFSN model.

- Fidelity to the Meitheal model increased over time suggesting that the model is applied following the guidelines and stages intended in the model design.
- The majority of Meitheal’s were initiated through Direct Access and Lead Practitioners engaged from a variety of sectors including community and voluntary suggesting that families have adequate access to the model.
- Key Stakeholders identified differences in how the model is being implemented nationwide. Some of the reasons given were the lack of structure and personnel needed to establish and deliver the model as stated in the original design. Fidelity to the model is a key indicator of success. Tusla needs to give careful consideration to the need for public and internal engagement of Meitheal with other statutory bodies, such as the HSE, Department of Education, and several local authorities.
- Issues remain around the need for public and internal awareness of Meitheal. Issues also remain around the engagement of Meitheal with other statutory bodies, such as the HSE and CFSN model in the Irish Child Protection and Welfare System.
- Tusla needs to give careful consideration to the need for public and internal engagement of Meitheal with other statutory bodies, such as the HSE, Department of Education, and several local authorities.


- This study identified that the level of Meitheal activity, compared to overall activity in the child protection and welfare system, is closed, there are serious issues about what supports are being provided at different stages of the process.
- Tusla needs to give careful consideration to the need for public and internal engagement of Meitheal with other statutory bodies, such as the HSE, Department of Education, and several local authorities.

Conclusions and Recommendations

- Overall, the experience of Meitheal was positive for most families as they felt their needs were met and they were listened to and empowered. The holistic nature of the agency collaboration facilitated the response to complex needs.
- CFSNs can support families in an indirect way by building capacity through training events and supporting practitioners’ relationships.
- The role of the Lead Practitioners is crucial however challenges to engagement need to be addressed.
- Meitheal can work effectively at a prevention and early intervention level providing support for families at lower levels of need.
- The connection between Meitheal and the CFSN system is not fluent in all areas which can have a negative impact on timely provision of services for families.
- There is some evidence to support the sustainability of the model over time with the appropriate funding and resources.

Recommendations

- Address the challenges to implementation and engagement of Lead Practitioners to improve the sustainability of the model.
- Prioritise the meaningful inclusion of children and young people in the Meitheal process.
- Improve the connection between Meitheal and the CPW system to ensure that families’ needs are met and services are provided on a continuous basis.
- Tusla needs to give careful consideration to the needs and difficulties that specific areas may be experiencing in implementing the Meitheal and CFSN model.
- Increase internal awareness and external public awareness towards the model to facilitate access and also to encourage the engagement of government and statutory bodies to provide timely and integrated services for families.
- Facilitate availability and access to specialised services for children and young people.
Further Information
If you would like to read the Meitheal and Child and Family Support Work Package Final Report, or any of the publications listed above please visit our website www.nuigalway.ie/childandfamilyresearch
if you have any questions on our research, please email cfrc@nuigalway.ie

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List of Publications for the Meitheal and CFSN Work Package:


About the UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre
The UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre (UCFRC) is part of the Institute for Lifecourse and Society at the National University of Ireland, Galway. It was founded in 2007, through support from The Atlantic Philanthropies, Ireland and the Health Service Executive, with a base in the School of Political Science and Sociology, the mission of the Centre is to help create the conditions for excellent policies, services and practices that improve the lives of children, youth and families through research education and service development. The UCFRC has an extensive network of relationships and research collaborations internationally and is widely recognised for its core expertise in the areas of Family Support and Youth Development.