

Aiming High Enough? Improving Services for Disabled Children

The Government has produced a series of documents aimed at improving outcomes for all children, one of which focuses specifically on services for disabled children and their families. But what are the implications of this for the Early Years sector?

Aiming High for Disabled Children represents the culmination of a review of services for disabled children which the campaigning group Every Disabled Child Matters (EDCM) worked with Government to implement. It looks at the responses from a range of agencies and individuals and sets out further actions required to improve outcomes and equality of opportunity for disabled children and their families. It establishes 5 'core offer' areas:

Information. Disabled children and their families should be able to access appropriate information at every stage of a child's life.

Transparency. Support for disabled children and their parents should be determined on a fair, understandable and transparent basis, with social care eligibility criteria designed according to need and published by local authorities.

Participation. Disabled children and their families should have the option to be fully involved in the way services are planned, commissioned and delivered in their area, increasing their choice and control which may include access to a parents' support forum.

Assessment. Disabled children and their families should benefit from integration of assessment processes with shared information and basic assessments providing a gateway to more specialist services where necessary.

Feedback: A clear and published complaints procedure should be provided for families who aren't happy with the services they are receiving.

Through consultation with parents of disabled children, M-E-L Research has found a common theme which comes up time and again is around access to information and a feeling that parents themselves need to be empowered in their 'fight' to access services. Aiming High recognises the variable quality of provision across the country and how the current lack of data fails to reflect this failing. It also looks to Local Authorities and PCTs to collect data on the number of disabled children in their area.

To Include or Not to Include

"My Mum and Dad were told that I should go to a Special Nursery, but they were not very impressed, and so I was fortunate to be able to attend a Nursery where they take the non-disabled child with the disabled. I thoroughly enjoyed the Nursery. Special Schools I visited were very different from the Nursery. The experts had said I would get used to it, and would eventually like being with people like myself."⁽¹⁾

The Government's intention is that universal services will be made accessible to children with special needs or disabilities. Aiming High recognizes that children with disabilities may require a different level of care than most children their age. Until recently, such children's disabilities were either not recognised or were served by specialist provision in special schools and nurseries, set apart from the mainstream.

But, the days of the specialist may be numbered. A process of change is underway and it is Government's clear intention that all children should be 'included' and have the same rights to access services, regardless of disability. This *sounds* good, until you realise that the financial saving from closing special schools will not necessarily be re-invested in a commensurate improvement in mainstream provision.

Professional views are divided as to the benefits of such closures. Inclusion sounds sexy, but it neglects many of the needs both of the children and the practicalities of staffing a demanding mixed ability and needs classroom. Where special schools are still in existence, they are favoured by parents who value the professional experience and skills that specialist staff provide.

Early Years Inclusion: Childcare.

Providing for children with disabilities in an inclusive setting provides them with vital personal and social experiences. Doing so in an early education or childcare setting also allows their peers at an early age to gain an appreciation of difference.

This improvement in early education is important as the protective effect of education and care at an early age can reduce the incidence of social, emotional and behavioural needs later in the child's development.

As part of their childcare sufficiency assessments, local authorities are required to identify gaps in childcare, assessing demand and supply, particularly for those who need special care. Within Aiming High there are specific references to the importance of childcare, not in the least the potential cost benefits of mums of disabled children being able to re-enter the labour market.

The Early Years sector has been a key area for policy reform over the past 10 years and, in the current climate, the focus is on the needs and wishes of disabled children and their parents. But what are the principles and implications of inclusion for an early years setting?

Principles of Inclusion in an Early Years Setting

Aiming High is clear that childcare provision for families with disabled children should include options but, where possible, children should be integrated into mainstream settings. If necessary, however, specialist provision will remain.

In order to be fully accessible to children with a range of disabilities, early years settings will need to consider a range of access issues. In terms of building construction, the DDA will ensure that adaptations for physical access will be made to some extent, and all new Children's Centres will, by law, have to be fully accessible. But equality of access

under the law is about far more than ramps and toilets. What about the more subtle changes required?

A review of inclusive childcare settings undertaken in America (*Best Practices in Inclusive Child Care: Wisconsin Prepared by Wisconsin CCR&R Network*. http://www.wccip.org/tips/Inclusion/Best_Practices.html) identified several key principles of best practice in relation to inclusion:

- ◆ **Staff training in specific conditions.** Although there has been a general improvement in disability awareness, accredited skill levels in the mainstream children's workforce are still low in terms of working with more seriously disabled children. M-E-L's own research supports findings in national studies, highlighting the shortfall in training and professional development for staff in mainstream settings as they try to cope with the multiple needs of children in their care. This has been recognised by the Government who are to provide specialist training for childminders and nursery workers on caring for and educating disabled children.
- ◆ **Programme philosophy.** It is important that inclusive values are explicit and commitments to the principle of inclusivity are made when enrolling children with disabilities.
- ◆ **Professional Development.** Fundamental to the inclusion agenda is staff training. As part of the Government's recently announced £35m support package within Aiming High, there will be specialist training delivered for childminders and nursery workers in caring for and educating disabled children within 10 pilot areas across the UK. It is important that this training is included as part of a wider, systems change process.
- ◆ **Pay and Budgets.** Staff pay is part of a long standing debate about budgets within early year's settings. Faced with low status and inadequate pay - the average pay for those working in full day care settings is £6.80, well below the national average of £9.88 - the sector faces issues in terms of staff recruitment and retention.
- ◆ **Consultancy Advice.** Resources to hire experienced, specialist advisors to give support and consultancy advice. This should be in the form of a delegated budget or access to externally-funded consultancy advice. This support would allow in-house training on practical skills, including handling, toileting and restraint or more in-depth staff and management development on a range of inclusion-related topics.

So Government has set out its stall in relation to supporting families of disabled children. With funding notionally committed until 2011, the future looks promising. But there are many hurdles along the way and it will be interesting to see how effectively the Government's vision turns into a reality.

Key reading:

- ◆ Aiming high for disabled children: better support for families. DCSF May 2007.
- ◆ Aiming high for families. DCSF May 2007.
- ◆ Aiming high for young people. DCSF May 2007

- ◆ For Love or Money: pay, progression and professionalism in the 'early years' workforce. Institute for Public Policy Research April 2008.

(1) Action Research Centre for Inclusion at the University of Bolton (<http://www.inclusion-boltondata.org.uk/FrontPage/data16.htm>).

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The Background to Aiming High

The Government's programme for children's services, *Every Child Matters*, tells us that every child, whatever their background or their circumstances, should have the support they need to achieve five key outcomes:

- ◆ be healthy
- ◆ stay safe
- ◆ enjoy and achieve
- ◆ make a positive contribution
- ◆ achieve economic well-being

Children's Trusts are a key part of this programme and central to their delivery strategy. They bring together services for children, particularly local education, social care and health services, by ensuring that planning and delivery is co-ordinated and information is shared so that children are supported before they reach crisis point.

In the future, the UK will have to respond to new challenges that will impact upon children and families. These include demographic, social and technological developments and increasing global competition. The Government has promised to take action to support parents and families over the three-year spending cycle to 2011. Their approach is outlined within the documents:

- ◆ Aiming High for Disabled Children: better support for families
- ◆ Aiming High for children : supporting families
- ◆ Aiming High for Young People : a ten year strategy for positive activities

These should be seen as an integrated package of how the Government intends to address the needs of families and feed into the Every Child Matters agenda.