



WHAT WORKS FOR CHILDREN?

How well does research fit the needs of practitioners working to improve the well-being of children and families?

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Aims & Objectives



Social care research has been criticised for being insufficiently relevant to practitioners working with children and families in the field.

One way to make research more relevant to practitioners' needs is to involve practitioners in setting research agendas.

This study investigates the fit between what research practitioners would like to see done, and what research *actually* gets done or funded.

How did we look at whether research answers practitioners' questions?



We carried out a review of what practitioners say they want from research, drawing responses from previous surveys and a survey on the WWfC website. We recorded all the responses in a database of practitioners' research questions.



We documented what research had been funded by five major funders in social care between 1996 and 2004. We recorded all the funded research studies in a database of funded studies.

- We compared the two sets of data

Questions practitioners were asked in the surveys



- “Of the problems that you encounter in your work ... which do you think are in most need of further research?”

CEBSS and Barnardo’s NI surveys

- “If you could commission a single piece of research to help you in your ... practice what would it be?”

NCH and WWfC surveys

Practitioners' questions



We got practitioners' questions from five sources: four surveys which had asked practitioners about their research needs and our What Works for Children (WWfC) website survey

Survey	Number of practitioners' research questions	%
CEBSS 2000	429	43
NCH 2000	238	24
NCH 2004	78	8
Barnardo's Northern Ireland 2004	186	19
WWfC 2004	74	8
Total	1005	100

Funded Studies



Number of studies funded by each of the five main funders of research relevant to children's well-being in the UK, between 1996 and 2004

Funder	n	%
ESRC	314	50
Joseph Rowntree Foundation	228	36.4
Nuffield Foundation	35	6
Community Fund	28	4.5
Gatsby foundation	20	3
Total	625	100

Results



10 most commonly assigned keywords in the database of practitioners' research questions

Topic area	n	%
Employee issues*	190	19
Family support	138	13
Parenting	114	12
Child protection	106	10
Adoption/fostering	63	6
Mental health	53	5
Behaviour problems	50	4
Disability	47	4
Therapy	42	4
User-practitioner communication	36	4

* *Employee issues* = issues related to practitioners' own workplace, e.g. stress, workload etc.

Results: Comparison between practitioners' research questions and funded studies



Most common research questions from practitioners (orange) and where funded studies matched (blue)

Suggestions mentioned more than 20 times	n	Study*
Child protection – what works?	31	✓
Effects on children living with substance-abusing parents	27	✓
Engaging with hard-to-reach families/individuals	26	✓
Should adopted children have contact with their birth family?	25	✓
Preventative family support work vs crisis intervention	24	0
Multi-agency working – what works?	23	✓
Family support services – do they work?	23	✓
Workloads and associated problems	23	0
Behaviour problems – what works?	21	✓

*The ticks indicate which of these research questions were addressed by at least one funded study

Results – Recurring topics



In the literature review we found four additional studies looking at practitioners' research questions for which we couldn't get the original responses. We compared the reported results from these studies with the results from our database of practitioners' research questions.

Table 5: Popular topics in our database also found in other studies

	O'Brien et al	Smith	SCIE	Tozer & Ray
Contact with birth parents for long-term accommodated children	✓		✓	✓
Behaviour problems	✓		✓	
Multi-agency working		✓	✓	
Needs and risk assessment, particularly in child protection		✓	✓	✓

Examples of funded studies

The following examples show studies which fitted with practitioners' research questions around investigating the effects on children of living with substance abusers:

Parental substance abuse

- In-depth interviews with young people whose parents misused substances ([Bancroft et al, 2004](#))
- Semi-structured interviews with problematic drug users, one of their siblings, their parents and professionals ([Barnard, 2005](#))
- Literature review about children's experiences of living with domestic violence, parental substance misuse or parental health problems ([Gorin, 2004](#))

Examples of studies found which relate to practitioners' research questions around multi-agency working:

Multi-agency working

- Survey of policy makers, professionals and consumers about inter-disciplinary working for children and young people in difficulty in Scotland (**Kendrick *et al*, 1996**)
- Document analysis to look at professional knowledge-sharing in action (**Anning, 2005**)
- Case study of an innovative model of multi-agency childcare network (**Wigfall & Moss, 2001**)

Examples of studies found which relate to practitioners' research questions on family support services:



Family support

- In-depth interviews with users and staff of 13 family centres to assess how they were working with fathers (**Ghate *et al*, 2000**)
- In-depth interviews with parents from four South Asian groups to explore their views on family support services (**Quereshi *et al*, 2000**)
- Trial of the effectiveness of a home-visiting programme in improving parenting and preventing the maltreatment of infants in high-risk families (**Stewart-Brown *et al*, 2002**)

Results - types of questions



Type of research	Practitioners' research questions	Funded Studies
Effectiveness of interventions	45%	13%
What interventions are there?	4%	2%
Effects of not intervening	1%	0.2%
Users' views	2%	9%
Understanding problems	16%	64%
Policy	2%	4%
Practice issues	19%	4%
Other/not clear	10%	4%

Results - literature review



- **Lack of intervention research in public health (Millward et al 2003)**
- **Lack of research on government child health and well-being priority issues (Sherburne Hawkins & Law 2005)**
- **Lack of information on long-term outcomes and cost effectiveness for children's National Service Framework (Sloper & Statham 2005)**
- **Low-level of funding in social care research, research community needs to communicate a consensus on priorities (Shaw et al 2004)**

Conclusions and questions



Conclusions:

- Much research is relevant
- More UK research is needed on the effectiveness of interventions
- Further work is needed to find ways of getting research used

Questions raised:

- Should practitioners be more involved in setting research priorities?
- Should researchers and funders target research more towards practitioners' needs?

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