Title Evaluating community-based early childhood development initiatives: Experience from Victoria

Abstract:

Background
Best Start is an early child development initiative of the Victorian state government in Australia closely modeled on the local community initiatives of Surestart in the UK. It is aimed at eleven disadvantaged communities and two Aboriginal communities. Best Start aims to engage families, local services and local government in a collaborative local planning Partnership leading on to the development and implementation of projects in priority areas defined either by thirteen evidence-based outcome indicator areas (eg breastfeeding) and/or subsidiary aim areas (eg better access to services by vulnerable families and better service planning and cooperation).

Data gathered and methods used
A number of tools were developed to measure these parameters before and after Best Start by comparison with suitable control communities. These included eight ECD indicators using statewide datasets at LGA-level as well as more localised level for breastfeeding and attendance at Maternal and Child Health (MCH) centres as well as surveys of parents of three year old children site.

Results
Results indicated that there were significant improvements in five of seven areas of Partnership functioning. Four of eight nominated service co-operation and co-ordination activities became more frequent. New projects focused on health promotion/social marketing and promoting service cooperation and new service infrastructure. These Partnership and service cooperation activities led on to improved breastfeeding, attendance at MCH Centres measured using both routinely collected data and survey of parents. This was not typical though for other parameters.

Conclusion
Community-based ECD initiatives aimed at disadvantaged communities are able to improve core child health outcomes. The findings support the movement for social interventions that aim to improve the material conditions, well-being and prospects of people who live in disadvantaged neighbourhoods.