



Evaluation of the National Early Years Service (Tús Maith) 2014

Executive Summary



Tús Maith Evaluation

Executive Summary

The Programme

Tús Maith is a one to two year, centre-based early-years care and education programme operating in eight early years centres, with a particular focus on children aged three to five years from disadvantaged groups and those living in challenging family circumstances. Its overall aim is that the child will be ready for primary school and will develop the specific cognitive skills necessary for this transition. Its more specific outcomes relate to the following four domains:

Emotional Development	Children will learn to manage their emotions and regulate their behaviour.
Social Development	Children will experience positive relationships with their peers and early years staff.
Language, Literacy and Communication	Children will have the necessary emergent language and literacy skills.
Physical Development	Children will have healthy physical development.

Tús Maith integrates the internationally recognised High/Scope curriculum with the REDI (Research based, Developmentally Informed) programme in order to maximize the developmental outcomes for children in the Barnardos' Early Years settings. High/Scope is an evidence-based curriculum, demonstrating sustained outcomes for children across a range of domains, including improved school-readiness and achievement of developmental and learning potential. The REDI programme has been shown to enhance the High/Scope curriculum to achieve higher level outcomes in additional domains, including social and emotional competence, alongside language and literacy.

The Evaluation

The evaluation of Tús Maith was undertaken by the Centre for Social and Educational Research (CSER), in collaboration with the UCD Geary Institute from 2011 to 2013. The ultimate aim of the evaluation was to assess the effectiveness of the Tús Maith programme in terms of delivery and sustainability and its impact on young children. The approach was mixed methods and quasi-experimental, incorporating a number of elements.

The **qualitative** component included semi-structured interviews with Tús Maith staff, their project managers, the Tús Maith coach, regional and national managers, and parents. In addition, pre-and-post-programme **quantitative** data was collected from the children's parents and project staff implementing Tús Maith. Changes were assessed in the four outcome areas of emotional well-being; social competence; language and literacy; and physical development. In total, 108 children from eight Tús Maith pre-school settings took part in the study. In addition, a comparison group of 179 children from nine alternative pre-school settings also participated. It was found that Tús Maith cohort had a higher percentage of Traveller children, while the comparator cohort had no Traveller children. In light of this, an additional sample of

Traveller children was added to the comparator cohort during the study. The comparator group received an undifferentiated early years curriculum, not informed by a particular approach.

Research Questions

The study was informed by three overarching research questions:

1. Does child participation in the Tús Maith programme result in significantly better: language expression and comprehension; communication with peers and adults; fine motor skills; emotional awareness; and/or social competence?
2. Does preschool centre participation in the Tús Maith programme result in significantly better early childhood education and care practice and curriculum quality after one year of programme implementation (post-assessment) and at the two-year follow-up, as compared to baseline measures for the Tús Maith preschools and comparison group preschools?
3. Was the implementation faithful to the programme design/ manual in the first and second year of programme implementation?

Measures

A range of standardised measures were used to assess achievement and outcomes across the domains identified, combined in different ways. Key measures and subscales included:

British Ability Scales (BAS)	Designed to provide a meaningful profile of specific cognitive abilities based on free-standing subtest scores. Subtests scored for this study included verbal comprehension, naming vocabulary, early numbers concepts subscale, picture similarities and block-building.
Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaires (SDQs)	Behavioural screening questionnaire designed to provide a profile of problems on a range of subscales, along with a total difficulties score. This study includes scores across all subscales, including peer problems, emotional problems, conduct problems, pro-social behaviour and total difficulties scores.
Adaptive Social Behavior Inventory (ASBI)	Standardised inventory for preschool social development with the intention of identifying children’s social skills in terms of social competence. Express, disrupt and comply subscales are incorporated into this study.
Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale (ECERS)	Instrument been used extensively as a means of measuring quality of provision for 3-5 year olds in early childhood settings. ECERS-R and ECERS-E included in this evaluation.
Arnett Caregiver Interaction Scale (CIS)	Consists of 26 items forming four sub-scales, each of which measures a different aspect of caregiver-child interaction. Used to inform understanding of outcomes and also as a measure of setting practice.

Findings

Child Outcomes

Tús Maith children demonstrated significant improvements over time across a range of domains. In cognitive development, improvements were found in verbal comprehension, naming vocabulary, block-building, picture similarity and early number concepts. In measuring social behaviour, it was found that expression, compliance and prosocial behaviour improved. Improvements were also demonstrated in social and emotional competence, including reduced conduct and peer problems.

These findings were evidenced by significant effects over time across a range of measures. Significant effects were reported on all five BAS subscales, including verbal comprehension, naming vocabulary, block building, picture similarities and early number concepts. Significant improvements over time were also reported across the four positive social subscales, (ASBI and SDQ prosocial). Similarly, significant positive effects were found on the SDQ subscales including conduct problems, emotional symptoms, peer problems, prosocial behaviour and total difficulties scores.

More significant improvements were demonstrated over time (particularly on social domains) for children in centres characterised by low levels of family difficulty as compared to those in Centres with high levels of family distress, suggesting that family difficulties influence children's development. It was found that Traveller children in the Tús Maith Centres benefitted more from the programme than their non-Traveller counterparts, particularly regarding conduct problems.

Centre Outcomes

At a practice level, it was found that the Tús Maith programme being implemented consistently across centres and with fidelity. In addition, Tús Maith centres improved over time across all the quality environment and quality curriculum sub-scales. Tús Maith centres also improved over time across nearly all the sub-scales of the Caregivers Interaction Scale. Tús Maith practitioners were well-tuned in to the needs of individual children and centres and were comfortable in implementing solution-focused strategies to reduce challenges and ensure optimal programme implementation. An identified challenge with the implementation of a sound game saw the staff adapt the game to suit the children.

Comparison Group Outcomes

The comparison group also demonstrated improvements over time. While the majority of differences between Tús Maith children and comparison group children were not statistically different, a small number of differences were evidenced. A positive programme effect was found on the cognitive fine motor and spatial relations measure (BAS Block Building). Tús Maith children had significantly better phonological awareness (alliteration in words) than the comparison group at follow-up. Subgroup analysis demonstrated additional positive effects for the Tús Maith programme. For instance, the vocabulary of girls attending Tús Maith settings was better than the vocabulary of girls attending comparison settings. In addition, Traveller children in Tús Maith settings outperformed Traveller children in the comparison settings regarding comprehension skills. Sub-group analysis indicated that there was a positive effect

of the programme on key social and behavioural skills (expressiveness, prosocial, compliance) of children from two parent families (expressiveness) and Travellers (compliance and prosocial), such that children with these attributes in Tús Maith settings had better outcomes than children with similar attributes in the comparison settings. In addition, children attending higher quality Tús Maith settings experienced more positive social and behavioural outcomes than children attending higher quality comparison settings. This provides support for the Tús Maith programme as a superior quality programme for changing social and behavioural development, if operated in high quality settings.

Conclusion & Recommendations

Tús Maith is a one-year, centre-based early-years care and education programme operating in eight early years centres, with a particular focus on children aged three to five years from disadvantaged groups and those living in challenging family circumstances. This study sought to evaluate the effectiveness of the programme in contributing to improved outcomes for children. The study evidenced that children who participated in the Tús Maith programme achieved positive outcomes across a range of key domains, such as social, language and cognitive development. In addition, implementation was faithful to programme design and resulted in improvements in environment and curriculum quality.