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STATE OF THE MOMENT REPORT

A Review of the ParentChild+
and Stretch Graduate Programme Evaluations

Nikki Ryan
Early Learning Initiative
2025



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FOREWORD BY PROFESSOR GINA QUIN, PRESIDENT OF NATIONAL COLLEGE OF IRELAND



When National College of Ireland moved to our campus in the IFSC, in the centre of the North-East Inner City, nearly twenty-five years ago, we looked for a meaningful way of serving the community around us. With educational attainment at the centre of our thinking, the College founded the Early Learning Initiative (ELI), to specifically support children and families in the inner city. ELI continues to work to fulfil this intention, directly ‘changing lives through education’ in Dublin’s North-East Inner City and contributing to best practice and research nationally and internationally in the area of early education interventions.

Home Visiting, a prevention and early intervention service for children, parents, families and the wider community around them, creates a safe, stable and caring, learning environment. With programmes across the age groups for numeracy, literacy, creative expression and specific parental supports, ELI actively improves the educational aspirations and outcomes of children and young people living in disadvantage and the families and communities around them.

This report reviews two of ELI’s Home Visiting programmes, ParentChild+ and Stretch Graduate, and captures the positive impact they have each had on families over time. The paper seeks to highlight the long-term benefits of Home Visiting in giving disadvantaged children the support needed to achieve education, development, and social skills. Put simply the programmes give children and their families the opportunity for an equal start when compared with their peers from less disadvantaged households.

Examining the role of Home Visitors reveals not just how critical they are as family supports, but also as Academic and Community Action Researchers. Our Home Visitors develop a close understanding of the needs and circumstances of the family and their community and provide strong foundations on which to build policy and advocacy. Further, our close observation of changing needs allows ELI to continually respond and evolve best practice.

The work of ELI is a clear example of NCI’s mission ‘to change lives through education’ and aligns with our strategic objective to be recognised as an excellent model of community engagement and a national leader in early education interventions and student access. NCI supports ELI in its ambition to make home visiting accessible to families across Ireland and the programmes continue to grow in influence and impact nationally.

I commend Nikki Ryan on her completion of this report and join her in acknowledging the work of so many from ELI, not least our ‘pink ladies’, ELI’s Home Visitors, who are such an inspiration in our community.

Professor Gina Quin

President National College of Ireland

INTRODUCTION

This descriptive piece of work brings to life the impact of two programmes delivered by the Early Learning Initiative (ELI). ParentChild+ (PC+) and Stretch Graduate (SG) are two of the many programmes that ELI runs to support parents and children in disadvantaged areas of Dublin's inner city. PC+ focuses on education and parenting techniques for children 18 months to three years old and Stretch Graduate gives tailored support to children and families from three and a half years old to school age and beyond.

It should be noted that this work draws on and connects previous reports, evaluations and research carried out to create a bigger picture reflection of the impact ELI is having and has had on the lives of the children and families that have participated in either or both programmes.

Previous research includes:

- Parent Child Home Programme Internal Follow-on Evaluation 2014/2017 (ELI, 2018)
- External Follow-up Evaluation Study of the ParentChild+ Programme 2022/2023 (O'Neill, 2023)
- Parents' Voices Through the Pandemic – How a Community Action Research Project Shaped a Parent-Child Engagement Programme. (Darmody & Mihalka, 2021)

This report will cover previous research on the two programmes in chronological order. Starting with an overview of ParentChild+ to bring together a description of the programme, select scholarly literature on similar programmes and ELI's most recent proprietary data on the impact of the programme. Next it will look at how the success of the programme is measured and the impact it is having on families and children. We will then review the findings of the 2014-2017 Evaluation, followed by the 2022-2023 Evaluation. Lastly, it will cover one of one of ELI's newer programmes, Stretch Graduate, detailing its roots and the important role it now plays in the ELI offerings.



ParentChild+ Graduation June 2024

PARENTECHILD+ PROGRAMME 2007-2024

The ParentChild+ Programme is an evidence-based, innovative, early childhood, home-visiting, literacy and parenting programme that strengthens families and prepares children to succeed academically. Originally developed in the United States, the programme forms a key part of the Early Learning Initiative's family support programmes. It has been operating in the Dublin Docklands since 2007 and has since expanded to other parts of Dublin, Galway, Limerick, Louth, Waterford, Wexford and Offaly with desire for further nationwide expansion.

The programme is introduced to parents experiencing disadvantage when their children are generally aged between 16 and 18 months old. Parents find out about it through word of mouth, local family services, and through interactions with home visitors via other programmes. The programme focuses on the centrality of parents as agents of change for successful learning and development outcomes of their children during their early childhood and throughout their school years. ParentChild+ consists of bi-weekly home visits from a home visitor who brings a book and a toy into the family home and models how to explore using them in many different ways with the caregiver(s) and child. The section below is borrowed from the 2022-23 Follow-up Evaluation Study of the ParentChild+ Programme (O'Neil, 2023): The benefits of home visiting programmes have been extensively researched and documented (Olds et al., 2002; Van Doesum et al., 2008; Chen & Chan, 2016). A randomised control trial with Irish participants indicated that those in a disadvantaged community in receipt of a home visiting intervention had a positive impact on the home learning environment (Orri, Côté, Tremblay & Doyle, 2019). Indeed, ELI has also long documented the benefits of their existing home visiting programmes for disadvantaged communities (ELI, 2022).

There is an abundance of international literature suggesting that conditions in early childhood are foundational to the development of the skills needed for academic achievement and to be successful in life (Aboud & Yousafza, 2015; Britto et al, 2017; OECD, 2020). Previous research highlights the importance of such early childhood intervention programmes in bridging the gap between children at risk and school readiness (Han & Neuharth-Pritchett, 2019). Moreover, children engaging in high quality early education and care programmes, supporting parents and families, have been found to improve child development outcomes and alter trajectories (Peterson, Loeb & Chamberlain, 2018).

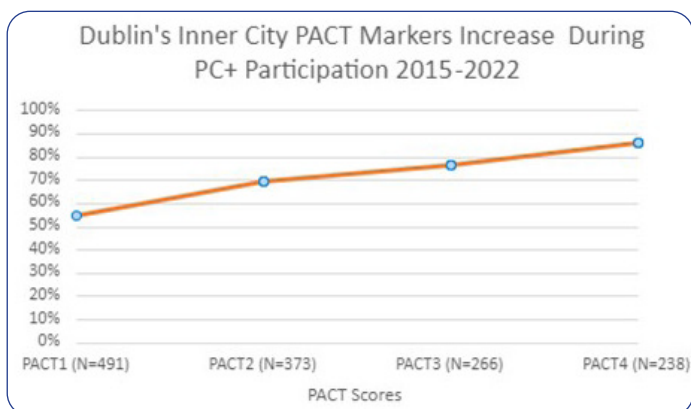
Specific to the ParentChild+ Programme, research in the U.S. continues to support the long-term benefits of the programme for the children and families who engage with it. Evidence has indicated that participation in the ParentChild+ programme results in:

- Reduced need for special educational supports (Lazar & Darlington, 1982)
- Improved reading and numeracy skills, and higher rates of school completion (Levenstein, Levenstein & Oliver, 2002)
- Long-term impact on positive children's outcomes
- Evidence of a relationship between children's early home learning environment experiences and later life success as measured by school completion rates, employment levels, and income levels (Centre on the Developing Child, 2023; European Commission, 2011; Sama-Miller et al., 2019)

HOW IS THE SUCCESS OF PARENTHILD+ MEASURED AT ELI?

The ParentChild+ programme has a specific set of evaluation and assessment tools completed four times over the course of the programme; at the outset, the conclusion and at the 44th and 68th home visit. Program Assessments include Child Behaviour Trait (CBT) and Parent and Child Together (PACT) markers that monitor the developmental trajectory of the children and focus on the parent-child relationship, highlighting areas of learning and interaction that need to be addressed. Each assessment contains a number of different assessment items, which the home visitor is asked to rate based on their observations of both the child and parent in their home environment. CBT was introduced in 2011, and PACT was introduced in 2015. Looking back over the years that PC+ has been delivered to families in Dublin's Inner City, a consistent positive pattern, as highlighted in the graphs below, emerges in both measures. 80% of children have reached their CBT milestones by the end of the programme, an increase of 45%, and almost 90% of parents and children reached the PACT milestones, an increase of 31%.

In addition to the CBT and PACT assessments, parents are also asked to complete a pre and post evaluation form and home visitors record their reflections after each visit.



OUR MOST RECENT FINDINGS 2023-2024

In 2023-24, 167 Families participated in ParentChild+ in Dublin's Inner City and Dublin 8 engaging in 4,754 in-home visits, 125 video call visits, 8 phone call visits and 3 outdoor visits. The number of completed visits are lower than pre-pandemic years as there are a larger number of higher needs families on the programme.

Our most recent data from 2023-2024 follows a similar pattern to the collated data above reflecting results of the programme since the CBT and PACT measures were introduced. The percentage of children reaching their developmental milestones in Dublin's Inner City gradually increased throughout the programme, from 30% at the outset to 52%, 67% and, finally, 79% on completion of the programme. This 49% increase is lower than that of the 2022-23 cohort (60%) but, this is slightly higher than the 2023-24 increase across all ParentChild+ sites nationally (45%). Children engaging in the programme demonstrated developmental increases across the three CBT subscales (cognition, behaviour and language) at each stage of the programme.

Overall, there was a positive increase in the percentage of parents having high-quality interactions with their children from 61% at PACT 1 to 90% at PACT 4. The percentage of parents having interactions of good quality with their children showed improvement in all four areas of assessment (parents' responsiveness to their child, parent's affection toward their child, parent's communication with their child and parent's consistency with their child).

The international literature on the success and efficacy of home visiting programmes delivers a clear message of positive near, and longer-term outcomes for both the child and the parent and the quality of their relationship. For ELI the success of PC+ is undisputed as documented in the most recent annual reports (2021-22, 2022-23 and 2023-24). Highlights of these reports are included below to offer data-backed insights into the benefits of the programme.

- In 2021-22 home visitor reflections showed that parents and children were doing well on the majority of their visits 60% and 61% respectively. Lower numbers reflect the ongoing impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.
- In 2022-23 parents were doing well on the majority (61%) of the visits but happily, children were doing well on 82% of the visits, an increase of 21% from the previous year.
- In 2023-24 Satisfaction rates remained high. 97% of parents reported the found the programme useful and 99% or parents reported feeling confident using the strategies learned for reading and playing with their child
- In all three years:
 - All parents found the programme, books and toys useful, felt supported by their home visitor and would recommend it to a friend.
 - Most parents reported the programme benefitting their child in areas such as speech and language, literacy and social skills.
 - Most parents noted they learned new approaches and ideas in which they could improve their interactions with their child.
 - Most parents felt supported by their home visitor
 - All parents would recommend the programme to another parent

Evidently, the programme is very well received and appreciated by participating families and it is continuing to make a tangible, positive impact on the lives of the parents and children. What this ultimately means is that ELI is closing the educational, aspirational, confidence and competence gap frequently experienced by disadvantaged or vulnerable families. It is giving children and parents an equitable boost to their educational capital and a stronger foothold to understand, seek out and take advantage of future life opportunities to reach their full potential.

Quotes from Parents about ParentChild+:

"[Our home visitor] was a great help to both us and [my child] has come on amazing without even starting her [speech] therapy. Amazing support during pandemic dealing with [my child] being anxious and shy and refusing to talk. It really helped us both being more confident on video calls as [my child] was extremely shy due to lockdown and [our home visitor] really gave amazing advice and guided us through a very difficult time. She had great patience and understanding to help us both."



"I learned new ways of communicating with my child when she is difficult to speak to. I have learned how to compromise more with my child. We got great support. Our home visitor went above and beyond in every way."



INTERNAL PARENT CHILD HOME PROGRAMME FOLLOW-ON EVALUATIONS 2014-2017

The 2014-2017 evaluation, conducted by ELI's research team and PC+ Home Visitors, examined how the PC+ programme (then known as PCHP) on its 10th birthday was doing against its long-term targets of:

- Increasing parental awareness and engagement in children's education
- Improving educational outcomes for children in the long-term

Over 90% (n=45) of the parents surveyed believed that PCHP both played a role in preparing their child for school and that PCHP was beneficial for their child and beneficial for them as parents. The majority of parents reported that PCHP had a positive impact on their child's general behaviour and extremely influenced their attitudes to learning positively.

Qualitative feedback on the main positives of the programme included the following comments from parents:

"I learned to communicate with and support my child more effectively."



PCHP "taught me to listen to my child more and allow her to grow and develop into a confident and intelligent young girl."



Another suggested that PCHP was;

"planting the seeds for children's learning journeys."



A number of parents reflected on the fact that the home visitor showed the parent how to spend quality time interacting and being involved with their child through reading and play. When asked **what the most worthwhile part of the programme was, many parents indicated the books and toys they received through the visits, together with the way in which the home visitor modelled the use of these materials to the parent.** Two parents commented that the most worthwhile part of the programme was the parent's gaining of a greater understanding of the importance of early learning. Others reflected on the confidence and skills they built as parents through their involvement in the PCHP. One parent commented that they felt the most worthwhile part was,

"Seeing my child happy and content in the learning process".



EXTERNAL PARENTECHILD+ LONG TERM EVALUATION 2022-2023

The ParentChild+ Follow-Up Evaluation in 2022-23 aimed to contact previous graduates of the programme and:

1. Explore their current Home Learning Environment experiences, academic engagement in school and development across cognitive, behavioural, and socioemotional domains.
2. To map the children's educational journey and find out what, if any, other supports children may need as they progress through the education system.

Completed in 2023, the external study replicated the findings from the previous internal evaluations and indicated the promising positive impact of the ParentChild+ programme on the 13 children and parents, all mothers, who participated. Some highlights include:

- Mothers, children, and teachers highlighted that children were doing well in school academically.
- **Children's STen scores received for some participants indicated a position in the average range for English. This is in line with previous research exploring early, home visiting programmes (Doyle & UCD Geary Institute PFL Evaluation Team, 2016).**
- **The majority of children exhibited positive socio-emotional development and were participating in extracurricular activities.**
- The two teacher interviews highlighted the **children's willingness to engage in the classroom and their positive engagement with their peers.**
- Teacher interviews suggest a **high level of socioemotional development with the children concerned.**

Anecdotally, local headteachers have been known to remark that children who have gone through the PC+ programme stand out from their peers with their positive attitude to learning and well developed social emotional skills.

- **Mothers felt well equipped to support their children with their learning and developmental outcomes**, and partly attributed this to the skills developed in the PC+ programme
- Parents discussed **the positive impact the PC+ Programme had on them, both at the time of participation in the programme, and the long-term benefits.**
- Parents highlighted the **importance of the social element to the programme, how it reduced feelings of isolation and provided a sense of belonging to the community**, this was highlighted by parents originally from Ireland and those who moved here from abroad.
- Additionally, parents with English as a second language mentioned the **added benefit of improving confidence and ability in communication for both themselves and their child.**



ParentChild+ Graduation January



ParentChild+ Christmas Activity set 2023

The following statements and quotes draw on the findings from the 2022/23 evaluation to paint a picture of the impact of the home visits on the participating families. Direct quotes from parents during interviews and focus groups bring to life the value of the programme to their families.

Overall, the vast majority of mothers (no fathers participated) stated that they:

- **Felt that their child would go on to complete further or higher education**
- **Have fun with their children and feel that their children share their thoughts and feelings with them.**
- **Felt the ParentChild+ programme definitely helped them to have a warm and affectionate relationship with their child and helped them with their parenting skills.**

When asked to describe other ways in which the ParentChild+ programme helped them as a parent. Parents stated the following:

- Helped them to have “a little more patience and open mind about parenting” and that it was “great to have someone else coming and seeing... [the child’s]... progress”.
- The “warm and affectionate” relationships fostered by the Home Visitors and that they were “just so brilliant” and they “really enriched our lives”.
- They continued to employ the skills they learned with their “other children”.

A number of themes were also identified in the findings including: Confidence, Love of Learning, and Support.

CONFIDENCE

“I learned to observe more before helping with tasks, to let my child lead the way,... to only assist and not do the puzzle or put the lid on the toothpaste.”



Parents described how the programme provided them with confidence to effectively interact with their child and to understand that learning can happen through play, which has had a long term impact.

The parents mentioned how they learned new skills and developed an understanding that scaffolding their child’s activities can be important for development. Additionally, how effective small changes can be in their child’s development.

Having the support of the Home Visitors was another theme present in the data, particularly having the support of another person during a time that can be isolating for new mothers.



ParentChild+ Graduation June 2024

LOVE OF LEARNING

Parents highlighted that the programme instilled a love of learning which has continued to have a positive impact as the children have progressed through primary education and, for some already, into secondary education. There was an understanding that this could be attributed to the element of the programme which makes learning fun.

Mothers also describe how the programme made learning more normal for their child and framed it as a normal, fun activity you would do regularly.

“I feel that it has supported my child’s learning because I believe that he gained a love of learning and it was fun... I was like ‘that’s what learning is, it’s through play’... So I think having that kind of message instilled in him, it really helped him to progress in his learning...”



COMMUNICATION

Although not directly attributed to the ParentChild+ programme, this theme was strongly present across the parent interviews. Particularly, the willingness of both child and parent to engage in open conversation about important or sensitive topics. There is also the presence of good self-awareness from the children

Additionally, the ParentChild+ programme was deemed particularly important for a parent whose first language was not English, for both them and their child:

Parents highlighted that their children were sociable both inside the classroom and outside, and the children were also engaged in classroom activities and in extra-curricular activities in school and the local community.

Interviewer: And if he was beginning to start to feel anxious would he come to you?...Parent: Oh definitely, oh yeah... he's been more confident... he'll tell me now when he's anxious and he's able to tell me what's making him anxious."



ParentChild+ St. Patrick Activity 2024

FUTURE EDUCATION PLANNING

The children provided qualitative insights into their plans for the future. The most prominent theme was that they wanted to continue with education. This theme can be broken down further into sub-themes of Concrete Ideas and General Continuation.

A number of children expressed concrete ideas and plans for their future education, including the desire to follow a particular career path or study a particular topic.

Children also described wanting to continue on with education but without having a particular goal in mind. This continuation included completing secondary school, going to college, or continuing with education generally due to its importance:



CONCLUSION

To conclude, when viewed together, the data from this most recent evaluation and the comparative data from the 2014-2017 research provides a promising exploration of the long-term outcomes of the ParentChild+ programme across educational, cognitive and socio-emotional domains. The results suggest that the programme can:

- Instil an extended love of learning in children
- Instil an understanding of the importance and scope of learning in the parents
- Impact graduates academic performance positively
- Foster a willingness for children to engage in the classroom both academically and socially
- Support children in performing averagely or above averagely in their standardised tests
- Foster an open parent-child relationship with clear avenues of communication for the child and the schools, as found in the parent questionnaires, focus groups, and teacher interviews



STRETCH GRADUATE HOME VISITING PROGRAMME 2020-24

One of the newer ELI initiatives, Stretch Graduate (SG) was born during the COVID-19 pandemic to extend support for ELI families that had finished the PC+ programme. Directly after completing this intense, two-year home visiting programme, there was usually no direct follow-on support available from ELI for families with children in the four to six years age-bracket. As families transitioned into pre-school and infant classes and they were being supported by early years practitioners and primary school teachers, no additional support was required apart from the ELI Community Services programmes e.g. Zoom Ahead with Books, Doodle Den, Early Numeracy Programmes etc that were running in the local ECEC services and schools.

In March 2020, when schools and services closed down, ELI pivoted their Community Services programming to virtual and phone delivery. Seeing the impact of the COVID-19 lockdown on the PC+ families Home Visitors were visiting virtually, ELI embarked on a community action research project to see how previous graduates of PC+ and their families were doing during this challenging time. Through texts, phone calls and letters where necessary, ELI checked in to see how these parents and their families were doing and determined what support they would need going forward. The study had three aims:

- Explore parents' perspectives of their family's well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Understand parents' experiences of home-schooling.
- Help ELI plan for programmes that would support families throughout the pandemic.

What ELI discovered was that although many families were coping well throughout this time, those in the most vulnerable positions were experiencing significant challenges. For ELI, the project also highlighted a gap in parent support programming and identified a need to support the parents as home educators. The virtual Stretch Graduate Programme was born. Initially focusing on supporting families with children aged between four and six years old that had graduated PC+, Parenting365 or who had been referred from schools and services from the Dublin inner city and aiming to improve children's holistic development by empowering their parents with confidence, skills and knowledge that can support their children's education and wellbeing.

The programme has now evolved to offer two distinct levels of support with a staggered step-down approach offering bespoke signposting to other programmes and services both within ELI and externally. The most vulnerable families receive home visits, and families with lower support needs receive regular check in phone calls from a home visitor. All families in the programme are also invited to a series of themed educational events throughout the year. Themes in 2023-24 included recycling, STEM, and dental hygiene. The programme aims to continue enhancing parental competence and confidence regarding their children's holistic development, enhance positive parenting practices and parental and family wellbeing while increasing children's readiness to transition to pre-school/primary school.

Key Programme Objectives:

- Increase parent and family educational capital, empowering them in becoming competent and confident in supporting their family's holistic wellbeing & development via a differentiated, needs-based approach
- Protect the investment made through earlier home visiting and parent support engagement. Families continue to thrive and succeed in education and life, receiving the support they need to meet ongoing challenges and unexpected life events e.g. mental health crisis, eviction etc
- Partner with parents to provide non-judgemental and non-didactic support during crucial periods of life transitions for families

The educational resources provided are diverse, inclusive and carefully sourced according to Aistear (The National Curriculum Framework in Ireland for early education). Throughout the initial Home Visiting stage, and later as they progress on to check-in phone calls, the Stretch Graduate Programme serves as a lasting connection between the ELI and the programme families. Although Stretch Graduate does share some commonalities with PC+ (educational resources are demonstrated to families by a home visitor) it is an extended and expanded level of support. Focus is on the wellbeing of both children and parents.



Stretch Graduate - Love Your Earth Event - Recycling

HOW DOES ELI MEASURE SUCCESS OF THE STRETCH GRADUATE PROGRAMME?

The impact and benefits of the PC+ programme have been well documented by ELI through their annual reports and the two major evaluation studies completed in 2017 and 2023. Stretch Graduate is still in its infancy and does not yet have the same built-in monitoring and deep quantitative data gathering opportunities that the PC+ programme has. It is still evolving, semi structured and tailored to meet the needs of individual families rather than the more formulaic delivery of the PC+ programme, which makes it more challenging to assess. However, the weekly visits and follow up check in calls provide rich qualitative data about how the families are doing, what their needs are and how ELI is impacting them. Like PC+ parents are asked to complete a pre and post evaluation and have visitors record their reflections after each visit and call.

From 2022-24, 162 families engaged in the Stretch Graduate Programme. 72 had home visits and 94 received regular check in calls. 603 Home visits were delivered and a further 317 phone calls (with an average duration of 20 mins) and 20 video calls were made.

Families in the Stretch Graduate programme have shared positive feedback on the programme since it began. In 2022-23:

- **98% of parents found the resources brought by the home visitor useful.**
- **All respondents reported that they felt supported by their Home Visitor and would recommend the programme to a friend.**

In addition, in 2023-24, 93% of parents agreed that the programme gave them new ideas and approaches to how they can improve interactions with their child.

Data from the last two years shows parents reporting the **programme benefiting their child in areas such as speech, language, literacy and social skills.**

Stretch Graduate offers a more fluid support system than ParentChild+. Families referred to the programme are categorised by level of need (1 is low, 4 is high). As needs decrease, families who formerly received home visits will transition (according to Hardiker Model Scale 1991) to check-in calls but may return to home visits if they need to. The first year of operation (2021-22) saw almost a quarter of families on the programme with the highest level of need. Two years later this has dropped to below 10% of families as many have transitioned to check-in calls as their circumstances improved. What is evident however, is although the majority of current families are doing well (need level 1-2), the proportion of families with children with additional needs has increased by close to 50% since the programme's inception in 2021.

Quotes from Parents:

Call list families:

'The calls are good and knowing you can call and ask advice at any time or just to chat, is such a great support especially when you have a special needs child.'



'I enjoy the calls a lot, It's nice speaking to someone who can relate to your situation and understand how hard it is to be a parent in these challenging times.'



Home visiting family:

'The emotions puzzle the HV brought was so good as we have been working on my son's emotions, as he is trying to understand his big feelings, I was so happy to see a whole range of emotions that you would not normally see on a child's puzzle.'



'On the 1st visit back, I catch up with the mother and talked about how the summer went and she was glad we are back visiting as she had a stressful Summer and she doesn't have any family or friends around her.'



Stretch Graduate event attendee:

'I can't believe how engaged my child has been, he has literally spent 40 minutes sitting and concentrating (which he does struggle with usually) with that shaving foam and food colouring activity. This is something I can do at home easily with him.'



'It really means a lot to be invited back to these events even though our family finished up in the Summer of 23, you feel remembered.'



CASE STUDIES - FURTHER EVIDENCE OF THE POSITIVE IMPACT OF PARENTHILD+ AND STRETCH GRADUATE

Given the historically disparate methods of data collection for PC+ and Stretch Graduate and the differing structures of the two programmes, it is perhaps most valuable to look at the impacts of the programmes through individual case studies. Each of the anonymised case studies below paints a picture through real-life examples of how children and families have gained so much from the services and support they received from ELI. What is also evident from these examples is the close ties ELI has with the local Docklands and Dublin 8 communities and how important the work they do is to many families who live in the inner city. Whilst it can be challenging to quantify this impact with hard numbers, the case studies demonstrate a hugely beneficial impact on these families.



Stretch Graduate - Dublin Port Workshop March 2024

ANONYMISED CASE STUDIES

Kieron: PC+ & Stretch Graduate Calls

Kieron came to ELI through PC+. He was a very shy child, lacking in confidence and social skills. His parents were struggling to bring him out of his shell and support his education at home. Kieron embarked on the ParentChild+ programme, and through bi-weekly visits his parents watched their home visitor modelling how to connect and play with their son. Slowly but surely they gained the confidence and skills to support Kieron's development and eventual transition to school. Kieron is now almost eight years old, and whilst he didn't go on to participate in Stretch Graduate visits, ELI continued to provide Stretch Graduate check-in calls to one of his primary caregivers, his grandmother Niamh. Kieron also participated in the Stem Play and Learn summer programme, Zoom Ahead with Books and other one off events such as the Christmas Celebration. At the last check in call, Niamh talked about how well Kieron has come on since he started with PC+ and how he is thriving at school. She expressed deep gratitude to their home visitor and wished every child in Ireland could have the same opportunity Kieron had. She credits the support ELI gave their family for the strong progress Kieron is making in junior school. She recommends the programme to all other families she knows with young children. Kieron has just won an award at school for Irish speaking. An achievement that his family could not be prouder of.

Emma & Kate: Giving Back to the Community

ELI fosters a culture of support and encouragement both internally and with the families they work with. Emma's daughter Kate started with ParentChild+ when she was 18 months old. At the outset of the programme she was incredibly shy and reluctant to communicate. Kate became easily overwhelmed and her parents didn't have the skills to nurture her confidence and help her develop her self esteem. Similarly to Kieron, Kate and her parents started putting into practice what they learned and observed the home visitor doing each week. After graduating from PC+, Kate was thriving. Her communication skills were progressing and she was even enthusiastic about participating in the STEM Play and Learn summer programme. The experience of participating in PC+ took Kate and her family on a journey from extreme shyness and daily overwhelm to confidence and comfort in expressing herself verbally. In addition to Kate finding her feet, growing in confidence, and feeling ready for school, her mum Emma felt she had learnt so much from the PC+ home visits that she applied for a job as a home visitor and continues to support ELI families in that role today.

Mary: PC+ & Stretch Graduate

When Mary's family started the PC+ programme in 2021 they were contending with several challenges. Mary had been diagnosed as autistic, was deeply shy and completely non-verbal. She was finding it very hard to build relationships outside of her immediate family. At the first few home visits the home visitor found her hiding behind her grandmother's legs, not wanting to play with the books and toys she had brought with her. After completing the PC+ programme, Kate and her family continued with the Stretch Graduate programme during 2022-23. Following this, she took part in the Stem Play and Learn summer programme. Over the course of two years, Mary made incredible progress. By the time she started the Stem Play and Learn programme her solid self-confidence skills were evident. She had transformed into a social butterfly, talking to everyone, making connections and kissing and hugging the ELI staff as she left, already asking for an invitation to the next event. ELI also worked with Mary's parents and her school to put in place extra educational support. Her social and emotional abilities, self confidence and love of learning demonstrate the value of the work and the power of home visiting. Home visits for 30 minutes, twice a week for a year was the catalyst to change Mary's way of thinking about the world and given her opportunities and ambitions that may have otherwise passed her by.



*Stretch Graduate
- Love your Earth Event
- Cardboard building station*

Stretch Graduate: Holistic Support on the Journey to Starting School

In 2022 a displaced and vulnerable Ukrainian family was connected to ELI through their GP and Public Nurse at Summer Hill Primary Care Center. Mum, dad and their four-and-a-half year old son Artem were living in temporary accommodation. They were in a high-risk situation and in addition to their basic needs not being met, their son was entirely non-verbal. Their Nurse initially recommended ELI's Parenting365 Saturday programme. The Parenting 365 Pilot Programme is for families with young children with disabilities and additional needs in Dublin's Docklands. However, it was felt that due to their son's age and their circumstance that the Stretch Graduate programme would be a better fit for them. An ELI home Visitor met them for weekly visits in the centrally located Ilac Library. She was able to access the sensory room there for him a few times and provided holistic support with housing applications and obtaining food as their accommodation didn't allow cooking. Mum was fighting for a preschool place for Artem and housing for the family but found herself continually turned away as the schools couldn't provide the AIMS support Artem, who was by now five-and-a-half, needed. The ELI Home Visitor encouraged and supported Artem's mum to apply for National School and eventually secured a place for him, all the while continuing the weekly visits. In addition, ELI linked Artem's family to free play therapy in Osanam House. Artem is now a senior infant building on his growing self-confidence, speaking, and interacting socially with his classmates and friends. Artem's mum has now started working full time and obtained HAP support enabling them to move house during the summer of 2023. The impact that ELI had on their lives is demonstrated by Artem's mum taking a day off work to bring Artem to the ELI Christmas event. Her thank you note is transcribed below.



Stretch Graduate - Love your Earth Event



Stretch Graduate - Happy Smiles Event

Dear ELI,

I want to say Thank You!

You are fantastic people. Thank you for all help and support. Nobody can understand how we are broken from inside even when we are smiling. People like you give me hope and power to fight and stay strong! Thank God (and Santa!!) for sending all of you into our lives. I wish you good luck in all your work and projects. Merry Christmas and Happy New Year.

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Alana: PC+ to Home Visitor

Alana's second child took part in the pilot PC+ programme in 2007/8. She moved here from Croatia in 2005 with her husband and two young daughters. At the time Alana was the primary caregiver to her two girls which meant hours spent at home, isolated without friends or family for support. She saw the PC+ programme advertised at her local creche and signed up immediately. The weekly visits from her home visitor were invaluable for setting up a routine that she felt would have been hard to introduce and establish herself. She could see her child thriving with the 30 minutes of focused attention she received from the home visitor and mum, and Alana found it easier than she thought to replicate this on days the home visitor wasn't coming. Alana also looked forward to the home visits for herself, it was life changing to have another understanding adult to talk with, even briefly.

"Showing me as a young mum that just 30 minutes a day can set a routine and highlighted for me how important and effective the focused attention with your child is"



A few years later in 2011, Alana bumped into her home visitor on the street and they got to chatting. Alana was looking for a job and the home visitor suggested that she apply to work as a home visitor for ELI. Alana was the first PC+ mother to be recruited to work as a home visitor and set a precedent for many other women to follow in her footsteps. Almost all of the women that work at ELI are mothers with families. Almost a third of them have experienced a home visiting programme themselves and have come full circle to now work for ELI as home visitors.

Alana has now been a Home Visitor for over 12 years and has the added insight of having been through the programme as a parent herself. She captures the essence of the importance of the programme by saying;

"PC+ gives children strength for later on in life, so things come out from inside of them. Motivation comes from inside them. Home visiting forms an environment where children can find space to express themselves, whatever kind of child you have. They show you the way, what's next."



REFLECTIONS ON IMPACT AND EMERGING CHALLENGES

The substantial amount of qualitative and quantitative data gathered over the last 18 years reveals a powerful story of the positive impact ELI's two programmes ParentChild+ and Stretch Graduate have had and continue to have on the communities they serve. In addition, as one home visitor pointed out to me, the impact on the number of families that start with a programme then drop out should not be underestimated. What can't be captured by data is the amount of good the home visiting programmes are doing even when families don't finish the programme. It may look like a number of families drop out part way through, usually due to circumstances beyond their control such as relocating, but the positive impact on those that complete even a few months or a year is significant.

While ELI has had an indisputably positive effect on the families it has served in the last 18 years, what is emerging from the most recent data and conversations with staff is that the prevalent needs of families that are participating in PC+ and Stretch Graduate have evolved significantly over the last few years. We are seeing an increase in diverse nationalities, migrants and asylum seekers who have additional language challenges, difficulty securing housing, and finding work and an unfamiliar system to get to grips with. Racism and the threat of violence are often also present in families' daily lives. More importantly, we are seeing a rapidly growing number of children with developmental challenges such as autism spectrum disorders and ADHD. The PC+ programme has somewhat evolved to meet these needs and there is now a separate list of materials for home visitors to use with children who have developmental challenges. However, the programme is designed for children with the ability to meet normative milestones and its success is evaluated accordingly. The decrease in the number of children meeting their CBT milestones over the last couple of years reflects this change in families' circumstances. Home visitors are also finding parents can be in denial, finding it hard to secure a diagnosis, or having to come to terms with a diagnosis while their child is participating in an ELI programme. As non-professionals, home visitors can make referrals to the Health Nurse but can't comment or advise directly. Autism Spectrum Disorder can present itself in so many ways, some subtle and others more obvious, especially to a non-family member. All these factors plus the continued impact that the social isolation imposed on families with babies and young children during COVID-19 can add an extra dimension to the work of home visitors trying to deliver a programme that is not designed to take into account all these factors.

Below is a case study that is both a success story and serves to highlight how different the needs of children participating in PC+ can be.

For the first few weeks that Sarah visited with Issac he barely looked at her or showed any interest in her presence. Most children, even the very shy ones, have some reaction to a new person coming into their home. He wasn't interested in the books or the toys, and had no interest in interacting with Sarah. At a loss for what to do, Sarah asked her fellow home visitors for advice. Do nothing they suggested. Take a blank sheet of paper and a crayon and sit there and do nothing. The following week, Sarah did what they suggested. She took out a blank sheet and a crayon and just sat there quietly. Suddenly Issac reached out and touched Sarah's hand, he wanted to hold her hand. This was the first connection this severely autistic child made and it felt like a huge step forwards. From then on he wanted to hold Sarah's hand at each visit. This progressed in small steps to little activities like turning a light switch on and off again and again. Eventually as their connection grew Issac was open to trying more activities, the most adventurous of which was jumping up and down on the bed with Sarah. PC+ isn't designed with children like Issac in mind and doesn't really cater to their needs but ELI is always listening to the communities they serve and is looking for ways to support them on their varied educational journeys. The Stretch Graduate section earlier in this report also highlights the growing number of families with children with developmental needs. It should also be noted that the number of referrals from the Parenting 365 programme that caters specifically for families who have children with additional needs, or a developmental delay aged 1-6 to Stretch Graduate has grown rapidly in three years from under 10% to just over 50%.

The above demonstrates, in part, why the Parenting 365 programme is critical, and it feels as though there is an opportunity for it to expand or evolve to continue to serve families whose needs are additional to those that PC+ or SG are designed to address. Anecdotally, further challenges around this subject include inviting parents to a parenting 365 group without telling them anything is different about their child especially if they are in denial or haven't sought or been given a diagnosis. (is a common occurrence that parents often are either not able to get an appointment or are turned away from services or told their child doesn't have additional needs when it is clear to them that they do).

Home visitors are required to be flexible, adaptable, open minded and non-judgemental. They don't know what they are going to be met with once they step through the front door of a family's home. To illustrate the breadth of families on the same programme, one home visitor shared with me that she may start the day visiting with a family where a lone parent is experiencing severe low motivation and mental health challenges and experiencing isolation from their support network of friends and family. This could be followed by a very engaged, relatively well-resourced family that has moved here from another European country. Both parents are well educated and can communicate in English, the father is working here, and the mother is looking for work and they are getting to grips with the

various systems and processes needed to live and work here but still desire and value the knowledge, expertise and company of the home visits. Having support in place for the Home Visitors to meet the multiple, complex challenges of their work has been noted as critical. This report also wishes to acknowledge the important role Home Visitors have as researchers. They are the primary data gatherers for both programmes discussed here. Many home visitors live in the local community themselves. The trusted relationships they have built with families have allowed ELI to build and maintain an authentic connection to, and deep understanding of the communities we serve. The qualitative and quantitative data they gather daily enables us to use Community Action Research to continuously monitor and evaluate our programmes throughout the year. Their work as researchers also enables ELI to innovate and respond to emerging needs in an evidence-based way to consistently deliver programmes that focus on what is most impactful, effective and tangible for parents, their children and our communities.

CONCLUSION

ELI has been robustly supporting the educational needs of the communities they serve through the delivery of the PC+ and Stretch Graduate programmes. Both programmes are universally, positively received by caregivers, children and teachers. What this review has revealed is that although the programmes have been a great success over their lifetimes, the needs of the communities served are now changing and evolving and it may be worth looking more deeply into the trends noted in the discussion above to help inform future programme development, staff training and success criteria. The number of families ELI can impact decreases as the needs of families increase as individual cases require additional time and support.

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