



Research **brief**

Evaluation of Action for Children short break services on outcomes for children

Introduction

Action for Children commissioned the Centre for Child and Family Research (CCFR) at Loughborough University to explore the impact that their short break services have on disabled children and their families.

Research suggests that, as a group, both disabled children and their families can be among the most vulnerable in our society.¹ A break from caring is one of the most frequently requested services from families caring for disabled children² and many studies point to the positive outcomes achieved through the provision of short break care.³ From April 2011 local authorities in England came under a statutory duty to provide a range of short break services for disabled children and their families.⁴ This duty, however, has been implemented at a time of substantial concerns about public spending in England and many service providers are in the process of making efficiency savings.



Study objectives

This study examines the impact that Action for Children short break services have on disabled children and their families, how good Action for Children are at communicating with different agencies to inform the setting of outcomes within their short break services, and how this improves outcomes for the children and their families.

Methodology

In total, eight different Action for Children short break services participated in the study: three residential short breaks, two family-based short break services, two community-based short break services and one service providing activity holidays. The study was divided into two phases. Data recorded by Action for Children on the outcomes and targets set for the children and young people and the progress against these outcomes within a six-month time period were gathered for a sample of children from each of the participating services. Interviews and surveys were also completed by families accessing Action for Children short breaks, professionals from partner agencies and Action for Children staff members

The families accessing Action for Children short breaks

The study identified that the children accessing Action for Children short break services have a wide range of disabilities and needs, which may impact on their quality of life and overall wellbeing in different ways. The children may progress at various speeds, and some children may require more time and investment from staff before they are fully able to experience the benefits of some of the services. Furthermore, children and families may require different types of support to meet their different needs.

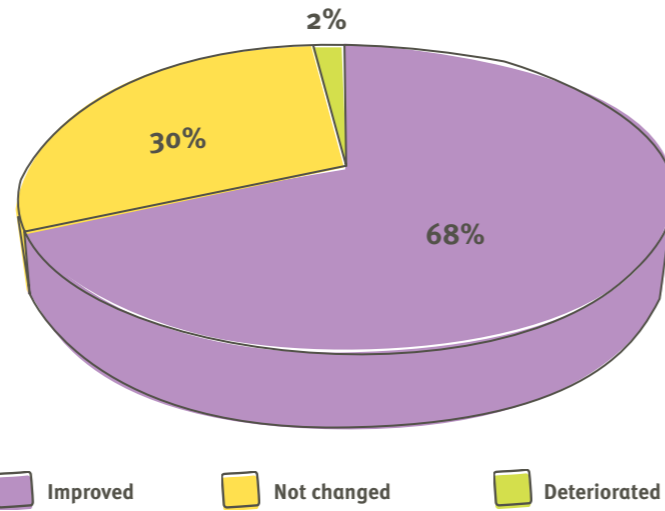
Overall, the analysis of all the data collected in the study identified that Action for Children is good at meeting the needs of a diverse group of children. As well as offering different types of short break, the identification of a set of outcomes indicators for each child means that the support offered can be individually tailored to meet the needs of circumstances of the children and families accessing their service. Twelve families identified in the surveys that specific pieces of work on an identified area, such as a sleep programme, had been carried out with their child at the short break. Of these, the majority (11) considered the work to have had a positive impact on their child.

The study found that the flexible provision offered by Action for Children is a strength of their short break service and may assist local authorities in offering the range of provision they are now required to provide.

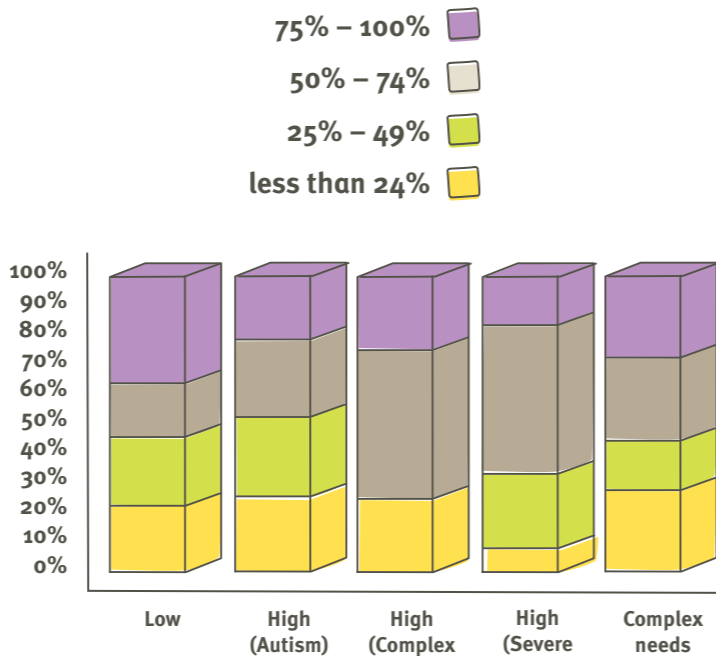
The impact of short breaks on children and families

Overall, the data gathered throughout the study suggests that Action for Children short break services have a positive impact on disabled children and their families and allow them to achieve a range of outcomes. Of those outcomes for which progress had been recorded in phases one and two of the study, 68 per cent were recorded as having 'improved', 30 per cent had 'not changed' and two per cent had deteriorated.

Progress recorded for the outcomes identified in phases one and two



The proportion of outcomes recorded as improved per child for the different level of need

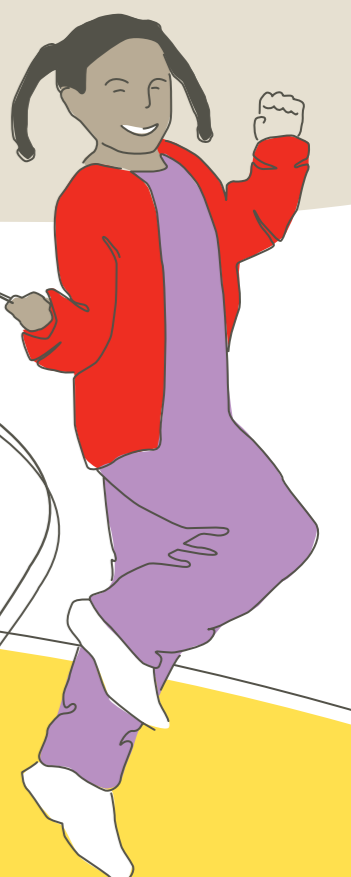


Outcome indicators

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For each set of outcome indicators identified for every child in the sample, the percentage that were recorded as having improved in the six-month time frame were calculated. The data suggests that Action for Children services have a positive impact on children with all levels of need.



Findings

The study identified a number of different ways that Action for Children short break services impacted positively on disabled children and their families.

Impacts on the children

Trying out new things:

Action for Children short break services enable children to participate in activities that they may not have done previously or may not get the opportunity to engage in without the necessary specialist support. This outcome had improved for 65 per cent of the children in the sample for whom it had been identified. The families reported that this helped to reduce social isolation. One parent said in a survey that:

'My son enjoyed the short break and enjoyed being with other children and peers. He had an experience with the break that we wouldn't have been able to give him or even thought about giving him. Conquered a fear of heights and joining in as a group. Very recommended to others. My son said it was awesome.'

(Parent)

Being listened to:

The study identified that Action for Children services are effective at seeking and acting on the views and wishes of children and enabling them to make informed choices. This outcome was identified for 80 children in the sample and was recorded as improved for 62 per cent of those children. This finding is particularly pertinent, as other research has shown that many disabled children may be excluded from voicing their views and opinions.⁵ It was also noted in the study that for some children, communication difficulties can limit their ability to contribute to decision making, and Action for Children employs a number of techniques to ensure the opportunity to be listened to is available to all children accessing their services.

Developing practical life skills:

The outcome to develop practical life skills was identified for 68 children in the sample and was recorded as improved for 43 per cent of those children over a six-month time period. All services were found to help children develop new skills, especially the overnight stays, and the various day trips the staff take the children on. Overnight short breaks present a unique opportunity to assist the child in developing skills such as dressing, washing, eating and shopping. This, in turn, had a positive impact on the wider family, as one parent commented:

'I practically washed, dressed and brushed her teeth, did everything for her, but now ... I won't do it now, no. I did everything. She does need prompting, she does need supervision, you still need that but she can actually do it. I don't do it anymore. Because I was exhausted from doing it.'

(Parent)

Improvement in self-confidence: More than two-thirds of the families and all of the staff members who completed a survey reported that the children's self-confidence had improved.

Improvement in emotional wellbeing: Most staff surveyed indicated that children's emotional wellbeing improved (94%) and that levels of anxiety had been reduced (75%) as a result of their short break service.

Having fun:

All of the children interviewed were positive about the short break. The study found that the most important thing to parents was that their child was having fun and enjoying the short break.

Impacts on the family

Enhancing family life:

The families participating in the research felt that the short break had a profound and substantive impact on their own wellbeing and their family as a whole. Ninety-six per cent of families reported in the surveys that the short break service had a positive impact on family life. One parent said:

'... If they took [the short break] away from me now, my family would collapse. And I'm not exaggerating in any way, shape or form ... I can't underestimate what it's done for us. It's saved my marriage.'

(Parent)

Spending time together as a family:

Half of the families interviewed said that family life was improved because the short break gave them the opportunity to spend more quality time with their spouse or their other children and engaging in activities not possible before receiving short breaks.

Rest and recuperation:

Allowing parents time to relax and recuperate while their child was at their short break was also deemed to contribute to enhancing family life as the parents interviewed said that they were better able to 'care' for their child once they returned from their short break. Just under half of the families interviewed said that they were less stressed since receiving the short break. One parent said:

'[The short break has been] very positive – time for 'head space' and recharge batteries knowing that my son is well cared for.'

(Parent)

Views and experiences of the short break services

Many parents were happy with the short break services they were receiving and said that they would like more breaks from their current provider or access to a different short break as well as continuing with the short break they were currently receiving.

A small number of parents identified difficulties they had encountered with their short break. Two families accessing the community short break services did not have access to transport which made their journeys difficult and often lengthy due to public transport provision in their area and the location of the activity. Two parents accessing the family-based short breaks found the amount of notice required to secure their short breaks extensive, as they were often asked to provide the dates they required quite far in advance. This meant that they were sometimes unable to plan their short breaks to coincide with future events. Most of the short breaks services participating in phase two had waiting lists or were unable to accept referrals as they were up to capacity, however, some sites were finding ways to help to manage waiting lists. For instance, one service had responded to the needs of a child who waited 10 months for an overnight short break by providing outreach support in the interim period.

Overall families were very positive about how the services shared information with other professionals. Most of the families reported that they had a clear understanding of the targets and outcomes that had been set for their child, and there was evidence of good partnership working with professionals from other agencies, including children's social care, health services and schools. There is a clearly held view across all professionals who participated in the study that sound working relationships between professionals benefit children by supporting the achievement of good outcomes.



Conclusion

The environment in which Action for Children short break services are currently operating is one of transition, public spending cuts and uncertainty, but also one in which the importance of short breaks has been recognised the rough the new statutory duty for local authorities to provide a range of short break services.

A range of positive impacts on both disabled children and their families were identified and it was evident throughout the study that the services are highly valued by children, parents and professionals. While the sample for this study is small, it is evident that Action for Children short break services had a positive impact on the families participating in the study.

Taking small steps

Many of the children accessing the services have profound and multiple disabilities. They may struggle to do things that may be routine to non-disabled children, such as dressing or feeding themselves, or participating in leisure activities such as sport, swimming or drama. The study found, however, that while for these children progress may be small or slow compared to non-disabled children, such small improvements may have a substantial impact on both the child and the wider family. A child learning to feed themselves or dress themselves is not only good for that child, but it may also mean that their parents can, for example, help young siblings get up in the morning or have a 'normal' family dinner time.



Jack and Mary's story

Jack is a 16-year-old boy with Down's syndrome. Before accessing the Action for Children short break service, Jack was becoming increasingly isolated as he found it difficult to communicate and interact with others. As a result, Jack had become very withdrawn. His mother, Mary, described him as 'exceptionally shy' and said that he would often avoid making eye contact and would rarely, if at all, initiate conversations. When he did speak, others sometimes found it difficult to interpret what he was saying and would ask him to repeat himself. This only made the situation worse and led to Jack failing to interact as he would be reluctant to speak, as Mary explained: 'He'd be kind of der der der and then people would say "sorry?" and then he wouldn't say it again so he'd lost the moment.'

Jack has always been interested in art and drama and had been asking to go horse riding. Mary worked with staff from an Action for Children community short break to find some appropriate activities that would help him to interact with others and develop his social and communication skills. Jack was supported by two support workers to attend weekly drama classes for one and a half hours per week and horse riding lessons for half an hour a week. The support workers gradually encouraged Jack to talk to the other young people attending the groups. He now attends these classes alone.

As a result of attending drama classes, Jack recently took part in a play and is also concentrating on developing his writing skills as he would like to write scripts in the future. His social and communication skills have improved as he now initiates conversations, makes eye contact and is much more vocal.

He recently led an improvisation session indicating that both his confidence and verbal communication skills had improved. His mum said:

'We [parents] went to his parents' evening at school and they said, "oh, we're really pleased because I don't know what's happened, but suddenly, he's initiating conversations" which was always the problem, because of the shyness, people would say 'hello' [and] he'd turn his head away, back away.'

The breaks also enable Jack's mother to have a 'mental rest' and 'a bit of a breather'. When Jack goes horse riding she uses the time to take the family dog for a walk or visit a local cafe. When he is at drama she attends her own course, which she was able to coincide with the drama lessons.

Jack's mum feels her emotional wellbeing has improved as a result of the short break. She's much more optimistic about her son's future, safe in the knowledge that his confidence has improved and that he is capable of socialising and communicating effectively with others.



For more information about the research go to:

www.actionforchildren.org.uk/policy-research/research

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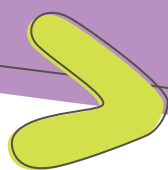
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