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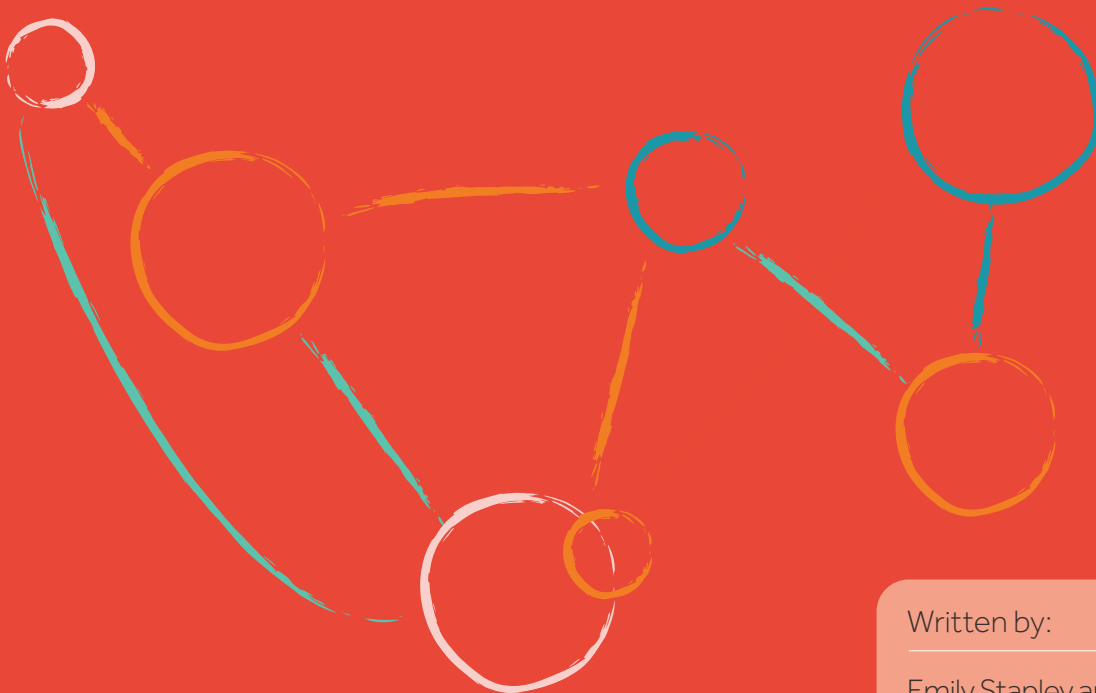
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# Supporting young people's and families' mental health and wellbeing:

examples and perspectives from parents  
and carers in HeadStart

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## The HeadStart programme

HeadStart was a six-year, £67.4 million National Lottery funded programme set up by The National Lottery Community Fund, the largest funder of community activity in the UK. It aimed to explore and test new ways to improve the mental health and wellbeing of young people aged 10–16 and prevent serious mental health issues from developing. To do this, six local authority led HeadStart partnerships in Blackpool, Cornwall, Hull, Kent, Newham and Wolverhampton worked with local young people, schools, families, charities, community and public services to make young people's mental health and wellbeing everybody's business. As a test and learn programme, the funded HeadStart programme ended in July 2022, with the intention being to sustain and embed effective HeadStart approaches locally.

## The HeadStart Learning Team

The Evidence Based Practice Unit (EBPU) at the Anna Freud Centre and University College London (UCL) worked with The National Lottery Community Fund and the HeadStart partnerships to collect and evaluate evidence about what does and does not work locally to benefit young people, now and in the future. Partners working with EBPU on this evaluation included the University of Manchester and the Child Outcomes Research Consortium (CORC), a project of the Anna Freud Centre. This collaboration is called the HeadStart Learning Team. Previous partners in the HeadStart Learning Team included the London School of Economics (LSE) and Common Room.

## Aims of this briefing

Over the course of the HeadStart programme, as well as offering a range of interventions for young people, the HeadStart partnerships designed and delivered interventions (or intervention components) aiming to support parents and carers. The six HeadStart partnerships reported that from June 2016 to May 2021, 3,900 parents and carers had been supported through HeadStart activities. The first part of this briefing provides some examples of these activities. The second part of this briefing provides an insight into the experiences and perspectives of a small number of parents who had been involved in HeadStart, either directly receiving support themselves or whose children had received support. The findings are intended to be of interest and use to those with a role in delivering support or seeking to understand the value of delivering support for parents and carers, in the context of a holistic approach to supporting young people's and families' resilience, mental health, and wellbeing.

## Examples of HeadStart support for parents or carers

This section provides an overview of 11 examples of HeadStart support involving parents and carers and delivered within the period 2016–2021.

### HeadStart Blackpool

#### Video Interaction Guidance (VIG)

VIG for parents and carers was informed by 'resilient therapy' (Hart & Blincow, 2007). Using video clips showing 'better than usual' communication between family members, VIG helps parents and carers to develop a deeper understanding of their children's emotional needs and behaviours, including how to work together to enhance resilience within the family.

#### Co-produced systems change

Parents of the Revolution was a group of parents and carers who shared experience and interest in supporting young people with their mental health. The group provided peer support for one another and worked co-productively to choose which systems to challenge, with the aim of improving outcomes for all Blackpool's children and families. The group developed a family version of [Hart and Blincow's \(2007\) resilience framework](#).

\*Interventions marked with an asterisk have been included in the snapshot of parents' and carers' experiences of support presented in the next section.

### HeadStart Hull

#### Parent Peer Mentor Project

Trained parent peer mentors helped parents and carers to access services and supported them to identify changes needed to build a happy family home. They helped in reducing parental stress, offered a listening ear, and provided parenting skills and knowledge to help parents and carers to support their children better. They also offered group workshops and a drop-in service in schools and in the community. [Find out more about Parent Peer Mentoring](#).

#### Jigsaw for Parents

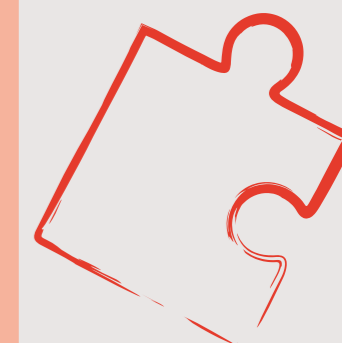
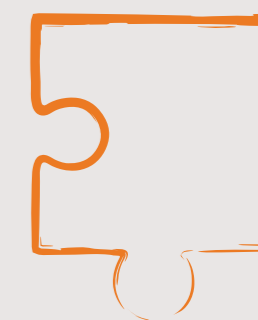
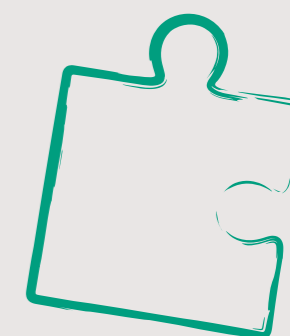
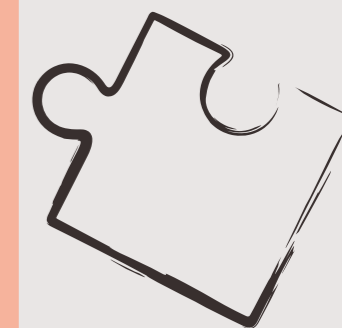
[Jigsaw Parenting](#) was designed for young people and their parents and carers and was specifically for children who required additional support within the Jigsaw Personal, Social, Health and Wellbeing Education (PSHE) programme. A parent or carer and one of their children attended eight, weekly group sessions delivered by school staff as part of the wider PSHE offer. Sessions helped young people to develop their emotional literacy and social skills and helped parents or carers to work on positive and mindful parenting skills and strategies.

#### Parenting group work programmes

[Parenting Support](#) was a group work programme provided by HeadStart Hull's parenting practitioners. It aimed to help parents and carers to provide emotional warmth, stability and consistency, to empower their children to grow into healthy young adults.

#### Barnardo's – Wellness Resilience Action Planning (WRAP)\*

[WRAP](#) was a targeted, evidence-based, therapeutic group work programme co-delivered by Barnardo's and school staff in secondary schools, in which each young person developed their own wellness plan. The service also (where needed) provided family support to improve whole family emotional health and wellbeing.



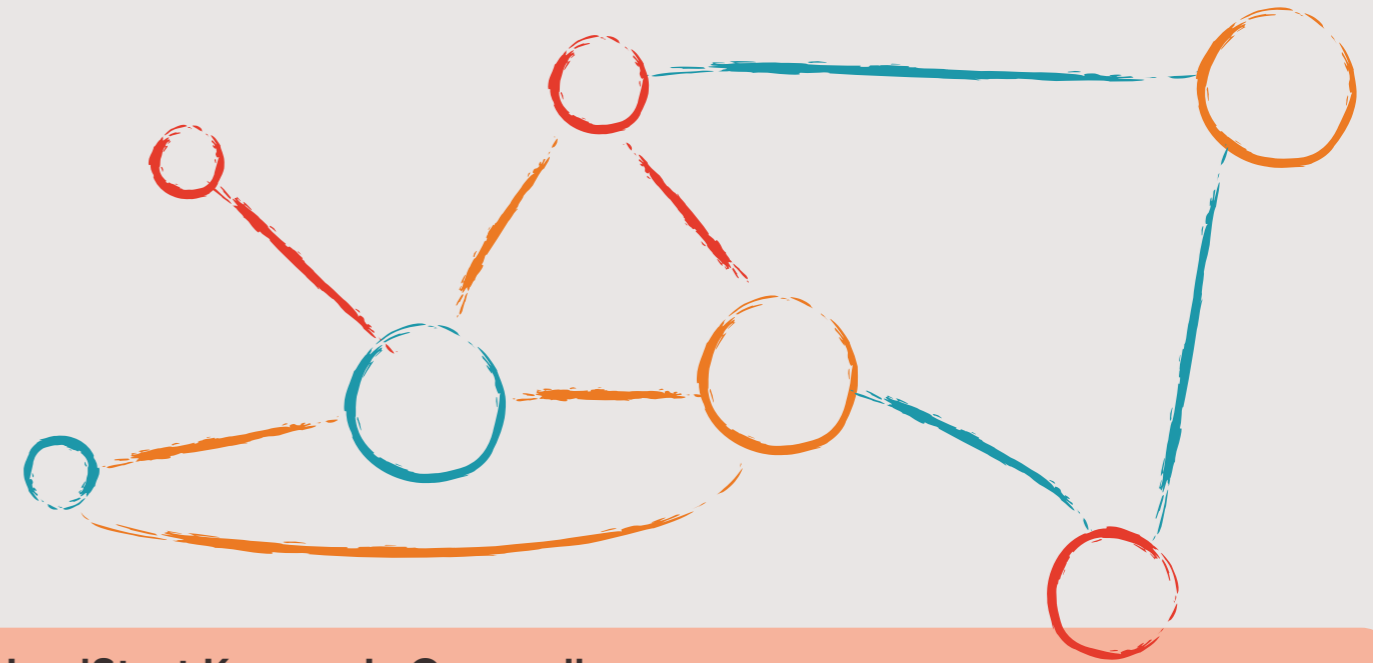
## HeadStart Kent

### Family Focused Transition

Family Focused Transition aimed to facilitate young people's transition from primary to secondary education by bringing families together and creating an environment of mutual support. Young people in Years 6 and 7 whose school transition was seen as needing additional support were invited to take part. The family and any related significant others all took part in the intervention.

### Intensive Mentoring Programme\*

The Intensive Mentoring Programme was delivered by Salus. Through group and one-to-one sessions, resilience mentors aimed to help young people who were experiencing a number of risk factors in their lives to build resilience. Mentors also helped to improve these young people's parents or carers' understanding of how to build and sustain their resilience. Mentors utilised cognitive behavioural therapy approaches as well as mentoring, coaching and support of young people and families, where appropriate.



## HeadStart Kernow in Cornwall

### Supporting Parents and Children Emotionally (SPACE)\*

SPACE was a free, up to six session programme for parents and carers to help them better understand and manage their children's, and their own, emotions and behaviour. The programme aimed to help parents and carers understand the trauma-informed approach to care and the 'fight or flight' response. It also helped parents and carers to build resilience in both themselves and their children.

## HeadStart Newham

### Empowering Parents, Empowering Communities: Being a Parent Course

This peer-led, group-based parenting course helped parents and carers to support each other in using evidence-based strategies to develop resilience in their children. Parents and carers who completed the course then had the opportunity to be trained, supervised and paid to facilitate future groups.

## HeadStart Wolverhampton

### Flourishing Families

Parents and carers could drop into Flourishing Families sessions at a community venue. The sessions were designed to enable parents and carers to learn new skills.

# A snapshot of parents' and carers' experiences of HeadStart support

## Background

We invited a small sample of parents and carers who had been involved in three HeadStart interventions to take part in qualitative research interviews about their experiences. The interviews took place between October 2021 and January 2022. The aim was to provide a snapshot of parents' and carers' experiences and perspectives of being involved in different types of HeadStart support.

The selection of the interventions to recruit parents and carers from was a pragmatic exercise based on:

1. what intervention information the HeadStart Learning Team already had access to, via intervention description forms completed by the HeadStart partnerships;
2. which interventions had already been comprehensively evaluated locally by the HeadStart partnerships;
3. which interventions were still being implemented at the HeadStart partnerships around the time of data collection (the final year of the HeadStart programme, 2021–2022).

On this basis, we contacted three of the HeadStart partnerships for this piece of work: HeadStart Kent, HeadStart Hull and HeadStart Kernow in Cornwall. HeadStart Kent and HeadStart Hull were delivering interventions for young people which included contact with, or support for, parents and carers as a component the Intensive Mentoring Programme (HeadStart Kent) and WRAP (HeadStart Hull). HeadStart Kernow in Cornwall had begun delivering a new professionally-led intervention for parents and carers (SPACE) in 2020.

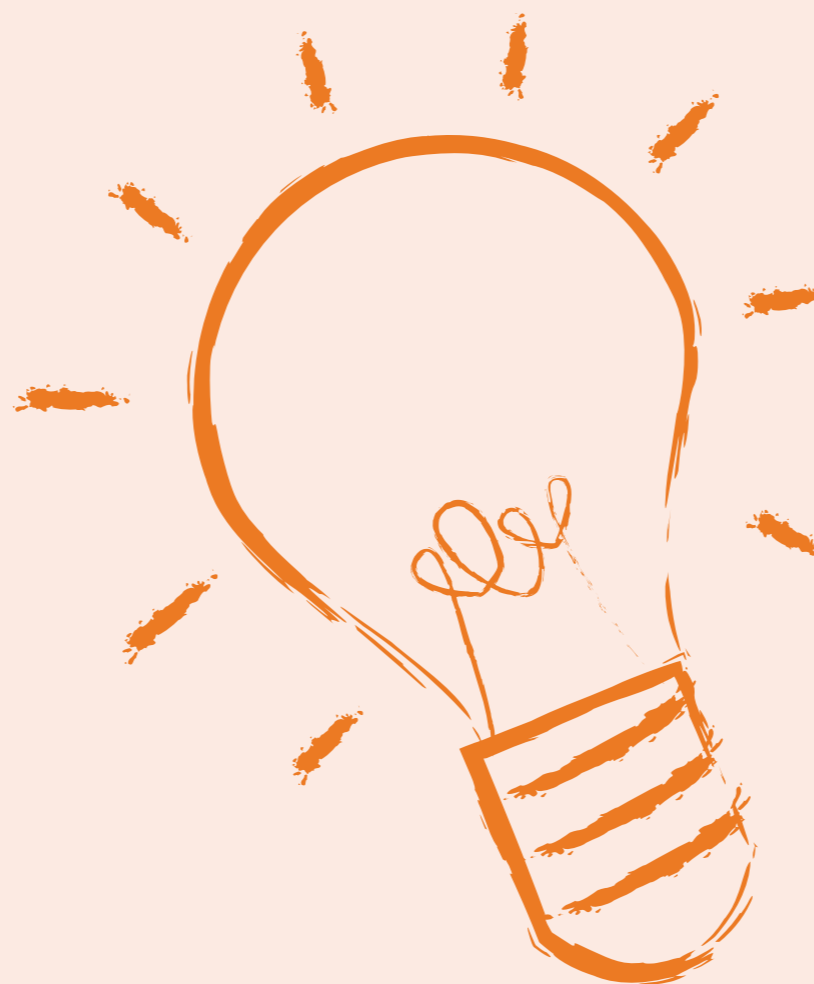
## Methods

Staff at the HeadStart partnerships invited parents and carers to express interest in taking part in a confidential interview with the HeadStart Learning Team. We then contacted interested parents and carers to arrange a date and time for their interview (conducted over Microsoft Teams or by phone). All participants gave their informed consent to take part and received a £10 voucher as a thank you for their time. All interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed.<sup>1</sup>

We conducted interviews with seven parents (six mothers and one father): three had been involved in WRAP in Hull; one had been involved in the Intensive Mentoring Programme in Kent; and three had participated in SPACE in Cornwall. In one interview, a mother and father were interviewed together. The interviews ranged from 23–50 minutes in length. Interview questions asked participants about:

- their experiences of and views on the activities, content and contact that they and/or their children had received during the HeadStart intervention
- their perceptions of helpful and less helpful aspects of the intervention
- their perceptions of the impact of the intervention
- barriers and facilitators to taking part in the intervention
- their suggestions for improvement.

We analysed the interview transcripts using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to identify themes across participants' interviews (and across the interventions).



<sup>1</sup> Ethical approval for this research project was received from the University College London (UCL) Research Ethics Committee (ID Number: 7963/002).

## Findings

### Perceptions of positive impact

**Reassurance.** Parents mentioned feeling happier themselves as a result of their children feeling happier and less anxious following their support from HeadStart. Their children receiving support had provided them with a sense of "relief", a "lifeline", or a "weight off" their shoulders as parents. They felt reassured that there was a professional helping to look after their child and that their child had someone else to talk to. Parents who had received HeadStart support themselves also mentioned feeling more confident or affirmed in their parenting abilities as a result of the support, as well as deriving comfort from meeting other parents and carers who shared their experiences.

**Improved parent-child communication.** Parents described how, after receiving HeadStart support, their children talked to them more about their problems or how they were feeling. Parents who had received HeadStart support themselves also described learning new language to talk to their children about emotions and making more time for play or conversations with their children: "So all that vocab stuff that I could role model and speak to him. And it's worked, he'll come and say to me how he's feeling now, rather than just go, 'Oh, I'm fine', or 'I don't know what's wrong.'"

**Developing new knowledge and understanding.** Parents who had received HeadStart support explained how learning more about their children's emotional development (including relevant theoretical frameworks, such as attachment theory) had helped them to better understand the difficulties that their children were experiencing and how to support their children: "You're not born with a manual for children, so anything that you can learn – the strategies and stuff like that – I'm all for that." Parents' understanding of their own emotions had also improved.

**Learning new techniques and strategies.** Parents described using new coping strategies or resources that they had been given through HeadStart, and reminding their children to use these too: "He was worried. I said, 'Look, go and get your bit of paper and look at it.' [...] Because he reads that bit of paper, and it's like him being back with [HeadStart facilitator]." Parents who had received HeadStart support themselves spoke about learning useful techniques, such as breathing and grounding, to regulate their own emotions, and using activities like mindful colouring to take a break. They also described sharing techniques that they had learnt with their children when they thought that they might help them too.

### Perceptions of helpful factors and facilitators to engagement

**Positive interactions with HeadStart staff.** Parents voiced their perceptions of the HeadStart staff working with their children as dedicated to their jobs, caring and "easy to talk to" for both their children and for them as parents. Likewise, parents who had received HeadStart support themselves described the HeadStart staff who they had worked with as "friendly", "welcoming", and able to create an environment in which they felt "safe" sharing their experiences: "Parenting courses can normally feel very led, very, 'This is what you're doing wrong. This is how you do it right.' Whereas it didn't feel like that at all any week. You know you never felt like you were going to give a wrong answer." They mentioned that HeadStart staff gave everyone the opportunity to contribute in sessions, kept the conversation "on track", and adapted sessions in response to the group's needs, such as extending the length of sessions.

**Engaging session format and useful resources.** Parents noted that their children had enjoyed doing activities and talking to HeadStart staff and peers in group sessions. Parents who had received HeadStart support themselves liked the informal, discussion-based format of the sessions. The resources that they had received, which included a booklet, YouTube content and PowerPoint slides, also meant that they could revisit information when needed: "[It was] a nice touch because you don't normally get a lot of things like that. It was something that you could keep, you could reference to."

**Peer support.** Parents who had received HeadStart support explained that having group sessions with other parents and carers had increased their opportunities for learning, through hearing experiences and strategies that other parents and carers had tried: "I think you learn just as much from other parents than you do from facilitators." Peer interaction created a sense of "camaraderie", a feeling that "you're not the only one in that boat", and reinforced a sense of learning from others, rather than being 'taught'.

**Receiving helpful feedback.** Parents spoke about having good communication with the HeadStart staff who were providing support for their children, although this varied in regularity. This included receiving helpful feedback about how their children were "getting on" and HeadStart staff having an open-door policy so that parents could ring them if they needed to. Sometimes HeadStart staff would share resources or strategies that their children had been introduced to in sessions, which they could then use to support their children in the future: "She gave me examples of what they've done, so I could then put them into use when these sessions were finished."

**Online delivery of support.** Some parents who had received HeadStart support themselves explained how the online format of sessions (due to the coronavirus pandemic) had actually made them more accessible, such as when they had childcare or work commitments: "I could fit it in around my job rather than having to take the whole morning off."

### Perceptions of unhelpful factors and barriers to engagement

**Lack of sufficient depth of content.** Parents who had received HeadStart support liked the breadth of content covered in the sessions. However, some felt that this could lead to sessions feeling too tightly packed or to aspects of content not being covered with sufficient depth: "They're huge areas. And things that they wanted to show and to share and to discuss, and then building in time for those group bits as well, it was just too whistle stop." However, others felt that the sessions were "well timed".



**Less relevant aspects of content.** Parents of children with specific needs and parents with different family structures described finding it "difficult to get as much from the course as others" or finding some areas of content less relevant to their situation.

**Disruption caused by the coronavirus pandemic.** Parents commented on the impact of the coronavirus pandemic and associated restrictions on the support that they and their children had received from HeadStart. This included challenges that they had faced in using technology and unfamiliar applications to access sessions remotely. Navigating group discussions could also be more difficult in an online space: "When you're all online as well it's that bit trickier to wait your turn and try and figure out who's speaking, who's not speaking". Moreover, from some parents' perspectives, online sessions did not afford the same opportunities as in-person sessions. For example, in-person group sessions gave young people more of an opportunity to socialise with others, which was helpful.

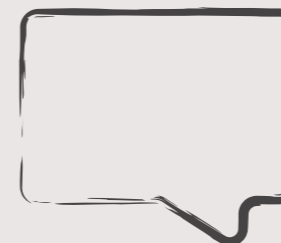
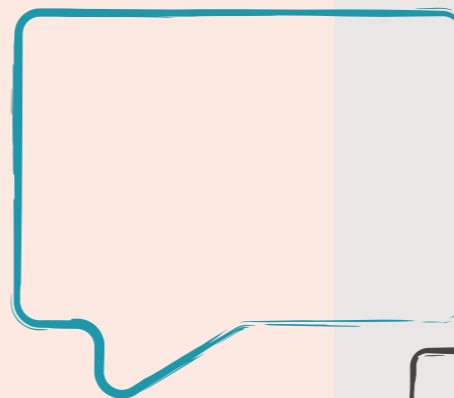
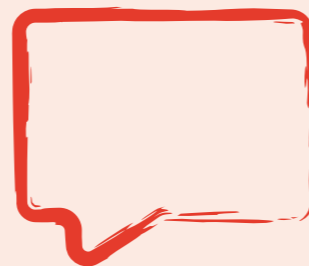
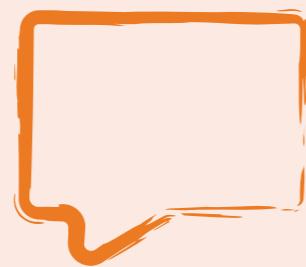
### Suggestions for improvement

**Lengthening or continuing programmes.** Parents felt that their children could have benefitted from having follow-up sessions to sustain impact and ensure that they were using the coping strategies that they had learnt from HeadStart interventions: "It gave him all the mechanisms he needed to cope to get to that point of coping. But then the extra sessions would have made sure he was using them, and he was coping at school." Similarly, parents who had received HeadStart support themselves suggested that having follow-up sessions after the formal intervention period could have supported them further in implementing what they had learnt during the intervention. It was suggested that these follow-up sessions could be less frequent – bi-weekly instead of weekly for example – or shorter: "Maybe it's just half an hour of going around and saying what worked and what didn't work. Just because that will help I think keep it up". Additional sessions would also ensure that each session did not feel too crammed with content.

**Refinements to content.** Parents who had received HeadStart support suggested that there could have been a greater focus on learning from peers, self-care and signposting to additional sources of support. They also suggested that more space could be given to ensuring that particularly big or important topic areas were covered in enough depth: "They touched on trauma [...] but they didn't go into it enough. It was very skimming over the top."

**Providing more feedback.** Parents of children who had received HeadStart support suggested that they would have liked "a little bit more" feedback about the sessions for their own "peace of mind" and to help them to "connect" more with their children. It was suggested that this could be in the form of regular phone calls or emails from HeadStart staff to parents and carers. This could also include advice for parents and carers about how to help their children themselves: "Some tips on how to deal with them when they're having a bit of an episode."

**Supporting ongoing peer relationships.** Parents indicated that they were keen to maintain relationships with other parents and carers who they had met through the HeadStart support that they had received. It was felt that devoting more time to strengthening these relationships during sessions and establishing a WhatsApp group from the start could have facilitated this: "It was too late by then [at the end of the course]." It was also suggested that future courses could be targeted towards families with similar "needs or abilities" to facilitate increased sharing and support.



## Discussion

### Summary of key findings

Parents were positive about the impact achieved by the HeadStart interventions that they or their children had participated in. This included improvements in parent-child communication, gaining new knowledge, skills and techniques, and feeling reassured that their children were getting the support that they needed.

Parents highlighted several factors that they felt had contributed to this positive impact, including the positive interactions that they or their children had had with HeadStart staff, the engaging format and content of sessions, the useful resources or advice that they or their children had been given, and the advantages of online delivery. Parents who had received HeadStart support themselves liked the peer support format of their sessions, whereas parents of children receiving HeadStart support told us how helpful it was to receive feedback from HeadStart staff about how their child was getting on.

Parents also identified less helpful factors and barriers to engaging with support. These included some topics not being covered in sufficient depth, some content not being appropriate for all participants' circumstances and needs, and the challenges of online delivery. Parents suggested that HeadStart interventions could be improved by including additional sessions, such as to allow more time to explore particular topics. Follow-up sessions could also help to ensure that new techniques learned during interventions are being implemented afterwards. Parents whose children had received HeadStart support also felt that more regular feedback or advice for them as parents would have been useful.



## Implications

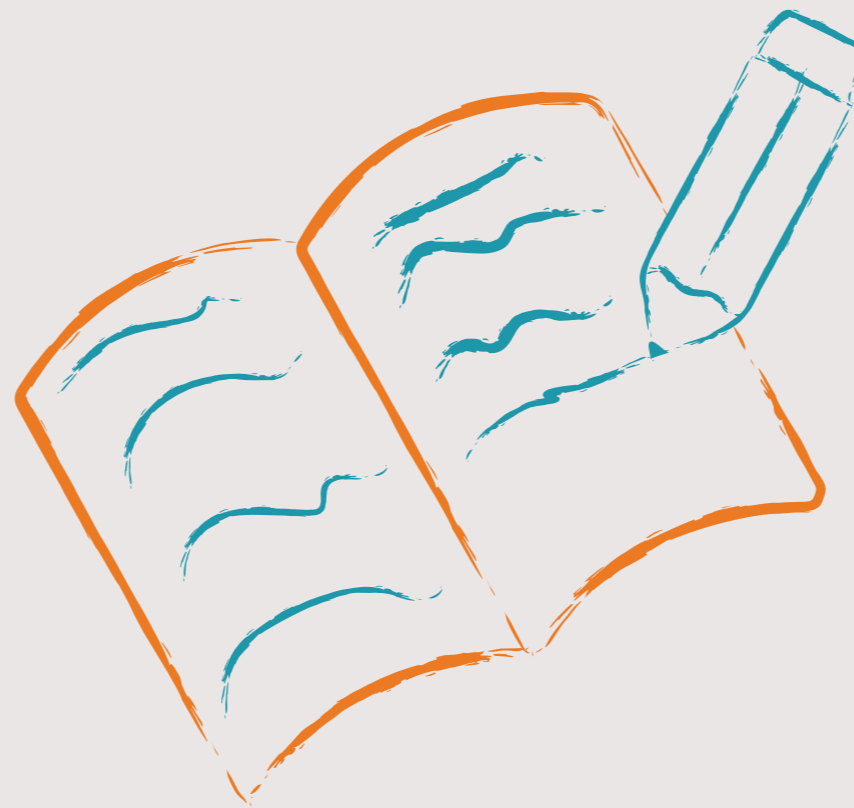
The findings tell us that parents want support, and ideally they would like more of it. Providing support or feedback for parents and carers, in the context of their children receiving support, is important to help manage parental stress and worry about their children. It also enables parents and carers to reinforce their children's learning from support within the home environment. This could involve separate sessions with parents and carers, or regular phone or email contact between practitioners and parents and carers.

The findings also show that group peer support sessions, where parents and carers can discuss and work through difficulties together with the support of caring and understanding facilitators, enable them to help each other through lived experience and not feel like they are being 'taught'. Having opportunities to form relationships with and learn from others in a similar position to you is useful.

Finally, the findings indicate that the ending of time-limited interventions needs careful management. Follow-up sessions after the formal intervention period could be useful to help young people and parents and carers to implement new skills and techniques learnt through support. These sessions could be less frequent or shorter than those in the original intervention period. This reflects wider research examining the effectiveness of time-limited preventive interventions like HeadStart, which suggests that refresher or booster sessions could help to ensure that the benefits from the original intervention period are sustained (Werner-Seidler et al., 2021). Practitioners 'checking in' at the end of time-limited interventions about whether parents and carers and young people feel that they need additional support would also be helpful, as sometimes more time is needed in interventions to cover all topics in sufficient breadth and depth and to embed learning.

## Strengths and limitations

The use of a semi-structured interview format enabled parents and carers to talk about the elements of their experiences that were most important to them, but also gave space for the interviewer to probe further to gain a deeper understanding of participants' meaning. However, it is important to note that as we only spoke to a small number of parents, the findings provide a snapshot of these parents' specific experiences across three HeadStart interventions. There are many other parents and carers – and other HeadStart interventions for parents, carers, and young people – whose views are not represented here (including those who may have found interventions less helpful, or who may have lost touch with HeadStart staff).



## Conclusions

Echoing learning from our research into young people's experiences of HeadStart support (Stapley et al., 2020, 2022), our findings from this small number of interviews with parents emphasise that to build young people's resilience, mental health and wellbeing, we cannot only support individual young people. This reflects definitions of resilience which highlight that resilience is dependent on the individual's connections with the people and systems in their wider environment, meaning that supportive relationships play a key role (Masten & Barnes, 2018). The findings of this evidence briefing remind us that for programmes like HeadStart, providing support for important others in young people's lives – whether in home, peer, community or school settings – is vital to bolster the protective factors in place around young people.

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