

Home visiting programme can dramatically reduce child abuse in the longer term, study finds

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(Medical Xpress)—Latest research from the University of Otago, Christchurch (UOC) shows the Early Start home visiting programme halved rates of physical abuse against children and lowered non-accidental hospital visits by a third over a sustained period.

Early Start is a home visiting programme targeted at improving the wellbeing of [preschool children](#) living in families facing multiple stresses and challenges. The programme begins in [infancy](#) and can be delivered for up to five years. The Early Start programme was developed in Christchurch and provided the prototype for the Government-funded Family Start programme, which runs in centres around New Zealand.

University of Otago, Christchurch, Professor David Fergusson and his team from the Christchurch Health and Development Study (CHDS) looked at the effects of the Early Start programme over a period of nine years.

The researchers compared 221 families with multiple difficulties who were receiving the Early Start programme with 223 control families, with similar difficulties, who were not in the programme.

The study found that after nine years, children who had been part of the Early Start programme had a 50 per cent lower rate of [physical abuse](#) compared with similar children who had not been part of the

programme. Children who had received Early Start also had about a third fewer [hospital admissions](#) for non-[accidental injuries](#) than children in the other group.

The results have recently been accepted for publication in the prestigious [Paediatrics](#) journal and were also recently published by the Ministry of Social Development.

Professor Fergusson says the positive effects of Early Start after nine years shows well-designed services such as this can have real benefits in reducing [child abuse](#), improving health care, improving parenting and reducing problem behaviours for vulnerable children. The findings are also timely in that they directly address the issues raised in the Government's recently released "White Paper on [Vulnerable Children](#)".

Professor Fergusson and his colleagues followed the two groups over a nine-year period to measure the short and longer term benefits of Early Start.

- At a three-year follow-up, children in the Early Start group had:
- Lower rates of physical child abuse
- Lower rates of hospital attendance for injuries
- Greater utilisation of general practitioner services
- High rates of enrolment in preschool
- Parents reported more positive and less punitive child rearing practices
- Lower rates of childhood behaviour problems

After nine years, children from families provided with Early Start had:

- Lower rates of physical child abuse

- Fewer visits to hospital for injuries
- Parental reports of more positive and less punitive parenting
- Lower rates of childhood behaviour problems

Similar benefits were found for Māori and non-Māori children.

Early Start was developed in the 1990s by a consortium of Christchurch providers, including Plunket, the Pegasus GP group and CHDS staff.

The idea for the programme came from CHDS research which showed [children](#) from families facing multiple problems, stresses and difficulties were at a far greater risk of developing later severe problem behaviours and having adverse outcomes in life.

More information: www.msd.govt.nz/about-msd-and-our-work/early-start/index.html

Provided by University of Otago

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