

StartBright



Exploring The StartBright Family Facilitator Role

This research was undertaken by
Dr Marlene McCormack and **Dr Sheila Garrity**

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Researcher and Research Institute Profile

Dr Marlene McCormack, *Assistant Professor, Early Childhood Education* is an academic, researcher and early childhood educator, based at the School of Languages, Literacy and Early Childhood Education, at Dublin City University, since 2015. Prior to that Marlene worked at Maynooth University, with Early Childhood Ireland and IPPA, two membership-based NGOs. Marlene has an established research interest in pedagogical and professional practice across Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) and more recently in supporting the advancement of the workforce.

Dr Sheila Garrity, *Associate Professor, Early Childhood Education* is an academic, researcher and early childhood educator, based at the School of Languages, Literacy and Early Childhood Education, at Dublin City University, since 2026. Previously Sheila worked at the University of Galway, leading their early childhood programmes for more than 15 years. Sheila has been a strong advocate for increased state investment into non-profit early childhood education and care, to enhance quality, support families and to professionalise the workforce through improved pay and conditions.

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Chapter 1

Introduction and Context

StartBright positions children and families at the core of their philosophy and at the heart of their work. They believe that the relationships between the children, their families and the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) centres are fundamental to each child realising positive outcomes. The values and mission of StartBright aim to empower and enable children, their families and communities in Southwest Dublin, through the delivery of exceptional early education services (Strategic Plan, 2024–2026).

This report and its findings affirm several propositions that provide a strong rationale for the Family Facilitator role in StartBright. Firstly, there is general acknowledgement that ECEC plays an important role in supporting children’s wellbeing, health, education and life outcomes, and that high quality ECEC can reduce inequalities over the life span (OECD, 2025). In addition, the relationship between families and ECEC staff offers opportunities for educators to signpost parental supports (OECD, 2021) and parental involvement is strongly associated with better cognitive outcomes for children but also increased parental self-confidence in their own parenting skills (Sim et al., 2019). Secondly, it is accepted that parents and families have the greatest influence on children’s lives and a key approach to optimising outcomes for children is to support families and improve their general well-being (Connolly and Devaney, 2018). Thirdly, this study highlights that while ECEC staff are critical in building relationships with parents and families, a dedicated staff member, who can focus primarily on parents, acts as a bridge between families, ECEC centres and the wider community (Dickerson et al., 2025).

The purpose of this report is to examine the Family Facilitator role from multiple perspectives, to begin to ascertain the impact of the role, and to understand what works for parents and why, with the purpose of explicitly framing the role as a core element of the StartBright way.



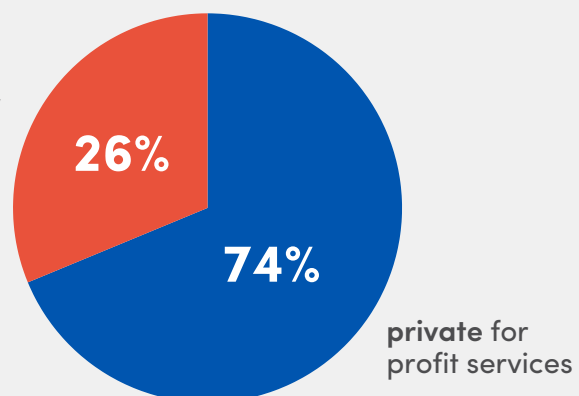
The StartBright Context

Start-Bright is a community based, not-for-profit, social enterprise which offers early childhood education and school age services across West and South-West Dublin. StartBright had its origins as part of Dublin West Childcare & Learning Services and was formalised in 2010 with the inclusion of four core Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) centres in Southwest Dublin, namely Balgaddy, Bawnogue, Deansrath, and St Ronan's, all located in the Clondalkin/Lucan area. A process of rebranding and collaboratively developing a Strategic Plan saw the launch of StartBright in the Autumn of 2019 with the inclusion of the Greenhills centre in Tallaght. In 2022 two additional centres have joined StartBright, Brookview in Tallaght and St. Finian's in Lucan. The seven centres work closely with children and families offering full and part time places for 480 preschool and School Age Childcare (SAC) and employing 85 professionals, which include six staff members in Head Office, along with a centralised operational and financial management team all of which are governed by a single voluntary Board of Management. From its inception StartBright has been underpinned by a strong value based and has prioritised high quality early learning experiences for participating children, as well as privileging strong relationships with families and their communities.

StartBright is grounded within an existing national system which breakdowns as a mix of private or independent (74% or 3,387) settings and community services 26% (1,140) (DCDE, 2025) (Image 1). Within this division and according to Pobal (2020) no private ECEC services operate in areas that are extremely or very disadvantaged, and in areas of disadvantage almost 58% of services identify as community. StartBright predominantly operates across the geographic areas Clondalkin, Tallaght and Lucan, each of which have pockets of disadvantage, measured in terms of extremely disadvantage, very disadvantaged, disadvantaged and marginally below average (Pobal, 2020). This means that many of the children and families connecting with StartBright experience social inequality and depend on the early childhood education and care centres as few, if any, alternative options exist. StartBright is critical to the fabric and infrastructure of the areas they serve. The policy context within which StartBright operates is a busy space.

Private/Community
service breakdown
(Pobal, 2020)

Community
services



Policy Context

Gradually over the past decade, greater policy focus has put the national spotlight on supporting parents in their critical roles. While progress has been made, severe challenges remain for those living in under-served communities.

Better Outcomes, Brighter Future (Gov. of Ireland, 2014) acknowledged parents as the primary carers, who should be supported and resourced to ensure they can provide all that is needed for their children's growth, development, learning and wellbeing. In this national policy framework, the role of Government in supporting parents to parent confidently and positively was highlighted. Subsequently, "First 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028" (Gov. of Ireland, 2018) identified and committed to actions that would enable parents to better balance work and care and also aimed to improve existing parent supports. It sets out a vision and commitment for children and their families, signalling 'strong and supportive families and communities' as a key goal. The strategy recognises that an effective early childhood system will incorporate inclusive communities where parents/families will have access to integrated services, a range of supports and public spaces that enable connections. A First 5 implementation report (Gov. of Ireland 2024) highlights that progress has been made in areas such as increased paid parental leave, higher rates and duration of breastfeeding, the introduction of a New Baby grant and growing levels of mental health supports for children and families.

Other embedded policies and frameworks directly related to ECEC foreground the importance of relationships with parents and families. Síolta, the National Quality Framework for Early Childhood Education (DES, 2010) prompts thinking and guides practice in highlighting the need for formal and informal opportunities for communication and possibilities for authentic engagement with parents and families. Aistear The Early Childhood Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2024) acknowledges that time and commitment are central to partnerships with families emphasising the need to make time and create space for meaningful conversations with parents (p.17).

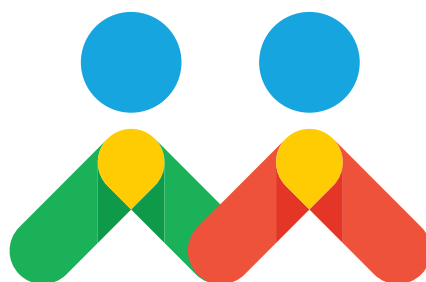


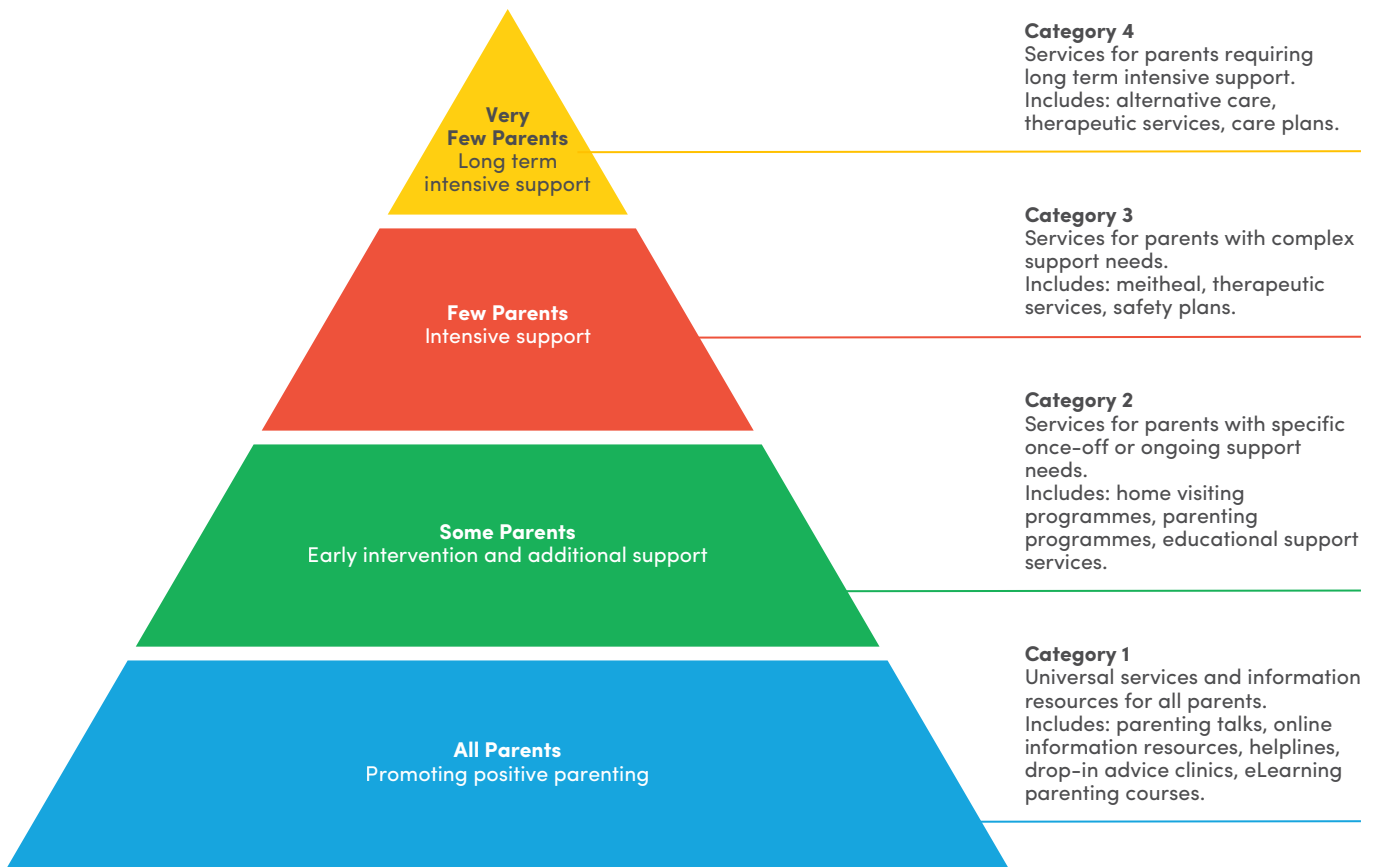
Relevant for families in under-served communities is the reduction of childcare costs for families and the introduction of Equal Start, which aims to support access and participation in early childhood and after school for children and families who experience disadvantage. Equal Start offers universal, child-targeted and setting-targeted supports, aiming to ensure that children experiencing disadvantage have access to early childhood education and to reduce child poverty. Equal Start is perhaps the most significant development relating to staffing supports, as it outlines and commits to the inclusion of a new specialist role of Family and Community Partnership Coordinator. As part of this this strand eligible ECEC settings will have access to funding for additional staff who can support engagement between settings and families.

The publication of *Shaping the Future* (DCDE, 2025) also highlights the Government plans to reduce parental fees to a maximum of €200 per month, increase the supply of places, widen opportunities for children with disabilities, support the reduction of child poverty and enhance the quality of provision. All this points towards a strong commitment to support children, their parents and families. Working and building relationships with parents is core to professionalism and practice in ECEC, but educators have complex roles which focus primarily on children's learning and development. Equally research has shown that practical, timely, non-judgemental support from trusted sources benefits parents (Department of Children, Equality, Disability Integration and Youth [DCEDIY], 2021). Consequently, combining parent supports with ECEC can make a positive difference to lives of children and their families (Leitão & Shumba, 2025).

Family Facilitator Role

The role of Family Facilitator, which is often named as Support Worker or Family Worker, has been found by parents to be both needed and effective in bringing about positive change in the lives of their families. Research from *Sure Start* (Carneiro et al., 2024) for example, highlights parents reporting that having family support helped build knowledge, confidence, and was of particular assistance where there were specialised needs in the family. In Ireland, a national model of parenting support services has been developed, with Category 2 relating to early intervention (Image 2) identifying the need for both once-off and ongoing supports, which include home visiting, parenting programmes and educational support services. While Government has increased parenting supports, it is frequently community organisations that work to address local needs.





DCEDIY. (2021). *Developing a National Model of Parenting Support Services*.

Despite the benefits of specific roles to support parents, research in Ireland on this topic has been limited (Leitão, 2023). This exploration of the StartBright Family Facilitator role aims to address that gap.

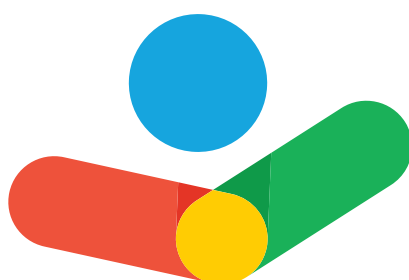
Children, families and community lie at the heart of the StartBright ethos. The Strategic Plan (StartBright, 2024) values Families as Partners and commits to working in partnership to achieve the best outcomes for every child. A key goal for the 2024-2026 period is the optimisation of services that will enable StartBright to meet the needs and support their children, families and communities. StartBright has long recognised the importance of engaging with parents and families as a means of supporting child and family-wellbeing (Sabol et al., 2018). Educators in StartBright have and continue to engage closely with parents, but staff need to have training, time and resources to put family support practices into place (OECD, 2024). Evidence has highlighted that a dedicated role is required to build responsive relationships and consequently, the role of StartBright Family Facilitator (FF) was developed.

The introduction of the Family Facilitator role is central to the mission of StartBright and builds on the organisation's experience of working in partnership with Childhood Development Initiative (CDI) in Tallaght. CDI has implemented the evidenced-based

Powerful Parenting Model (PPM) since 2008, which involves allocating dedicated Parent/Carer Facilitators (PCF) within ECEC centres. The PPM aims to positively impact on the relationship between parents and ECEC educators, addressing parental needs, supporting their engagement in children's learning and preparing children for effective transitions to primary school. The work of the PPM is enacted primarily through the Parent/Carer Facilitator role (PCF), who identifies parents' needs and offers supports in addressing children's developmental milestones. The PCF also offers evidence-based parenting programmes (Parents Plus), engages in interagency work to help parents access relevant services and develops capacity of ECEC staff to engage with parents in supporting children's development. The Powerful Parenting model involves one PCF per ECEC setting, each employed for 25 hours per week and available to any parent who has a child or children attending the service. As a model, it adopts a strength-based approach which means it aims to support parents and families as opposed to taking a judgemental and deficit approach. It supports parents in groups (e.g., evidence-based parenting programmes) and on a one-to-one basis (Leitão & Shumba, 2025).

StartBright has been working with the Childhood Development Initiative (CDI), drawing on their Powerful Parenting and Parent/Carer Facilitator model to develop a Family Facilitator (FF) role, which supports parents in a number of the ECEC centres. Childhood Development Initiative (CDI) in West Tallaght currently funds two PCF roles with StartBright employing two additional Family Facilitators who cover Clondalkin and Lucan, supporting five ECEC centres.

StartBright has broadened the scope of the role, shifting it from a part-time to a full-time role and incorporating not just parents/carers and young children (in ECEC settings) but connecting with children in after school programmes (SAC). The work of the StartBright Family Facilitator is led by the needs of the parents. The Family Facilitator requires a third level qualification in Early Childhood Education and Care, Social Work/Care, Psychology, Social Sciences or an equivalent and relevant discipline, along with a minimum of three years' experience of working with families. The vision is that equipped with relevant qualifications, and experience of working with families in complex situations, the Family Facilitator develops a toolbox of responses to meet the needs of families and can signpost additional supports within the community. Embedded within the Family Facilitator approach is the commitment to developing responses to situations and needs together, rather than pre-empting what might be required. The role aims to minimise a power divide by engaging with and being led by parents.





Chapter 2

Literature Review

The review briefly reiterates the importance of parents in children's lives, and the potential of ECEC to support development and learning but recognises the challenges in working with families and signposts lessons that have been learnt, for example, from aspects of the UK Sure Start model.

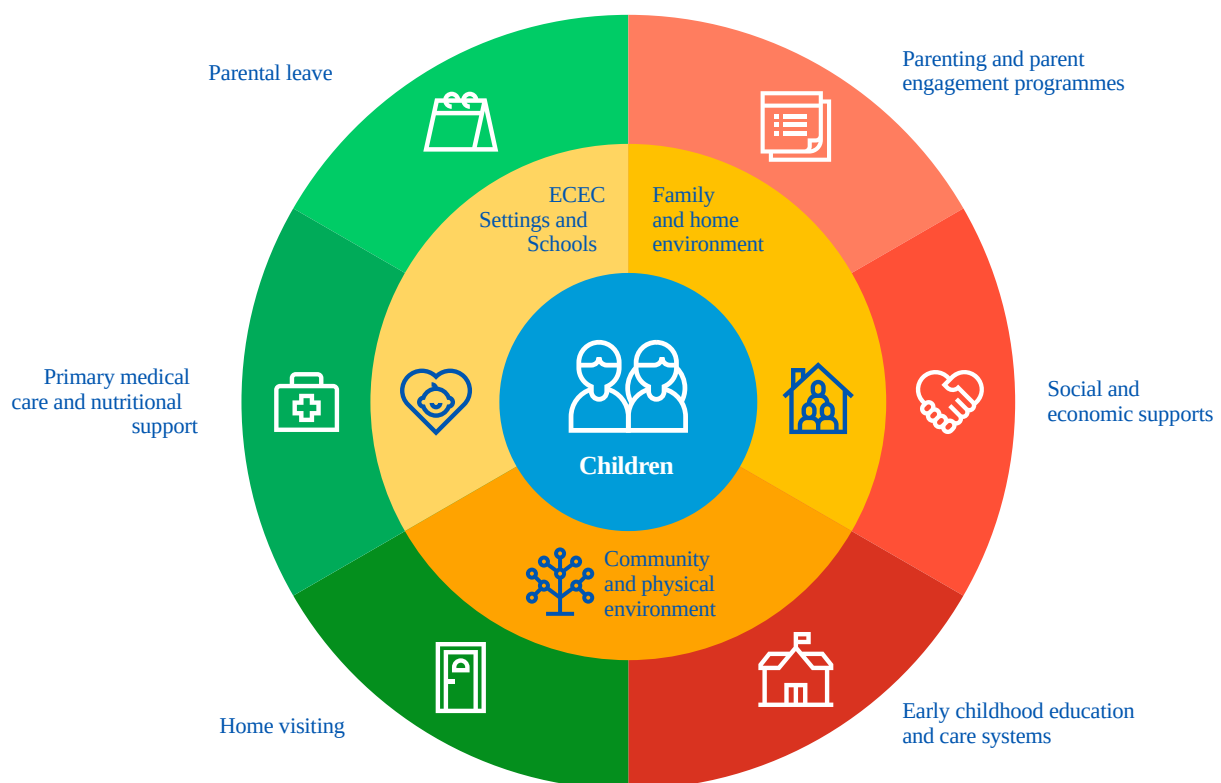
Family relationships are universally acknowledged to have deep and enduring effects on the well-being of individuals and society. A strong body of research, built over many years suggests that the quality of interaction between a parent and a child is the best predictor of a child's normal healthy development (OECD, 2024). However, family structures, stability and socio-economic circumstances all impact on children's outcomes (Bzostek & Berger, 2017).

The benefits of ECEC, socially, educationally and economically across children's life spans are well documented (OECD, 2024). Participating in high quality early childhood education and care is beneficial for all children and especially for those in under-resourced communities. Socio-economically disadvantaged children continue to engage less in ECEC services and particularly in regulated ECEC services that are likely to provide higher-quality education and care (OECD, 2025). ECEC helps in addressing early skills gaps and so can be considered as an essential tool to combat inequalities and educational poverty. However, to be effective, ECEC provision needs to be of high quality, and part of an integrated child-rights based system to improve outcomes for children, connected with national policies and local communities (European Commission, 2019, p.1). A belief that children's development and wellbeing can be supported independently, without reference to and support for their parents ignores the complex system within which relationships develop (Frosch et al., 2019). Early childhood education and care centres are powerful in providing opportunities to build relationships as they lead to a first personal contact with the parents and where there is effective interaction children can experience improved socio-cognitive outcomes (OECD, 2024).

Centrality of working with families

Children are profoundly impacted by the context into which they are born and grow, particularly where they encounter social inequality, and experience a lack of stability in their lives (OECD, 2025). Equally, parents have the greatest influence on children's lives and a key approach to optimising outcomes for children is to support families and improve their general well-being (Connolly and Devaney, 2018). In the Irish context, the family has been identified as the foundation of society and as having the single greatest influence on the life of an individual (The Commission on the Family, 1996; 1998).

There is an agreed consensus that parental engagement in early childhood is important and contributes positively to children's learning and development across academic and socioemotional skills (Pilarz, et al., 2024; Epstein, 2018) and that families should be involved in all aspects of education and care for their children. Consequently, ECEC settings are ideally positioned as the first point of contact, to connect with parents and families, based on mutual respect, as young children transition from home to creche, kindergarten or preschool (Poissant et al., 2024; EU Commission, 2019). However, there is relatively little known about how schools and teachers can help foster such engagement, especially with culturally diverse families (Rattenborg, 2019) or how engagement practices can be enacted (Murphy et al., 2021).



DCEDIY. (2021). *Developing a National Model of Parenting Support Services*.

Challenges of working in partnership

Working with families is good practice and one that is recognised in Aistear and Síolta as well as in the literature internationally (Epstein, 2018). Educators in ECEC engage parents as an integral and critical aspect of their work. However, as posited by Dickerson et al (2024) the emotional labour involved in the educators' work is general unacknowledged. Three key barriers that arise for educators in working with families are firstly, having emotionally safe space for sensitive and confidential conversations in settings where staff are extremely busy, particularly at hand over times when parents arrive and more inclined to talk. Secondly, increased expectations of and demands on educators, a lack of specific skills (Garrity and Canavan, 2017) along with insufficient training to navigate and work with complex families challenge partnership with parents. Finally, staff turnover, absenteeism, replacement (agency) staff negatively impact on the building of trusting relationships with parents, which requires time and consistency.

Murphy et al. (2018) reported the importance of supporting gradual transitions, building relationships over time, planning with families, and having ongoing professional development for educators. Although educators understand the importance of partnering with families, many are uncertain how to do this (p.95). These findings echo those of O'Connor et al. (2018) who found that while educators recognised the importance of working with parents, they were uncertain of their roles, uncomfortable in approaching parents and consequently only felt that it was appropriate to support them 'up to a certain point' (p.8).

Challenges of working in partnership are not solely attributable to ECEC educators. Martin and Fitzpatrick (2002) highlight that parents too have fears and concerns in engaging with ECEC settings, namely, a lack of time, a lack of authentic opportunities to get involved, a sense that the opportunities when they arose were already decided upon by the staff, a fear of being judged and not having enough knowledge or confidence to participate. These findings were more recently echoed by Leitão (2022) who also suggests that motivation to engage, where first language is other than English parents can feel overloaded.



The current Irish context for ECEC staff is that many experience burnout because of sectoral recruitment/retention issues and demanding working conditions (Oke et al., 2019). Thus, while the literature stresses the benefits of working with families and acknowledges the importance of ECEC staff as initial points of contact, more is required. The case is therefore made for a specialised and dedicated role within settings that is dedicated to supporting parents and families.

Signposting what works

Lessons from established parent support programmes emerge through CDI evaluations and the Sure Start initiative in the UK, both of which offer insights into what works.

The Powerful Parenting Model (PPM) developed by Childhood Development Initiative (CDI) and enacted by the PCF, offers a range of universal supports to parents and children (2-6 years of age) attending specific ECEC services in West Tallaght. Strengths of this model indicate that focusing on more than one area of parental/family need; being accessible; tailoring supports for parents/families; and building trusting relationships are core to effective programmes. Weaknesses of the PPM suggest that PCFs' working hours (part-time) might be inadequate, as more time is required to enable appropriate tailored support for individual families. It was also suggested that some of the PCF's time could have been allocated to research work, which highlights the importance of capturing learning and positioning the PCF as the researcher.

Sure Start was a large-scale early year's programme established across England in 1999 located in areas of disadvantage, which aimed to improve outcomes for children, specifically those children living in poverty. Sure Start operated as a 'one-stop shop' for families offering an accessible range of supports and services (Carneiro et al., 2024). A core principle or belief of Sure Start was that this initiative was to be responsive to local need where parents had ownership and influence in shaping the programme so that it was not done to them or for but rather in partnership with them (Duddy, 2024). All Sure Start programmes provided outreach and home visiting; support for families and parents; high quality ECEC services; healthcare advice and support for people with special or additional needs (Melhuish et al., 2010). While parental engagement can take many forms, home visiting, newsletters, parenting courses and individual meetings, the role of Family Worker or Family Support Outreach Worker (FSOW) located within the ECEC setting was central to the Sure Start programme.

While the Sure Start model embraced more than the role of family support worker, some of the findings from its evaluation have relevance to the work of StartBright Family Facilitator. Glass (cited in Belsky et al., 2008, p.10) stated in respect of Sure Start that,

“what I learned from visits to successful early years programmes and local communities was that it was necessary, in the case of early years at any rate, to involve local people fully in the development and management of the programme if it was to take root and not simply be seen as another quick fix by middle-class social engineers”.

Overall learning from Sure Start (Blake, 2024) highlighted a number of points that have relevance for educators and family support staff in working with parents and families.

An effective aspect of Sure Start was the emphasis when engaging with parents on avoiding a sense of stigma, shame or about needing help. Findings also highlighted the sensitivity required when offering advice to parents, as it might be experienced as a personal challenge and this also related to the language used. Having regular contact to build rapport and trust, along with meeting the practical needs of families was found to be important, as was including parents in decision-making. Responding quickly, being flexible and adapting as necessary was an effective characteristic of Sure Start.

More generalised messages from research also indicate that in addition to programme flexibility there is also a value in both formal and informal approaches to support as forms of prevention and early intervention (Sneddon and Owens, 2012). It is evident that family support services which are embedded within the local community are more likely to be used by parents and families (McKeown, 2013) and the main driver of parental engagement is parentally identified need, either for themselves or their child (Duddy, 2022, p.868).

“It is sometimes all too easy to lose sight of the fact that often what a family needs is immediate and tangible practical help, rather than a course of high-powered therapy. ... Intensive practical help in the family’s own home may often be the most valuable form of assistance.”

- Gilligan, 1991



Chapter 3

Methodology

The StartBright approach is influenced by Bronfenbrenner's proximal processes, which is at the core of his seminal work on bioecological theory. Bronfenbrenner's early work identified the various layers or systems that impact on a child's development, starting with the microsystem and broadening out to include the meso-, exo-, macro- and chrono-systems. These systems connect, working bi-directionally, each exerting influence on the other. Bronfenbrenner's (1985) later work incorporated the concept of proximal processes which suggest that interactions should happen on a regular basis over an extended period of time to allow for increasingly greater complexity. This focus on process-person-context-time (PPCT) model (Bronfenbrenner and Morris, 1998) reflects the aim of StartBright's Family Facilitator role to work consistently across systems and structures of families, ECEC settings and wider community over time, building trust and enabling deeper and more complex relationships which may offer opportunities for more authentic and effective support for parents and families.

The aim of this research was to explore the impact, challenges and successes of the Family Facilitator role. A participatory research approach, within an ethnographic methodology, was developed to prioritise the tacit local knowledge and rich lived experiences of parents, educators and Family Facilitators.

The following research question guided the project:

How effective is the StartBright Family Facilitator role?

What influences the success of the Family Facilitator role?

A short literature review, focusing on working with and supporting parents/families was undertaken and this informed the schedule of questions, or areas explored with each participating group. Learning from initiatives such as CDI (Leitão, 2022) and Sure Start (Belsky et al., 2008) in the UK corroborated the findings from the StartBright research.

Data collection included individual interviews with key actors, between June 2024 and June 2025 (Image 3). To explore the impact of the Family Facilitator role the researcher engaged with the Family Facilitator, parents attending the Parent & Toddler group, managers, and educators. Prior to commencing data collection, researchers connected with StartBright, as a process of familiarisation and relationship formation.

Schedule of data collection

Research Participants	Number	Timeframe
SB Family Facilitator (Individual Interview 1)	1	June 2024
SB Family Facilitator (Individual Interview 2)	1	April 2025
Parents (Individual Interviews, attending P&T)	5	June 2024
Parents (Individual Interviews, attending P&T)	5	April 2025
SB Manager (Individual Interview 1)	1	April 2025
SB Manager (Individual Interview 2)	1	April 2025



Chapter 4

Findings

Findings from this study, which drew on feedback from parents, educators and parents themselves, highlight key points of learning that have emerged to date in respect of the FF, but which will change over time as more staff are recruited for this role. The purpose of the Family Facilitator role is to support parents in StartBright Early Education Centres and School Aged Childcare, leading to improved outcomes for children and families. The FF has multiple roles, informing and supporting parents, initiating activities or sessions that help parents and young children, acting as a bridge between educators and parents, and linking with the community to build partnerships and effect change. Seven key areas emerged from this study which highlight that FF presence and availability, time and trust were critical in the process of building relationships with parents.

Being attuned to parents

A key finding that emerged was the concept and practice of being attuned to parents which means active listening, taking time and giving space. The study also suggests that having specific outcomes and pre-organised parent programmes is not a successful approach, “as people or organisations push their own agenda and that might not be what the parent wants at that time”. This raises questions of positioning, is the work of the FF for parents or with parents, is the parent perceived as a recipient of services or as an engaged partner in the supportive process or programme. Tensions can arise, as was found in respect of Sure Start in the UK, when parents find the attention of programme providers stressful and intrusive (Belsky et al., 2006). As this study found that “pushing” parenting programmes can leave parents feeling that there is nothing for them. While the FF requires a work plan flexibility to respond to emerging parent’s needs is critical because “the most important part of this role is to be on the lookout”. Working with parents is slow emotional labour.

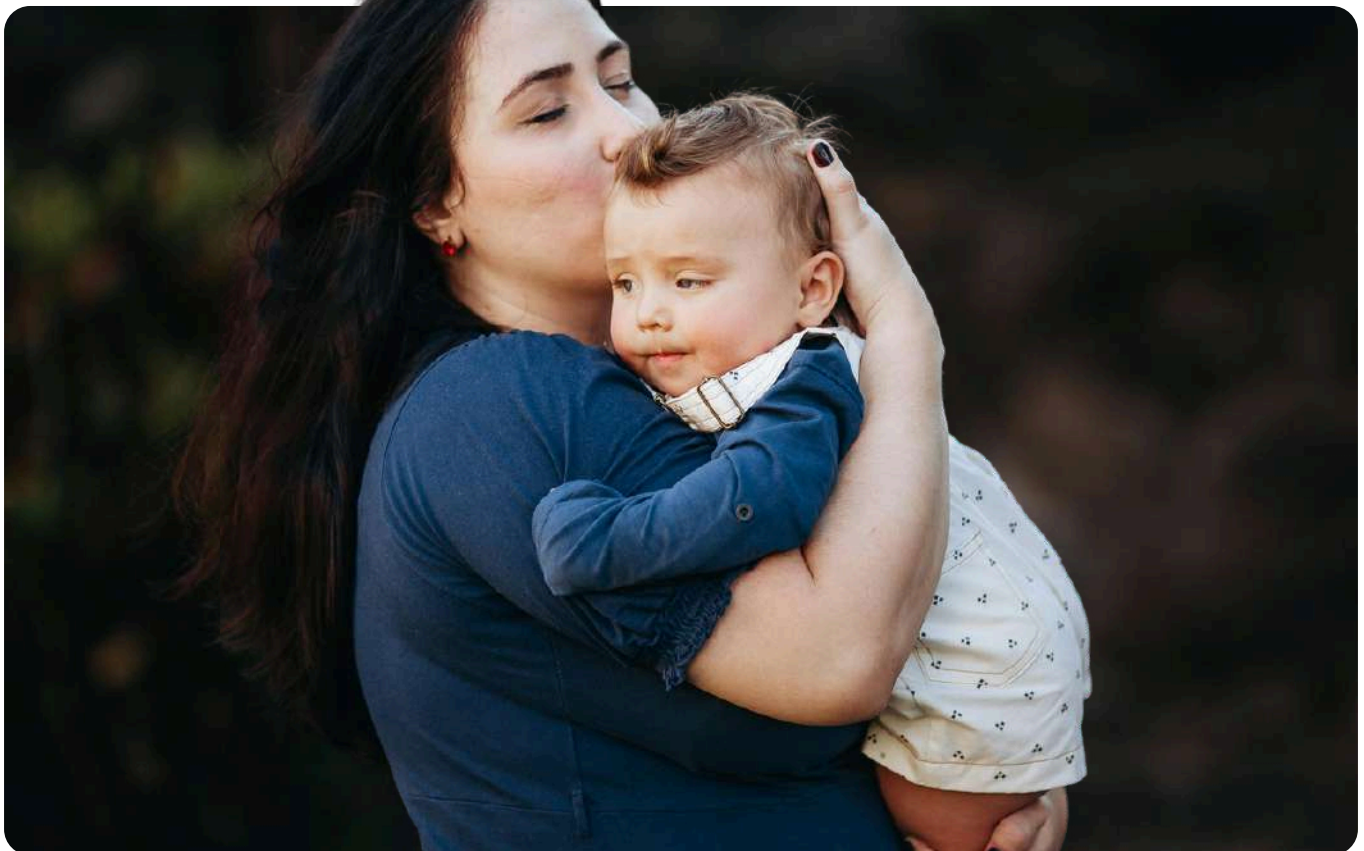
Ultimately attuning to parents means that:

“The best help is not the help you think someone needs. What I (FF) have been trying to do is to follow the Mums to know what they need, accept the different stages people are at and respect that. For example, I have been trying to help a Mum get a medical card, but she does not have a phone number or an email. While I struggle with this, I am still respecting her and trying to find a solution. It is not on me to force anything on her, my role is to support her. I am trying to follow the parents and share information”.

Responding practically taking initiative

Attuning to parents is first step for the Family Facilitator but to build trust and satisfaction requires follow up actions that have been identified by the parents themselves. Examples that arose highlighted the need to support parents in respect of their children but also as it pertains to their own wellbeing. Yoga was organised because “the moms want something for themselves”.

Providing information and signposting parents to supports available was the most significant and constant demand on the FF. Helping parents in respect of entitlements (social welfare, childcare schemes) formed a key part of the FF work, for example “organising a SENO from Tallaght to come up and so any parents who wanted to get advice”, “helping a parent who is having financial difficulties at the moment fill out a supplementary welfare form “contacting St. Vincent De Paul food bank to see what can be done for a family”. Finding suggest that while the FF role aimed to deliver parenting programmes directly, more immediate and basic needs of the parents took precedence. One key initiative that parents wanted and which commenced in St. Ronan’s was the Baby & Toddler group. This was supported through a grant which the FF accessed along with the 7 Mills Community grant for the School Age Childcare (SAC). Working to secure grants for activities for children and parents was additional element of the FF role which was not evident from the start.



Building relationships / Working to parent time and not 'outcome' time

The role of the FF is to support parents but how are relationships authentically made with parents? This question revealed that "finding a way to build trust is different for everyone. For parents to trust me, I need to be approachable, but I also need to be professional, yeah, and I need to be genuine".

Educators believed that the first step in building relationships with parents was to take the time to be present and they suggested that consideration might be given to the time of the year the role starts. Where for example the FF starts their role in the middle of a term is challenging. "The parents knew all of us and suddenly there is someone else there. Some of the problems that the parents have are very personal and so they are naturally reluctant to talk with someone they don't know".

Making the effort for the FF to be at the ECEC centre at drop off and collection times and to greet them are useful starting points. Working to build relationships with the educators was central to the success of the role in the beginning. Educators signposted parents to the FF with queries that extended from "where they are on the housing list to getting medical cards, GP cards, and chic numbers".

The feeling of managers, educators and the Family Facilitators is that it takes time to develop trust and relationships with the parents, and in the words of one manager, "it is a slow process, but it's working". In the centres that have a Family Facilitator, the ECEC educators and managers have already begun to feel the benefits.

Communicating

Communication with parents occurred initially through the in-person contact at the ECEC centres both outside so that the FF became familiar in a non-threatening way to the parents or inside in the parent's room when more sensitive or confidential discussions took place. Communicating with the parents of younger children (not attending StartBright) was initially challenging. Communication with parents was via email and in the beginning with the FF sending out "over 200 emails to highlight the Toddler Group and this did not work – no one was responding". A move to texting parents saw a different response, with increased attendance at the Baby & Toddler Group.

Clondalkin has a high diversity of families and ethnicities, which is characterised by a mix of long-term residents, a large population of travellers and a growing international community. Given this landscape, the importance of the language used to engage and communicate with parents is critical. There is a need to simplify language, and the FF emphasised the need to be conscious, and mindful of how the message is being understood.

The parents valued the approach stating that “we never have been so informed about anything that is going on. I know the information is up on a poster, but you don’t always take the time to read the information. Information is everywhere but you have to go looking, she helps us feel more involved”. Taking the time, being present and the communication approach has meant that parents have “a sense of being listened to because she follows up on things – if she says she will find out something, she does”. This has been relevant for first time Moms, and for new community members.

From the parents’ perspective their engagement with the FF “is about the personal touch”. For one Mother it was the challenge of filling in forms because her literacy skills meant “I just can’t write it”. For another parent it centred around the FF explaining NCS and how it works, for another it was information about getting a place in the creche.

In considering the importance of communication, the findings suggest that listening to parents, using language that is understood and sharing information as necessary and appropriate underpinned the relationships that developed. Findings indicate the forms of communication that work and the attitude or professional approach that emphasise as one parent suggested “even if you have personal or financial issues to discuss you don’t have any fears in talking with her, I’m not nervous about it”.

Connecting parents into the community

As is evident from the above findings, the value of the FF is also in how they connected parent to parent; parent to services for their child; and the StartBright group (children and parents) with the wider community.

Organising coffee mornings, walks with the parents around the locality, talks with the parents in the community centre helped connections be made even before the children enter the StartBright centre. As one new Mother shared that “to get to meet and talk with other moms, to hear their stories and to know that you are not on your own – it is definitely worth it”. Another Mother highlighted the value of connecting with others in building up a social network that can support and help out, when necessary, e.g., when a hospital appointment comes up.

Working with parents where they have a child with additional needs was not an uncommon focus for the FF. In one case helping parents to secure a place in primary school and while waiting to be aware that home tuition was applicable for early years as well as primary aged children.



The family facilitators work closely with the after-school children and the wider community. One little boy was enjoying the kick-boxing club that the FF had organised for him. Three other children were interested in martial arts and the FF reached out to three clubs in the area to see if they would provide sponsored places. The three interested children got free access to the club and facilities and more importantly, the clubs have allocated 3 places to StartBright on an ongoing basis. In all instances the FF supported connections which built a sense of belonging in the community.

Bringing about community change

Connecting with the community has also highlighted the way in which the family facilitator has begun to engage politically for the benefit of one of the local StartBright centres. The FF was working with the local TDs and counsellors in trying to get a pedestrian crossing or zebra crossing up outside the building. As the centre manager suggested, “she has progressed the issue with her persistence. She is focused on targeting the politicians and counsellors to get the job done. She is almost like a bridge between the ECEC setting, the community and the local politicians”.

Peter Moss (2007) spoke of the need to bring politics into the nursery and to recognise the power of early childhood and those working in it to promote democratic practice. In other words, to find and use voice and power to bring about change for the common good. This one example highlighted how StartBright was effecting community improvement through the democratic actions of the family facilitator.

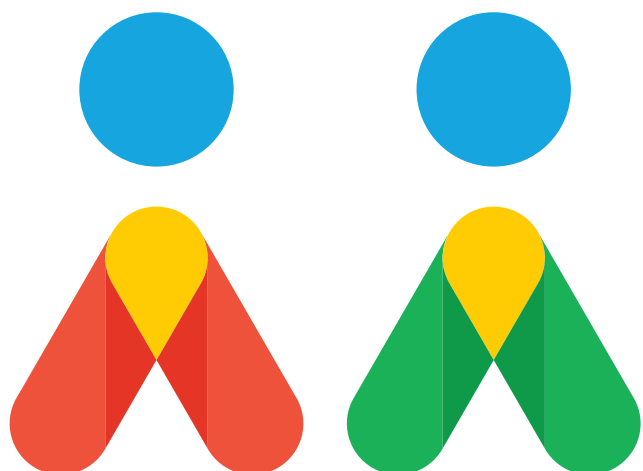
Working as a team

The Family Facilitator is central to the StartBright centres. The manager in one centre affirms the value of the FF role in suggesting that “the one-person approach is better – you don’t want to be talking to multiple people about your problems or queries. It is better to deal with one specific person” and this is corroborated by the parents who agree that “it makes a difference having that one person, as your own business is kept private”. The managers and educators have built trust with the family facilitators and so “when we point them in the direction of the Family Facilitator, they know that she is also trustworthy”.

The belief amongst ECEC managers and educators is that the Family Facilitator is an invaluable position, particularly in a DEIS area, where the needs of families can be high. The consensus is that as an ECEC centre “we don’t know what we would do without the role”.

Key characteristics of the StartBright approach:

- Being parent led
- Responding to local need
- Being attuned to parents
- Building relationships with parents/carers
- Communicating with educators and ECEC settings
- Working as a team
- Linking parents into community services
- Bringing about community change





Chapter 5

Discussion

Overall, the research suggests that neither the FF role nor the ECEC centres under the StartBright umbrella exist independently of the social, economic and political contexts within the communities they serve. The structure and context of family lives is complex and influenced by the changing policies of Government (Canavan, 2012). Issues that disproportionality impact on vulnerable families and children relate to affordable housing, flexible working and poverty (Eustace et al., 2023). Challenges facing families in under-resourced under-served communities, include limited access to information about available services, the complexity of navigating administration systems, and a low level of trust in the quality of services offered (OECD, 2025). There is also a concern that more broadly that support programmes for parents in under-served areas (medical, nutritional, employment, etc.) operate in silos. Thus, the need for a single point of contact or support in the form of a 'champion' or 'advocate' or a single committed professional (Devaney & Dolan, 2014) emerges.

Findings from this study highlight that the role of the FF is a demanding one, which requires knowledge and skills, a sensitive balance in maintaining personal/professional boundaries, supporting parents and being available but not assuming their responsibilities or disempowering them, having goals but embracing a slow relational approach, and acting as the connector linking parents, ECEC settings and local communities. It appears that the FF acts as a bridge within the system that supports, guides and connects parents and families.

Strengths of the FF role centre on a number of key points which are highlighted through the perspectives of parents, educators/managers and the family facilitator. Having a dedicated professional who is available to parents in “real time” (Dolan et al., 2020) and on a full-time basis, provides a strong foundation in building trusting relationships. Time that the FF spent in the initial phase for example, being present at the ECEC centres during drop-off and collection helped with familiarisation and established connections with parents and with educators. Having the FF role has also helped minimise stigma experienced by parents, e.g., a mother who had literacy difficulties and needed support in completing forms, another who needed support in finding a school place for her child with additional needs.

Being flexible in responding to parents needs underpins the FF role in supporting families and not merely delivering set programmes, which echo findings from the CDI Powerful Parenting evaluation (Leitão & Shumba, 2024). A challenge has been to both meet the individual parents’ needs but also to plan events which support parents to connect for example through Baby & Toddler sessions, coffee mornings and buggy walks in the locality, all which support parent interactions. Being open to adjusting event start/finish times so that they work for parents, e.g., after drop-off times in the morning, has also been important in building relationships and ensuring healthy participant numbers.

Potential challenges arise around **communication**, where parents and families have English as a second language, and where the FF works to ensure information and messaging is clear in translation. Modes of communication are also important with WhatsApp being preferred by parents over email or written material. Using technology and understanding how public systems such as early childhood education (e.g., getting a Chick number) and primary schools (getting a place, particularly where a child has an additional need) operate arise frequently for parents, especially those new to Ireland and the local community.

Key messages

It is not merely the presence of the FF role but more importantly **the core characteristics of the professional** that impacts positively on parents and families, which is well documented in literature. Devaney and Dolan (2017, p.16) suggest that the worker or family facilitator’s style and skills base with a focus on building relationships, a non-judgemental and respectful manner, and a reflective approach to practice allied with high quality supervision were critical in effectively working with parents and families. Leitão and Shumba (2024) identify the qualities needed to be the right person for the role, that is the Parent/Carer Facilitator is responsive to families’ needs; acting as a central point of contact; and helping parents to better understand the developmental needs of their children.

Research also suggests that the power of relationships and staff who are empathetic cannot be underestimated. While this holds true in respect of the StartBright study, the FF must also be sensitive to **creating and managing boundaries** relating to time and levels of support.

On a practical level, and in acting as the bridge within the system the FF requires **support from management and leadership within the settings** that recognises the emotional labour of the role and the value of supporting parents (Dickerson et al. 2024). Findings from this study begin to reflect the benefits of the role but also gives a sense of the demands on the Family Facilitator and their need for ongoing organisational support and supervision. A dichotomy exists in that while this study along with a body of literature highlight the benefits of the Family Facilitator, the current funding under the Equal Start programme only covers two hours per week for the FF role, which suggests that a **greater level of resourcing is required to sustain and expand the FF role, to increase its impact, and to improve outcomes for children and families.**

A minor but relevant finding that may support the **recruitment and introduction of new FF roles** in the future relates to timing. The suggestion is that the start of a new school year (September) is an effective time to introduce the FF to parents and staff. In this study one FF commenced mid-way through the school year when practices and processes were already established, and parents had begun to build relationships with educators.

The envisaged FF role in StartBright is **comprehensively mapped out in the job description but is underpinned by a flexibility in practice** that is led by parents needs. There is a danger in professionals having rigid work plans, and in pre-judging and assuming what parents need, for example directing them towards evidence-based Parenting Programmes, which may not be the solution (Duncan et al., 2023). The job description as devised, anticipated that the FF would be involved in the delivery of evidence-based and evidence-informed parent programmes. However, in the early phase of the role, the overwhelming needs of the parents guided the FF in an alternative direction, ultimately working to parent time and not 'outcome' time. The challenge into the future will be to find the balance where the FF meets the needs of parents but also leads with parenting programmes that have proven success. In evaluating one parenting programme, Berry et al. (2022, p.19) suggested that familiarity and trust had not been sufficiently established with parents in advance and that greater attention to building rapport with parents would have supported better retention and outcomes. In short, the delivery of a successful parenting programme is contingent on "supportive, flexible and resilient organisations systems that host and deliver them".



The role of the FF has evolved over time and while for example it was not envisaged that writing grant applications was part of the job, a more flexible approach has been beneficial for children and parents. In being flexible and taking initiative the FF sourced funding for Baby and Toddler sessions, and in accessing local funding schemes such as 7 Mills, a greater range of activities for the school-aged children were made possible. Through the efforts and energy of the FF, a local kick-boxing club gave a number of free memberships to the school-aged children and engagement with local councillors resulted in a safe road crossing near one of the ECEC centres. Flexibility is key to the functioning of the role (Devaney and Dolan, 2014) because as suggested in Eisenstadt's blog (2024) "families struggling to meet essential needs rarely ask for the kind of services that we think they need. In light of these findings, it may be timely to **re-conceptualise the role of the family facilitator**.

Conclusion

The impact of family support, parenting programmes, preventative and other universal programmes are recognised nationally and internationally (Fives et al., 2014; Connolly & Devaney, 2017). There is general agreement that no one-size-fits-all (Lechowicz et al., 2019) and this has been borne out by this study. The Family Facilitator role description, work plans and general expectations were that evidenced-based and evidence-informed parent programmes would be delivered to parents as well as workshops that would proactively improve the home learning environment. These actions were not possible to achieve in the first phase of the FF role, primarily because of the time required to build trusting relationships with the parents. In contrast to the aim of delivering parenting programmes directly, the more immediate and basic needs of the parents took precedence. Ultimately, the Family Facilitator needs to be sensitive and experienced in working with diverse families. Embedded within the Family Facilitator approach is the commitment to developing responses to situations and parental needs together, rather than pre-empting what might be required. The role aims to minimise a power divide by engaging with and being led by parents. What has been most evident from the study is that parents and educators have begun to feel the benefits of having a Family Facilitator and with multi-annual funding this role should be extended across all StartBright centres.



The benefits of the current programme are being felt by educators and parents, and it is anticipated that the investment by StartBright in the FF role will pay dividends into the future. There is a recognition within StartBright that “while it is a slow process, it is working”. The notion of a slow development, or slow burn is reflective of Sure Start findings where impact and overall savings are accrued over a number of years (Eisenstadt, 2024). What must be borne in mind is the sustainability and future resourcing of this role within StartBright. Carneiro et al. (2024, p.43) highlights that “integrating services in deprived areas can make a material difference to children’s outcomes, but only if they are properly funded”. The current situation is that CDI supports two, part-time roles and StartBright employs two full-time Family Facilitators, who cover and support five ECEC centres. What is apparent is that StartBright depends on CDI and the current level of Government funding under Equal Start does not adequately fund the two full-time roles which are covered through the organisation’s limited resources. To effect sustainability and embedded change, more is needed. Given the community demographics and contexts within which StartBright operates, the waiting lists of each ECEC centre and the findings from this study all signpost the need for one full-time family facilitator per setting.



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