

You Do Not Know What You Have Not Lived

Linking Families & Communities:

Family Support Learning Report

November 2024



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Foreword

'You Do Not Know What You Have Not Lived' shares the experience, perspective and wisdom of the families and practitioners who have journeyed together in our Linking Families & Communities Project since 2016. We're indebted to our funder, The National Lottery Community Fund, for allowing this project to develop organically, informed by the expertise of families themselves, and for supporting the publication of emerging learning.

The Linking Families & Communities Charter is a key addendum to the main report. It sets out the reasonable expectations that families from minoritised ethnic communities have when seeking and receiving family support. That the Charter bears such a clear resemblance to the NISCC Standards and Conducts of Practice for Social Workers in Northern Ireland tells us something about the policy to practice gap, in which so much work on realising rights remains to be done.

We are, however, heartened that the Report of the Independent Review of Children's Social Care Services in Northern Ireland (2023) urges *"greater focus and attention"* be given to family support,

and recommends *"urgent investment"* in services within the community and voluntary sector. Further, Professor Pat Dolan, in his appendix to the report, acknowledges family support as *"a prerequisite for the full and indivisible exercise of the rights of the child"*, noting that *"it is within the voluntary/ community sector that the delivery of early help and family support services occurs across the region."*

The Linking Families & Communities Project is testimony to what's possible when you dig where you stand and to the real difference that high quality, family support, delivered in the right way, at the right time, can make for children and their families.

This report reflects our commitment to amplifying the voices of families from minoritised ethnic communities, and our contribution to making systems and services as flexible, child-centred and outcomes-focused as these families already are.

Fintan McAliskey,
Chief Executive Officer
South Tyrone Empowerment Programme



About STEP

South Tyrone Empowerment Programme (STEP) is a rights-based community organisation providing services in advice, support, advocacy, community development, social enterprise & strategic engagement.

Established in 1997, we are a registered charity based in Mid Ulster with offices in Dungannon, Cookstown and Magherafelt.

STEP's overarching aim is to contribute to building a rights-based participative, peaceful and prosperous society which provides equality of access and opportunity, embraces diversity and respects difference.

The core principle of empowerment underpins all our activity regardless of changing projects and clients.

Our Core Services



Community Advice

STEP is funded by Mid Ulster Council to provide support, information and advice on accessing benefit entitlements to those living in Mid Ulster. By receiving timely advice from qualified staff, individuals can begin to access the resources necessary to resolve issues impacting the quality of their daily lives. Free language support is also available.



Community Partnerships

We believe that collaborative relationships, with shared vision, responsibility, resource and reward are the most effective way of developing community solutions and change. We currently host and manage staff for both An Tearnann, Traveller Support Group, and the Stronger Together Network for people working in the field of ethnic and racial equality in Northern Ireland.



Community Support

Our Community Support programmes include family Support, floating Support and mental health services. Our aim is to provide relationship-based scaffolding alongside information and guidance to help restore self-efficacy and self-advocacy. Our support workers offer one-to-one and group opportunities for individuals and families to self-identify needs and work through the issues impacting their quality of life.



Policy, Engagement & Research

Our service reach puts us in a unique position to gather first-hand, grassroots-level information on the needs and experiences of minoritised communities. We contribute this knowledge and experience to consultation and decision-making processes, when we believe it might influence systemic change. Policy and engagement work is currently focused on racial equality; immigration; housing and homelessness; and education.



Community Development

We want to help create social, environmental and economic improvement within the community. We work continuously to raise awareness of and support engagement in empowerment opportunities within the wider community. Current community development initiatives are focused on education and training; good relations and anti-racism; and access to funding and development for small, grassroots community groups.



Social Enterprise

Like others in the community sector, we rely on innovative practice to ensure our service offer is not compromised by short-term or inadequate funding. Our social enterprise, STL, has provided a lifeline for STEP, through the identification of sustainable revenue which fits with our social mission, most notably managing our landmark community building, The Junction.

About Our Linking Families & Communities Project

All families need support at some point in their lives. Better still, we're all entitled to support and asking for it should be seen as a strength.

"Where, after all, do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home – so close and so small that they cannot be seen on any maps of the world... Such are the places where every man, woman and child seek equal justice, equal opportunity, equal dignity without discrimination. Unless these rights have meaning there, they have little meaning anywhere."

Eleanor Roosevelt, 1958

Our Linking Families & Communities Project has been funded by The National Lottery Community Fund since 2016, in acknowledgement that for many to support families from minoritised ethnic communities with a child aged 12 or under, the experience of seeking support has not been a positive one.

Lack of service and system knowledge, self-confidence, communication barriers, experiences of prejudice and judgement, stigma and fear of unintended consequence can all impact on a family's sense of belonging and development of networks of support.

Thresholds of need, exclusion criteria, lack of interpreting services or bilingual workers, time-bound interventions, waiting lists, rigid and siloed service provisions can equally frustrate a family's enjoyment of their rights and ability to access support.



The Linking Families and Communities Project works to contain presenting problems safely, to stop things getting worse, while we support families to restore their capacity to think, implement short term solutions and, in the longer term, develop confidence, knowledge, skills and relationships which will endure beyond our involvement.

We do this by providing direct, practical and flexible support through 1-to-1, parent and child, family and group engagements. We offer outreach and language support, home visits and evidence-based programmes to help build positive, nurturing family relationships and to improve confidence, capacity and connections for problem-solving and support-seeking.

We work at the pace of the family. Action plans and targets are set by them. Our role in the achievement of sustainable outcomes is to offer containment, reciprocity, scaffolding and co-advocacy.

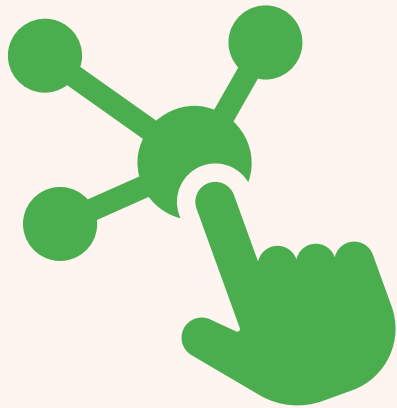
We work collaboratively with other STEP services and external organisations to avoid duplication, extend available networks of support and to meet whole-family needs.

We contribute family and practitioner knowledge and expertise to the development of law, policy and practice, when we believe that our strategic influence is likely to be given due weight and could result in meaningful and population level change.



Understanding and Responding to Need:

Data protection and archiving processes mean that we have relied on data from 1 May 2019 to 30 September 2024 for this statistical summary. Statistics will be higher for the full duration of the project, 1 September 2016 – 31 March 2025.

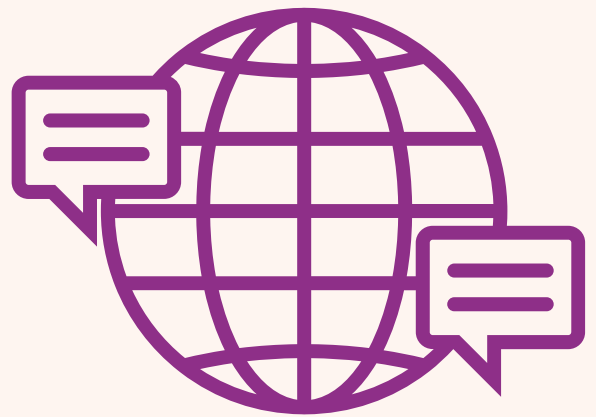


391

Families engaged

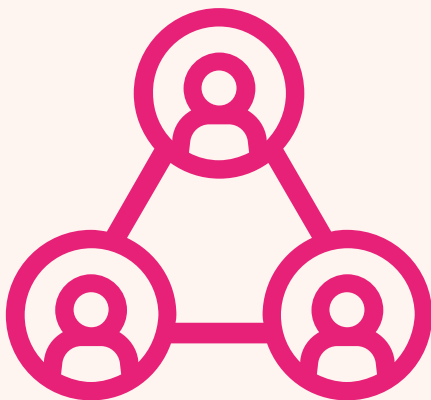
552

Child beneficiaries



23

Languages spoken by families



83

Families completed Incredible Years programmes

170

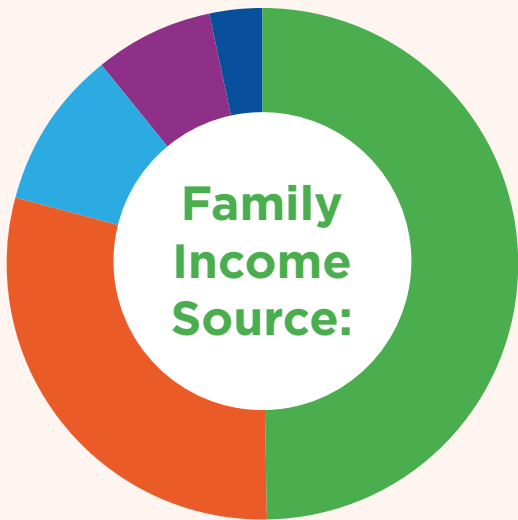
Children benefited from Incredible Years programmes



260

Referrals for additional services

Project Statistics 2019-2024



195
Benefits only

115
Earnings & benefits

39
Earnings only

29
Not disclosed

13
No income



268

Families requiring foodbank support (69%)



86

Families needing clothing & other essentials (22%)



79

Families experiencing homelessness (20%)



102

Families supported to financial gain through full benefit entitlement (26%)



248

Families supported to financial gain through grants and charitable applications (63%)



£756,168.97*
Total financial gains for families

**This includes gains from benefits, grants and charitable applications*

Improving Experiences and Outcomes for Families from Minoritised Ethnic Communities

The Linking Families and Communities Project has been heavily influenced by the work of the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, particularly their science to policy and practice working paper, “Three Principles to Improve Outcomes for Children and Families.”

Informed by the science of childhood development, the Center on the Developing Child identify three design principles that policymakers and practitioners in many different sectors can use to improve outcomes for children and families and to help them thrive:

1. Support responsive relationships for children and adults.

2. Strengthen core skills for planning, adapting, and achieving goals.

3. Reduce sources of stress in the lives of children and families.

Cradled within our organisational commitment to rights-based approaches and anti-racist practice, this framework enables us to connect the organic development of our family support project with internationally evidenced theories of social change, inclusion and improving outcomes for children and families.

It also allows us to describe our work in a way that is teachable, learnable and doable by others.

Tackling discrimination requires an acknowledgement that it exists, and a proactive commitment to challenging the prejudices that facilitate it.

That’s why we’ve also adopted the four key policy and practice implications set out by the Early Intervention Foundation, (now ‘What Works for Early Intervention & Children’s Social Care’), in their 2022 report on *‘Improving the way family support services work for minority ethnic families’*:

1. All services working with children and families must embed effective approaches to eradicate racist and discriminatory practices.
2. Initial interactions with support services are critical. Local areas must make the idea of ‘no wrong door’ a reality for minority ethnic children, young people or families who reach out for help.
3. Early help and wider family support services must be designed to better respond to the needs of minority ethnic families.
4. Workforce planning, in relation to early help and wider family support services, must include a focus on the skills needed to build trusting relationships with minority ethnic families.



“Using these design principles to promote positive change on all three dimensions is our best chance to help adults provide safe and responsive caregiving, and to help children get (and stay) on track for healthy development.”

Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University.



Supporting Responsive Relationships

Responsive relationships help children and adults deal with stress, co-regulate emotions and behaviours, and build hope for the future.

Poverty, housing insecurity, serious illness, immigration status and domestic violence are only some of the issues which disrupt the stability and quality of relationships for the families in our project.

“Our major finding is that your history of relational health - your connectedness to family, community, and culture - is more predictive of your mental health than your history of adversity.”

Bruce D. Perry.
What Happened To You. 2021



We aim to foster responsive relationships between children and those who care for them, at home and in the wider community.

What We Do:

- ✓ Train all support staff in the Solihull Approach and apply the principles of containment and reciprocity to all our engagements with, and emotional support for families.
- ✓ Work at the pace of the family, making sure they have and understand the information they need to make decisions which affect them and their children.
- ✓ Model responsive relationships by listening without judgement, accepting families' experiences and perspectives, and treating clients with dignity and respect.
- ✓ Use our relationship with families to help contain problems safely, creating space in which parents can restore their capacity to think and make good decisions.
- ✓ Offer 1-to-1 home visit coaching and group based parenting programmes, including Incredible Years, to support parent-child relationships and interactions.
- ✓ Run activities, events and information sessions to connect families to wider networks of support and help bridge access to and development of these new relationships.
- ✓ Ensure our approach is flexible and adapted to personal circumstances so families can stay connected with us while they work through longer-term solutions.
- ✓ Ensure staff have the time they need to develop relationships with families, providing named-worker support without a cut-off date.



What Families Say



“Our home is different now, things have changed. Also, more love, more love for each other.”

“I feel because of managing my way through this difficult situation, my relationship with son is much stronger. Also, with family in my home country, we are closer. We call each other every day. They are great support to me. From the day I contacted STEP, these good relationships have rippled out through my life. I can believe things are going to be ok.”

“I am now more aware of what a healthy relationship looks like, and how to be safe, and what support I can get.”

“I remember feeling that everything was closing in on me. When you offered me the respite break, it was private and confidential. No one knew where we were. I went with my son and my mother. This helped us to relax and bond more as a family unit. I was so grateful for that space.”

“I loved coming to the group because I could relax, all parents were in similar situation as mine, so we understood each other. We had a cup of coffee and something to eat, I made a few friends, it was lovely.”

“When I left an abusive relationship, my children and I had nowhere to go. STEP took me to Women’s Aid, but the support worker stayed involved with me all the time, giving me good emotional support. STEP helped me get my own place to live and furniture. I am so relaxed. My children are safe.”

Strengthening Core Skills

Stark and deepening social and health inequalities mean that adversity is inescapable for many families from minoritised ethnic communities.

Skills such as the ability to adapt to change, to self-regulate and co-regulate emotions in stressful situations and to plan for and achieve goals can significantly affect the outcomes of that adversity.

“As children develop, their brains “mirror” their parent’s brain. In other words, the parent’s own growth and development, or lack of those, impact the child’s brain. As parents become more aware and emotionally healthy, their children reap the rewards and move toward health as well.”

Dr. Daniel J. Siegel,
The Whole Brain Child. 2012.



We aim to provide the scaffolding for children and families to develop, strengthen and apply these skills in a safe and supportive environment until we’re not needed, and we can gradually reduce support.

What We Do

- ✓ Help families recognise and value the skills they have already been able to apply in surviving adversity and in seeking support.
- ✓ Use a coaching and motivational model of family support to help families identify, plan for, and meet their own goals.
- ✓ Encourage self-efficacy and self-advocacy by supporting decision-making without overstepping the boundaries of parental agency and responsibility, unless in the case of a safeguarding concern.
- ✓ Support families to develop organisational skills including self-care, establishing routines, budgeting, medication planning, making appointments, maintaining benefits journals, and planning for the future.
- ✓ Offer parenting support programmes which model and coach emotional regulation and executive functioning skills for both children and parents.
- ✓ Create regular opportunities for families to learn and practice new skills in age-appropriate, culturally acceptable contexts, such as baby massage groups, play-based sessions and respite breaks.
- ✓ Model recognition, encouragement and praise by sharing frequent and specific feedback on small, incremental achievements.
- ✓ Help source education, training and employment opportunities which could contribute to economic stability and a predictable caregiving environment.



STEP FAMILY SUPPORT
SERVICES

What Families Say



"My planning skills have improved. I have good routine with my baby, my home is safe. I plan my days ahead to get to places and appointments and to be on time. I am communicating more with other people, and I got involved in a women's group. Even financially I can plan better for all expenses to make sure I have enough money to pay bills and buy things for the baby."

"My confidence in asking for support has improved a lot. I would say from 0% to 80% now. I can ring now housing and ask for the repairs to be completed myself. My level of English has improved as well. This is all thanks to STEP and my support worker. I understand more about my rights in this country."

"When my son was diagnosed with Autism, I didn't know what Autism was. Through the programme at STEP, I have better knowledge and more understanding of my son. This programme helped me to be more confident in my parenting skills and improved my relationship with all my children."

"Finding a job, helped me to improve my daily routine. My children's sleep pattern is better now. I plan for next day and I am more organised. I have all things in place which I need, and looking ahead is easier."

"Before, I would panic at sudden changes in my life. Now, I first look for the information and see where I can get help. If I can't do it myself, ring STEP! So, I'm responding better and managing change. I am calmer now. My family situation is much better."

Reducing Sources of Stress

Stress and stress responses are an important part of development, but poverty, systemic racism, intergenerational trauma, violence, abuse and prolonged mental illness can, without effective interventions, cause enduring problems for children and the adults who care for them.

Constant, chronic stress limits healthy development in children and reduces parental capacity and confidence for self-efficacy and decision making.

“The research literature has identified three factors that universally lead to stress: uncertainty, the lack of information and the loss of control.”

Gabor Maté. *When The Body Says No*. 2003.



We aim to reduce the build-up of toxic stress for children and families so that they experience fewer and less powerful triggers and feel better able to protect and support themselves through difficulties and challenges.

What We Do

- ✓ Provide services in calm, organised, and predictable ways and in environments where families feel safe and welcome.
- ✓ Routinely ask about and respond to major stressors affecting families as part of triage and support processes.
- ✓ Provide or signpost to quickly meet basic needs such as food, clothing, electric, heating oil, school uniforms and equipment, toiletries and baby products.
- ✓ Explore options for relieving longer-term financial stress through maximising benefit and work entitlements, debt and overpayment negotiation, sustaining tenancies and stabilising immigration status where possible.
- ✓ Intensify support for families during periods of severe hardship, such as homelessness and incidents of domestic or community violence.
- ✓ Work with other STEP services to reduce community-level sources of stress through, housing and homelessness support, mental health services, good relations activity and raising awareness of education, training and employment opportunities.
- ✓ Engage pro-actively in Family Support Hubs and Locality Planning Groups to secure whole family support and to help identify patterns of adversity and effective responses.
- ✓ Share family and practitioner knowledge and expertise in policy and decision-making fora, where we believe it will be afforded due weight and could influence systemic change.



What Families Say



"I was struggling, and it was affecting my mental health. Getting clothes, toys for the children and shopping vouchers helped me a lot to reduce anxiety. Knowing I can pay the rent and have electric and that the kids are safe and warm takes that bit of pressure of you, instead of always stressing about that."

"Family support called me back almost immediately and asked if me and my children I are safe. It's difficult to explain the relief but I felt that you really cared. You allowed me time to explain what has happened. It was from our first conversation that I realised I am not alone and things will get better."

"You showed me humanity, empathy, understanding of my feelings and emotions. Other people are just advising me and not considering what I want, just telling me what to do. You always gave me the options. The choice was mine."

"You took care not only of everyday things and formalities but most of all you gave me peace of mind, safety and security. This allowed me to concentrate on my kids and cancer treatment to improve my health. Even though I don't know what's next, I know my family will be ok even if I am not here."

"I was always able to get an appointment whether over the phone or face to face. The access was very easy. All staff were very reliable, they always contacted me on agreed time, so I had no stress, I didn't worry that maybe I got the date or time of the appointment wrong."

Rights-based Approaches and Anti-Racist Practice

“All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights.” This simple statement from Article 1 of the 1947 Universal Declaration of Human Rights bears repeating in 2024.

So too does the more recent 2022 statement from the UN Group of Experts, reminding states of their duty to *“ensure that all children, without discrimination, are allowed to be children, to grow, learn, and play in a safe, inclusive, and caring environment, and to thrive with dignity. Everywhere. And at all times.”*

*“Both systemic racism and interpersonal discrimination can lead to chronic stress activation that imposes significant hardships on families raising young children.
It’s time to connect these dots.”*

Center on the Developing Child, Harvard University. 2021



We aim to raise family awareness of and capacity to claim rights and to challenge racism and discrimination in law, policy and practice.

What We Do

- ✓ View support-seeking as both a right and a strength.
- ✓ Understand our role as scaffolding children and families towards the realisation of their rights, their full potential and equal participation in society.
- ✓ Minimise project exclusion criteria or thresholds because we recognise the multiplicity of pre-existing barriers to securing effective family support.
- ✓ Always ask and never assume. This minimises the risk of conscious or unconscious bias impacting on families’ experiences of our services.
- ✓ Employ a workforce that reflects the diversity of our community and specify bilingualism as a desirable criterion in our recruitment processes.
- ✓ Hold duty bearers to account on their statutory responsibilities while raising parental and child capacity to do the same.
- ✓ Support families to understand and use complaints and grievance procedures to challenge discrimination and unfair treatment.
- ✓ Represent the interests and experiences of children and families in decision-making fora and treaty reporting cycles.



What Families Say



“When we came to this country, we didn’t know anything about the school system, benefits, housing etc. We had support from STEP, and they explained everything for us clearly and slowly and support worker always asked if we understood, and we felt that it is ok to ask the question and ask for help if you are not sure about something.”

“I also liked at STEP that they allowed for the meetings here which are important for my culture. We had a Muslims meeting once a week to pray. This was very good for me. I am very thankful for this. It helped me to celebrate my religion, and no one judged us here when we were coming for the prayers.”

“Sometimes you don’t like to ask people questions, because they’ll answer you, but you can feel their impatience. You think, ‘why are you are being judgemental without knowing anything about me?’ Being a new mum, I don’t need that. At STEP I didn’t get that. Everybody was very supportive and understanding and there was no such thing as silly question.”

“I have been to one or two things organised by other organisations, but nothing else came from it. I didn’t get any follow up call, or nobody ever texted me after that to ask if me or my child wanted to come back or tell me what else they can offer. They had my number too. You can feel excluded as a Traveller. Life goes on and you are not going to search for relationships where you’re not wanted. Not all the places are as welcoming and accessible as STEP.”



Linking Families & Communities: Our Charter for Family Support Services

We asked families: What makes a good service for families from minoritised ethnic communities? What message would you give STEP and others about how you want to be treated when you ask for family support?

This is their charter, for themselves, for us, and for you.



1. Be friendly. Welcome me with a hello and a smile!

First impressions can affect my confidence and trust in you and a bad experience can be enough to make me not come back.



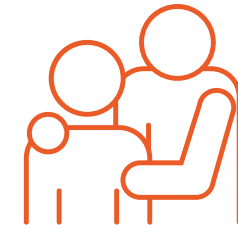
2. See my support-seeking as a right and a strength.

I'm here because I need and want to help my children and give us a better life.



3. Listen without judgement and don't make assumptions about me.

I've had too much of that. Please treat me with dignity and respect. Let me say what I need to say. Be calm with me and understanding.



4. Work with my availability as well as yours. I have so many responsibilities to juggle.

When I can't come to you because of a disability, caring responsibilities or fear, please come to me.



5. Support me in my own language when you can or provide an interpreter so I feel understood,

and we can get to know each other quickly. I feel at ease when I see people from different backgrounds and cultures working together.



8. Protect and value the information I share with you. It's not easy to tell private things to strangers.

Please don't make me tell multiple people, multiple times.



6. Give me practical help with urgent problems while we figure out longer term solutions.

I can't look after myself or my family when we're hungry and cold, have no money or don't feel safe.



9. When you say you'll call back, please do. Check in on me now and again as well, to see how I'm doing.

It helps me feel like you care and I'm not isolated.



7. Share information with me but also help me use it to make good decisions for my children and family.

I need your support to take action and make positive changes.



10. Offer me hope but not empty promises.

Helping me to change small things and plan for the future makes me feel safe and able to believe life will get better for my children.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to:

All of the families who have entrusted us to be part of their journeys.

Our staff team, volunteers and partners across the statutory, voluntary and communities sectors who enabled successful delivery of this project.

The National Lottery Community Fund for financially supporting both project delivery and the sharing of learning.

Dr. Lisa Cherry for inspiring the title of this report.



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