

Meitheal and Child and Family Support Networks Interim Report on the Meitheal Process and Outcomes Study

BY

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Key Findings

WHAT IS THE MEITHEAL PROCESS AND OUTCOMES STUDY ABOUT

The Meitheal Process and Outcomes Study refers to the Meitheal and Child and Family Support Networks that is one of five packages in the Development and Mainstreaming Programme for Prevention Partnership and Family Support (PPFS) that Tusla, the Child and Family Agency is currently working on. This document presents preliminary key findings reflecting the views of parents, children, young people and **Lead Practitioners** on the experience and effect of participating in Meitheal.

WHAT IS MEITHEAL?

In the context of this report Meitheal refers to an Irish **early intervention** and **prevention** practice model that is used when children and young people need support around, for example, behavioural issues or emotional needs, but do not meet the **threshold** for an intervention by Tusla's Child Protection and Welfare (CPW) service. A Meitheal can only be organised if a family agree to take part in it. A Meitheal is coordinated by a Lead Practitioner who can be employed by any organisation that is in contact with families such as Tusla, primary or secondary schools or Family Resource Centres. The family's involvement in identifying their strengths and needs and developing associated action plans is a key part of the process. In some cases a single organisation can provide support but usually a team of people from a number of agencies with relevant expertise is brought together to work with the parents/guardians, the child or young person. A coordinated action plan is developed to meet the needs of the child or young person and if necessary other family members. Regular meetings are held to review the progress made and to discuss possible new actions. Parents/guardians can ask for a Meitheal to be organised, or it can be suggested by a professional they are in contact with. Also, a Tusla's CPW social worker can suggest a Meitheal if there are concerns for a child or young person but the need does not meet the threshold for intervention, or where a child protection issue has been resolved but the family still need some support.

WHAT IS THE RESEARCH STUDY ABOUT?

This is a progress report on the Meitheal Process and Outcomes Study. In this study information is being collected from parents/guardians and their children who are participating in Meitheal and have agreed to take part in this research project. The research team usually meet with the families and Lead Practitioners at the start of the Meitheal process and then six months later to find out about what it is like to take part in Meitheal and what influence it can have on families' **well-being** and **outcomes**. The aim of this report is to give an early picture of families and Lead Practitioners' experiences of Meitheal, the nature of families' **participation** in it and the impact it has had on the difficulties they need support for. This report presents findings on a number of themes including the experience of taking part in Meitheal, the impact it has on families' outcomes and changes to the system of providing help and challenges it faces.

HOW WAS THE INFORMATION COLLECTED?

The information was collected from children and young people and their parents/guardians who are currently involved in a Meitheal and the Lead Practitioners who support them. Information was gathered through interviews and tools that measure changes in families' outcomes and their strengths and difficulties. Information from interviews with 41 people is presented (10 children and young people, 19 parents and 12 Lead Practitioners). Results from scales completed with 106 people are included (40 children and young people, 41 parents and 25 Lead Practitioners). Tusla performance data on its activities was also analysed for this report.

List of Definitions

Lead Practitioners are workers involved with the family who organise the Meitheal, support the family through the process and work directly with families.

Early intervention refers to supporting families at the earliest possible point so that their difficulties do not get worse and positive changes can take place in their lives. This can mean providing support early in their life or early in the stage of a difficulty.

Prevention refers to trying to work with families to prevent difficulties happening in the first place or to prevent difficulties that have happened from getting worse.

A **threshold** refers to the level of need a family member has. Once the level of need is quite high and there is a risk children or young people will experience neglect or abuse they are referred to and may become involved with Tusla's CPW service.

Well-being refers to people's general health, their emotions, behaviour, education, social selves and so on. It refers to how they are feeling and doing in these areas.

Outcomes refers to areas of a child or young person's well-being that the Meitheal process is trying to work to improve.

In this context **participation** refers to involvement in the planning and decision-making process of Meitheal.

KEY FINDINGS



Experience of Meitheal

Overall most people who participated in the study were happy with their experience of Meitheal so far. Almost all the parents/guardians felt listened to and were involved in making decisions about what supports their family should get and also believed that change was possible. Children and young people also felt listened to and some of this group and the parents/guardians thought that their families' lives had begun to improve because of Meitheal. Lead Practitioners found Meitheal useful and felt that it could help to improve families' outcomes.

The Importance of the Lead Practitioner

One of the key messages is that at least in the early stages of Meitheal the relationship between the family and the Lead Practitioner is really important. Parents/guardians saw the Lead Practitioners as empathetic and supportive. The study shows that the Lead Practitioner can help families to deal with services, provide emotional support especially to parents as well as doing direct work with the family. Participants were also happy that Meitheal helps services to work more closely together to support families and gives parents the opportunity to discuss their family's issues with these services. It can also lead to the development of more responsive action plans with less overlap between agencies in the help that is given.



Impact on Tusla

The research showed that Meitheal allows Tusla to provide greater continuity of support to children, young people and families. Meitheal also facilitates a more structured approach when a families' issues are below Tusla's CPW services' thresholds for intervention. The analysis of Tusla's data highlights that Tusla's preventative and early intervention work is more visible.

Participation in Meitheal

Parents/guardians' levels of participation seem to be quite good as they are involved in making decisions at the review meetings and help to develop plans to work on their families' issues. Some children and young people were also quite involved in the process while others chose not to be. However, some did not fully understand what Meitheal is or what their rights were and did not always have the opportunity to take part as much as they could have had. Some children and young people who had attended review meetings found them intimidating and stressful.



Challenges to Meitheal

Some problems were identified in the research that could reduce Meitheal's potential impact. These include lack of awareness about Meitheal among families and people who work with them and not having enough services and resources available to support the action plan.

The research also showed that some families might need extra supports that cannot be provided through the Meitheal process. A number of mothers were found to have a high level of need in relation to their well-being. Mothers' well-being and what region of Ireland people live in possibly have the biggest impact on what progress the family will make towards reaching their identified outcomes.

Importance of the Whole Family Approach

The research showed that in order to best support the child or young person for whom the Meitheal has been initiated it is important to understand the strengths and needs of the wider family. As noted, the findings also showed that mothers' well-being has a big impact on the families' outcomes. The research found that it was important to get the views of parents/guardians and their children about what the issues are as there were differences between what parents/guardians saw as their child's strengths and needs to be and the child or young person's views on this.



ABOUT THE PROGRAMME

The Development and Mainstreaming Programme for Prevention Partnership and Family Support (PPFS) is carried out by Tusla, the Child and Family Agency. The programme wants to change child and family services in Ireland. This change means making sure that any harm to children, young people and families is prevented and in situations when they need support and help, it is offered to them as quickly as possible.

ABOUT THE UNESCO CHILD AND FAMILY RESEARCH CENTRE, NUI GALWAY

Our job at the UNESCO Centre is to study how Tusla is supporting families, youth and children and present what we find out. There are five areas we examine on this programme including: Meitheal and Child and Family Support Networks; Children's Participation; Public Awareness; Commissioning; and Parenting Support and Parental Participation.



FURTHER INFORMATION



If you would like to learn more about the Interim Report on the Meitheal Process and Outcomes study and the overall work package, please visit our website

www.nuigalway.ie/childandfamilyresearch

or if you have any questions, please email dmpresearchstudy@nuigalway.ie

This literature is derived from the Meitheal and Child and Family Support Networks work package as part of the Development and Mainstreaming Programme for Prevention, Partnership & Family Support.

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