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A Literature Review of State Prevention and Early Intervention (PEI) Policies for Children and Families that are most Strongly Associated with Improved Outcomes

Executive Summary

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RESEARCH +
EVALUATION



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agus Comhionannais
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1. Introduction

Across many jurisdictions, child welfare and child protection systems are undergoing significant transformation, moving from historically reactive child protection and family support models towards more proactive, family-centered and community-governed approaches. This reflects growing international recognition that responding to difficulties only after they have escalated is costly, often fails to address the underlying causes of family vulnerability, and can lead to poorer long-term outcomes for children, families and communities.

Increasingly, Prevention and Early Intervention (PEI) is understood not as a collection of individual programmes, but as a whole-system orientation that integrates child wellbeing, children's rights, family support and public health principles. International policy and research suggest that effective prevention is frequently associated with coordinated policy, integrated governance, sustained investment, accessible services, skilled workforces and strong relationships with children and families. Together, these elements help to provide the conditions in which children, young people and families can thrive while reducing the need for more intensive statutory intervention. However, the wider evidence indicates that there is no single PEI framework or model consistently demonstrated to lead to improved outcomes. Effectiveness depends on how these interconnected systemic elements are adapted to local contexts.

Against this backdrop, the Department of Children, Disability and Equality (DCDE) commissioned this scoping review to examine international evidence on Prevention and Early Intervention policy and practice. The review addresses the following research question: *What core components and governance features of national Prevention and Early Intervention policy frameworks for children and families are most strongly associated with improved outcomes?*

Drawing on international policy and academic evidence, the review provides an evidence-informed synthesis of how Prevention and Early Intervention can be conceptualised, implemented and governed at a whole-system level. It identifies the characteristics associated with effective PEI systems and examines how governments are organising, implementing and evaluating preventative approaches across comparable OECD countries. In doing so, the report highlights the policy, governance and implementation conditions that are linked to strengthened

outcomes for children, young people and families while reducing future demand for statutory child protection and welfare services.

2. Methodology

This report is based on a comprehensive scoping review undertaken to systematically map international evidence on PEI policy and practice. The review followed the five-stage methodology developed by Arksey and O'Malley (2005), subsequently refined by Levac et al. (2010) and guided by the Joanna Briggs Institute (2020), ensuring a transparent, systematic and reproducible approach to evidence identification, selection and synthesis. The review was undertaken in collaboration with a Project Advisory Group comprising representatives from the Department of Children, Disability and Equality (DCDE), Tusla - Child and Family Agency, and the Prevention and Early Intervention Network (PEIN). The Advisory Group informed the scope of the review, search strategy and inclusion criteria, helping to ensure that the findings remained policy relevant and aligned with the needs of the Irish child and family welfare system.

Review Design

The review was conducted in two complementary phases.

Phase 1 examined international policy and grey literature to identify national PEI strategies, governance arrangements, implementation approaches, and system-level priorities across comparable OECD countries. Published material from 2018 to May 2026 was reviewed using major international policy repositories and organisational databases. In total, 392 policy documents and strategic publications were identified and synthesised.

Phase 2 comprised a structured review of peer-reviewed academic literature examining the implementation, effectiveness and outcomes of Prevention and Early Intervention. Searches were undertaken across eight major academic databases. Following PRISMA-guided screening, eligibility assessment, and quality appraisal, 62 academic publications were included in the final synthesis.

Together, these two phases provide a comprehensive evidence base that integrates international policy developments with empirical research on the implementation and effectiveness of Prevention and Early Intervention systems.

Data Charting and Analysis

Data were systematically charted using a standardised extraction framework. Policy documents were analysed to identify governance arrangements, strategic priorities, implementation approaches and accountability mechanisms, while academic studies were synthesised to examine implementation, outcomes, and the factors that enable or constrain effective Prevention and Early Intervention.

Given the diversity of the evidence base, findings were analysed using a narrative synthesis supported by thematic analysis, enabling evidence from policy and research to be integrated into a coherent whole-system understanding of Prevention and Early Intervention.

Methodological Limitations

The review focused primarily on English-language materials and evidence from high-income OECD countries, which may limit the transferability of the findings to other contexts. In keeping with the purpose of a scoping review, the study aimed to map and synthesise the available evidence rather than undertake formal quality appraisal of all included studies or generate pooled estimates of intervention effects. Much of the available evidence does not provide direct causal evidence of outcomes, with many studies and policy documents focusing on system activities, implementation processes, and enabling conditions. Notwithstanding these limitations, the systematic and transparent review process provides a strong basis for identifying recurring patterns across international evidence and informing policy, practice, and future research.

3. Findings

Child Wellbeing and the Prevention and Early Intervention Continuum

This review adopts a broad understanding of child wellbeing, recognising that children thrive when they are safe, healthy, connected, supported, and able to achieve their developmental potential. Consistent with OECD and Irish policy frameworks, child wellbeing encompasses physical, emotional, social, educational and material dimensions, reflecting both children's lived experiences and the wider social, economic and environmental conditions that influence healthy development.

Within this review, PEI is conceptualised as a continuum of support that promotes child wellbeing by responding to needs as early as possible and preventing difficulties from escalating. The continuum spans universal, targeted and statutory responses, recognising that children and families require different forms and intensities of support throughout childhood, and that needs may change over time. Figure 1 illustrates this continuum.

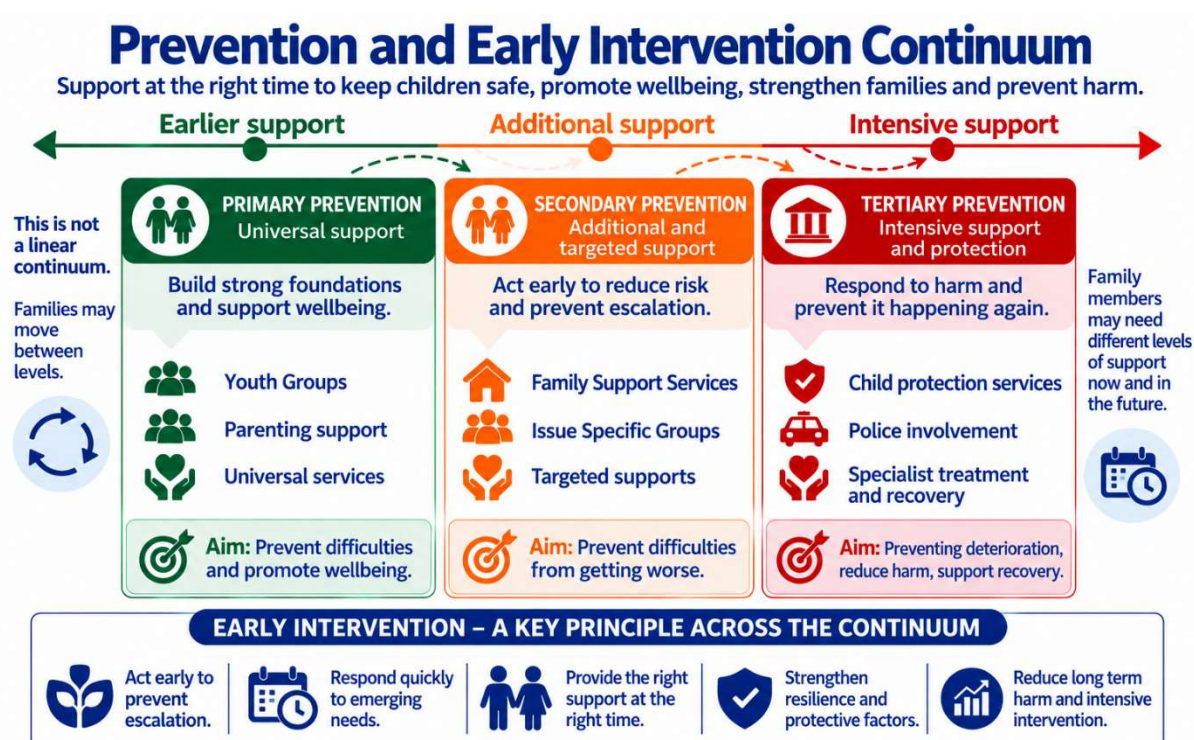


Figure 1: Prevention and Early Intervention Continuum

Effective PEI systems are characterised by sustained investment in universal and targeted supports that strengthen families, build resilience, and respond to emerging needs before statutory intervention becomes necessary. While specialist child protection and welfare services remain essential for children experiencing significant harm, international evidence consistently demonstrates that sustainable systems are associated with a reduced reliance on crisis-driven intervention by investing earlier and providing support at the right time.

This PEI continuum reflects a whole-system approach in which prevention, early intervention and statutory protection are understood as complementary rather than separate components of an integrated child and family welfare system. The central principle is that appropriate support should be provided at the earliest point and at an intensity proportionate to need, while ensuring that specialist child protection and welfare services remain available whenever children are at risk of significant harm.

Prevention seeks to reduce the likelihood of difficulties arising by strengthening protective factors and promoting positive outcomes, while early intervention involves responding promptly when needs or risks emerge, regardless of the child's age or the level of support required. Both aim to improve outcomes for children and families and prevent difficulties from becoming more entrenched or escalating to require more intensive intervention.

Importantly, the continuum is not linear. Children's and families' needs may change over time, requiring different types and intensities of support as circumstances evolve, while different family members may require different responses simultaneously. Formal services also operate alongside the important support provided by families, friends, communities, and wider social networks. The continuum therefore represents a flexible and responsive system of support, capable of increasing or reducing the intensity of intervention as needs and circumstances change.

International Policy Review: Emerging Directions in Prevention and Early Intervention

The international policy review identifies a clear shift across OECD countries from predominantly reactive child protection systems towards prevention-oriented, whole-system approaches that strengthen families earlier, improve child wellbeing and

reduce reliance on statutory intervention. Although relatively few countries have developed dedicated national Prevention and Early Intervention strategies, preventative principles are increasingly embedded within broader child wellbeing, family support, public health and children's rights policies. Across jurisdictions, five broad policy developments consistently characterise contemporary Prevention and Early Intervention systems.

Prevention as a Whole-System Policy Orientation

International policy increasingly positions Prevention and Early Intervention as a whole-system responsibility rather than the remit of individual services. European initiatives, particularly the European Child Guarantee, have accelerated this transition by promoting integrated national action to reduce child poverty, strengthen family support, and improve children's access to essential services. Countries such as Finland and Poland demonstrate how governments are restructuring child welfare systems to expand universal, accessible and non-stigmatising support while reducing reliance on crisis-driven intervention.

Promoting Child Wellbeing Across the Life Course

A growing emphasis has emerged on supporting children and families across the life course rather than responding only when risks escalate. Prevention is increasingly integrated within public health, early childhood development, education and family support policies, with investment in early, relationship-based and family-centered supports that strengthen parenting, promote positive mental health and reduce family separation.

Rights-Based and Protective Approaches

Children's rights have become a central organising principle within contemporary Prevention and Early Intervention policy. Many countries are strengthening legislative and policy frameworks to improve the prevention and early identification of abuse, violence, and exploitation, including in digital environments. A number of countries reviewed provided examples of increasingly coordinated cross-sector approaches that integrate legislative reform, governance and preventative action to strengthen child protection while promoting children's rights.

Integrated Governance and Cross-Sector Collaboration

Effective Prevention and Early Intervention requires coordinated leadership across government. Countries are increasingly establishing integrated governance arrangements that bring together health, education, social care, justice, and community services within shared policy frameworks. While governance models vary, successful systems consistently demonstrate clear leadership, defined responsibilities, shared accountability, and sustained collaboration across sectors.

Prevention as a Long-Term Social Investment

Governments are increasingly framing Prevention and Early Intervention as a long-term social investment rather than a short-term programme cost. Economic modelling from countries such as Iceland demonstrates growing recognition that sustained investment in prevention is linked to improved child wellbeing while reducing future demand for more intensive statutory child protection and welfare services.

Evidence Synthesis: What Makes Prevention and Early Intervention Systems Effective?

The academic evidence demonstrates that Prevention and Early Intervention is most effective when implemented as an integrated system rather than a collection of individual programmes. Sustainable improvements depend not on single interventions but on the interaction between policy, governance, investment, workforce capacity and service delivery. According to international evidence, five interconnected implementation mechanisms were consistently associated with improved outcomes.

Sustainable Investment

Long-term and protected investment provides the foundation for effective Prevention and Early Intervention systems. Sustained funding enables services to intervene earlier, strengthen workforce capacity, and reduce future demand for statutory services. Conversely, reductions in prevention funding undermine long-term system effectiveness and increase reliance on crisis intervention.

Proportionate Universalism

The evidence supports proportionate universalism; whereby universally accessible services provide the foundation for early identification while targeted supports are delivered in proportion to need. Rather than competing approaches, universal and

targeted services operate most effectively when integrated, enabling children and families to receive the right support at the right time without unnecessary escalation into statutory intervention.

Relationship-Based Practice

Relationships emerged as one of the strongest mechanisms through which Prevention and Early Intervention strategies and orientations can improve outcomes. Trusting, respectful and strengths-based relationships between practitioners and families promote engagement, strengthen participation, improve decision-making, and enhance families' capacity to respond to challenges. Relationship-based practice is consistently associated with earlier intervention, greater family confidence, and more sustainable outcomes.

Accessible, Equitable and Community-Based Services

Prevention and Early Intervention is also most effective when services are accessible, inclusive and responsive to the communities they serve. Families experiencing poverty, discrimination, geographical isolation, or cultural barriers often face significant obstacles to accessing support. Effective systems reduce these barriers through locally accessible, voluntary and community-based services that are culturally responsive, strengthen trust, promote meaningful participation, and improve outcomes for marginalised and underserved populations.

Workforce Capacity and Implementation

The effectiveness of Prevention and Early Intervention ultimately depends upon implementation. Skilled leadership, workforce capability, interagency collaboration, and organisational capacity consistently emerged as critical enablers of successful implementation. Investment in workforce development, supervision, collaboration and implementation support is therefore essential if policy ambitions are to translate into improved outcomes for children, young people, and families.

4. International Outcome Frameworks

A significant finding from the review is the international shift away from measuring child welfare systems primarily through deficit-based indicators, such as notifications, investigations or care entry rates. Increasingly, governments are adopting multidimensional child wellbeing frameworks that measure children's development, health, safety, participation, relationships and family wellbeing alongside system performance.

Examples include:

- *New Zealand (Ngā Wawata)*: A wellbeing framework centred on children, families and communities, with a strong emphasis on cultural identity, belonging and relational safety.
- *Alberta, Canada (Wellbeing and Resiliency Framework)*: Measures child development, caregiver capacity and social connectedness while distinguishing implementation from outcome indicators to support service improvement.
- *Iceland (National Child Wellbeing Dashboard)*: Uses an integrated dashboard to monitor education, health, wellbeing, safety, participation and quality of life across government.
- *Australia (Safe and Supported Framework)*: Combines long-term child wellbeing outcomes with implementation planning and a strong focus on reducing inequalities for overrepresented and marginalised groups.

Collectively, these frameworks demonstrate an international move towards measuring what matters most for children and families, shifting the focus from system activity to child wellbeing, equity, prevention and long-term outcomes.

5. Conditions for Successful Implementation

The review demonstrates that the success of Prevention and Early Intervention depends not only on policy ambition or programme design, but also on the organisational, financial and governance conditions that support effective implementation. Across both the international policy review and the academic evidence, a consistent set of implementation enablers and barriers emerged.

Successful Prevention and Early Intervention systems are characterised by integrated governance, sustained investment, shared accountability, and strong cross-sector collaboration. Effective implementation is supported by legislative and policy frameworks that enable interagency working, protected investment in preventative services, robust information sharing, meaningful participation of children, young people and families, and national structures that promote implementation, evaluation and continuous learning.

Conversely, implementation is weakened where governance and funding are fragmented, accountability remains confined to individual organisations, and system performance is measured primarily through compliance or statutory activity rather than child and family outcomes. Workforce shortages, high staff turnover, limited implementation capacity and weak interagency collaboration further constrain relationship-based practice and reduce opportunities for early intervention. The review also highlights that historical disadvantage, discrimination, and mistrust of statutory services can limit engagement unless systems actively promote equity, accessibility, and culturally responsive practice.

Overall, the evidence demonstrates that successful Prevention and Early Intervention is achieved not simply through effective programmes, but through well-designed systems. Sustainable improvement depends upon creating governance, investment, workforce and relational conditions that enable prevention to be implemented consistently, equitably and at scale. Figure 2 synthesizes these findings, illustrating how these interconnected components form a systemic framework rather than a checklist of isolated interventions.

Foundations of Effective Prevention and Early Intervention

Nine interconnected foundations that underpin effective systems

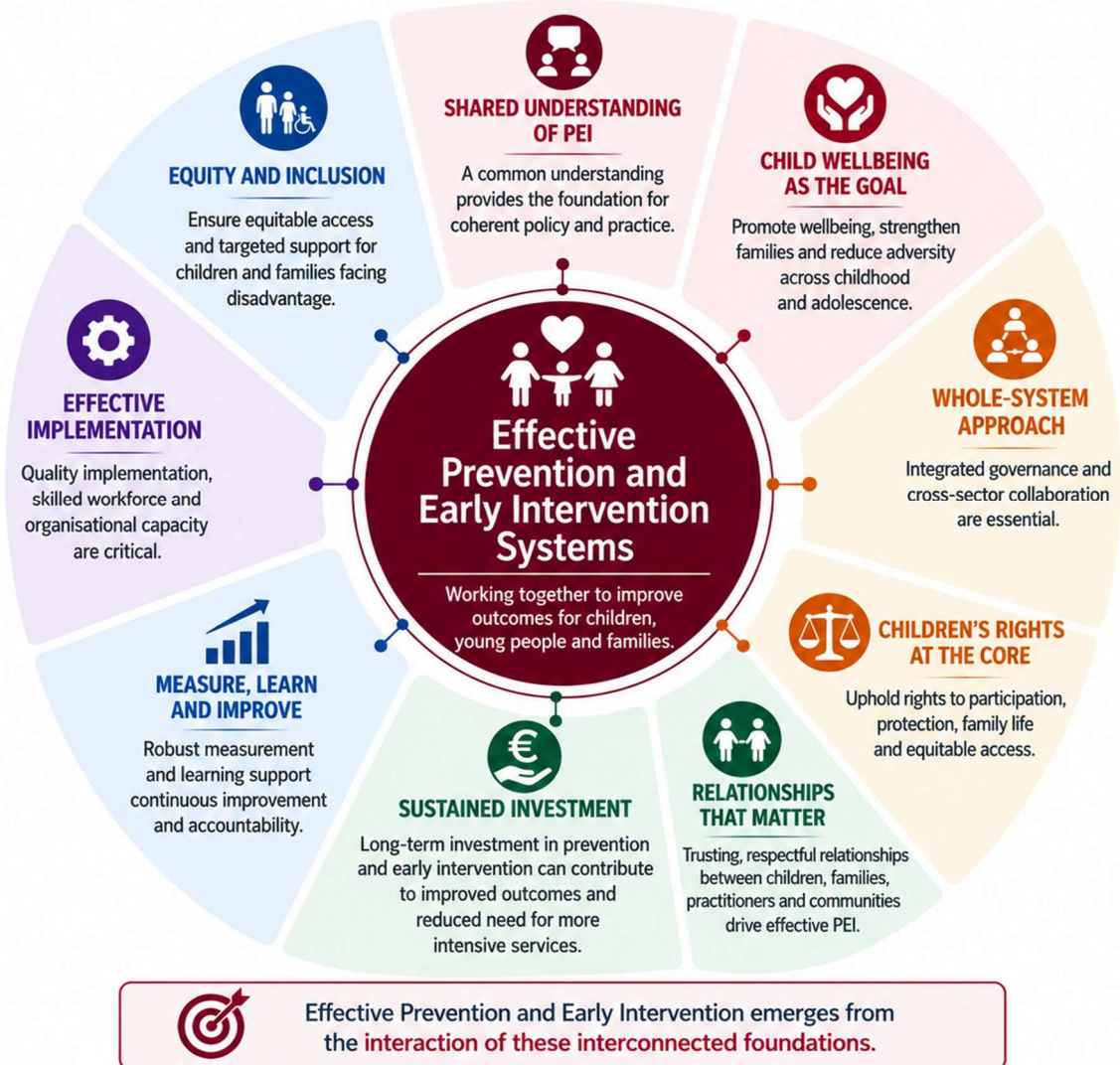


Figure 2: A Whole-System Framework for Effective Prevention and Early Intervention

6. Conclusion: Key Messages for Policy and Practice

This review demonstrates that the effectiveness of Prevention and Early Intervention is not determined by any single programme, policy, or service model. Rather, it emerges from a coherent whole-system approach that combines strong policy leadership, integrated governance, sustained investment, relationship-based practice, and a shared commitment to improving child wellbeing. Across international evidence, nine overarching messages consistently emerged (See Figure 2).

A Shared Understanding of Prevention and Early Intervention Matters

Prevention seeks to reduce the likelihood of difficulties arising by strengthening protective factors and promoting positive outcomes, while also preventing existing difficulties from escalating or becoming more entrenched. Early intervention concerns the timeliness of response, providing support when needs or risks first emerge, regardless of the child's age or the level of support required. Together, they aim to improve outcomes for children and families and reduce the need for more intensive intervention. As illustrated in Figure 1, early intervention is therefore a core principle operating across the child welfare continuum, enabling timely responses to emerging or changing needs within universal, targeted and statutory services throughout childhood and adolescence.

Child Wellbeing is the Central Policy Goal

Effective PEI systems are designed to improve child wellbeing rather than simply respond to risk. They seek to create social, economic, and service conditions that enable children and young people to experience safe, healthy, nurturing, and fulfilling childhoods.

Whole-System Approaches Deliver Better Outcomes

Effective Prevention and Early Intervention systems depend upon integrated governance, cross-sector collaboration, legislative support, workforce capability, sustainable investment and shared accountability across health, education, social care, justice and community services.

Children's Rights should underpin Policy and Practice

PEI provides a practical mechanism through which governments can realise children's rights by promoting participation, development, protection, family support, and children's voices within policy, service design and practice.

Relationships are the Primary Mechanism for Change

Trusting, respectful and strengths-based relationships between practitioners, children and families are central to successful Prevention and Early Intervention. Relationship-based practice strengthens engagement, builds confidence, and supports sustainable change.

Prevention is a Long-Term Investment

Sustained investment is essential to building effective Prevention and Early Intervention systems. Long-term funding enables earlier support, strengthens system capacity, and reduces future demand for more intensive statutory interventions.

Measure What Matters to Children

Measuring the success of PEI requires more than monitoring service activity or statutory interventions. Effective systems use multidimensional outcome frameworks that combine child wellbeing indicators, implementation measures, qualitative evidence and longitudinal data to monitor child wellbeing, understand system performance and inform continuous improvement.

Implementation Determines Success

There is no single model of Prevention and Early Intervention that guarantees improved outcomes. Effectiveness depends upon high-quality implementation, strong leadership, workforce capability, collaboration, and the ability to adapt approaches to local contexts and changing needs.

Equity Must be Embedded Throughout the System

Effective PEI systems embed proportionate universalism to ensure that while provisions are universal, families experiencing greater disadvantage receive additional support tailored to their exact level of need. Addressing structural inequalities,

reducing barriers to access and promoting culturally responsive services are essential to improving outcomes and reducing disparities.

7. Final Reflection

The international evidence points to a shift towards Prevention and Early Intervention as a whole-system approach to improving outcomes for children, young people and families. While countries differ in how services are organised and delivered, there is growing convergence around the importance of integrated policy, sustained investment, collaborative governance, relationship-based practice and a shared cross-sectoral commitment to child wellbeing.

Prevention and Early Intervention is not simply about intervening earlier. It is about creating the conditions in which children, young people and families can thrive by strengthening families, reducing inequalities, promoting children's rights and ensuring timely and proportionate support across the continuum of need.

Ultimately, effective Prevention and Early Intervention is not a single programme, standalone service or isolated policy, but a whole system orientation in which policy, governance, investment, services, communities and relationships work together. Its potential lies not simply in identifying programmes that work, but in building integrated, equitable and responsive systems capable of providing the right support, at the right time and at an intensity proportionate to need.

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