



Anna Freud
National Centre for
Children and Families

News Release

Embargoed until 6th October 2022

Not for release until 00:01 06.10.22

Landmark study shows therapy with parents, babies and young children improves mental health, relationships and social and emotional wellbeing

A new systematic study shows psychotherapy interventions can prevent and reduce mental health difficulties in parents and caregivers and their babies and young children

A comprehensive scientific review of international research by the Anna Freud Centre shows the positive impacts of therapy interventions with children under 5 Years of age and their caregivers. The detailed research, the first of its kind to focus specifically on psychodynamic and psychoanalytic interventions, was commissioned by the Association of Child Psychotherapists (ACP) and published on 6th October 2022. The systematic review of 77 research studies, including 5,660 participants, shows that therapeutic interventions in the very early months and years of life can help to prevent and reduce mental health difficulties **both** for parents and their children by focussing on the crucial relationship between them.

The programmes studied in this report aimed to get ‘beneath the surface’ of early difficulties in the parent-baby relationship and the emotional and behavioural problems that may be developing in the child. The psychoanalytic method means a focus on strengthening the infant’s early relationships with parents and helping the caregiver to observe and make sense of the baby or young child’s experiences. They also emphasise how parenting difficulties can be passed down through the generations – in the context of trauma or adversity in a parent’s past experiences – which means that some families need help in developing strong foundations for good mental and emotional health with their own children.

This review shows how early therapeutic interventions can offset negative outcomes associated with adversity and severe mental health issues in this crucial period of child development including the first 1001 days from conception to age two. This major research study showed significant improvements in:

- parent’s capacity to understand both their own and their child’s thoughts and feelings and how these may be connected (known as Parental Reflective Functioning)
- depression in the parent – primarily for mothers who were the main participants in the studies
- how the baby or young child behaves socially and emotionally
- the attachment relationship between parent and child which is the basis for good mental health when the caregiver is able to be available and responsive to a child’s needs.

The families in these studies who received therapy were experiencing significant and multiple psychological and social stressors on their parenting. The interventions were delivered to families experiencing more than one problem including parental mental health difficulties, substance misuse, chronic poverty and social exclusion, maltreatment, community and domestic violence and trauma. They were provided to families from a diverse range of ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds.

Chief Executive for the Association of Child Psychotherapists, Dr Nick Waggett said: “We are so pleased to hear the encouraging outcomes of this international research in recognising the role of psychotherapy in improving health outcomes for parents and children. It shows that early intervention when difficulties arise can make a real difference and supports Child Psychotherapists who are working every day with very young children and their caregivers to improve their mental health.

“The first months and years of life are critical for shaping a range of health and social outcomes throughout someone’s lifespan. We must improve services to support families whose difficulties are often very severe and can have adverse impacts on the health and development of children. It is encouraging to see in this research how adversity and hardship faced by parents and their children can be dramatically supported by the right psychoanalytic interventions. We are encouraged that the government in England is investing in Family Hubs as the heart of a vision for baby-centred services, designed to give every baby the best start for life. This new evidence highlights the importance of early-age psychological investment to help ensure the most effective services are provided.” Nick adds.

Lead Researcher, Dr Michelle Sled, from the Child Attachment and Psychological Therapies Research Unit (ChAPTRe) at the Anna Freud Centre said: “We are excited to have found some really promising outcomes that could have lifelong benefits for babies, young children, and their families. The results showed that psychodynamic and psychoanalytic interventions can help children under five years of age, and their caregivers, in preventing mental health difficulties. They do this by supporting improvements in parental reflective functioning, parental depression, infant behaviours, and attachment. We would like to see these approaches included in front-line services, delivered by Child and Adolescent Psychotherapists and other professionals. By increasing awareness that effective interventions lead to real change, we have the opportunity to make improvements to the funding and provision of services in the crucial early months and years of a child's life.”

Becky Saunders ACP Child Psychotherapist comments: “This report provides an important step forward in the development of our understanding of what works at scale to support the relationship between parents and their babies. I hope that, by increasing awareness that effective interventions lead to real change, improvements can be made to the funding and provision of services in the crucial early months and years of life.

"With the best will in the world, some parents struggle to tune into the changing moods and needs of their children, particularly when impacted by their own difficult or traumatic upbringing. Without psychological support and attention to parenting, some young children may then be deprived of parental bonding, and ordinary help from the rapport between parent and child, that they need to lay the foundations for good mental and emotional health. "

“This review shows how early therapeutic interventions have the potential to mitigate the impacts of adversity and severe mental health issues in this crucial period of child development.” Becky adds.

“For example, if a mother is experiencing depression due to her own traumatic upbringing and struggling to bond with her baby, she may, quite understandably, be finding it difficult to untangle the powerful feelings that are characteristic of this time of life, to enable her to fully support the needs of her baby. Exploring this with a child psychotherapist who can help the mother and baby to bond and connect, will not only enable the mother to meet the needs of her child and herself, but can have a long-lasting effect on the child’s development in play, learning and behaviour. This in turn will set up practices that will inform and support the parent – child relationship, child’s education and social development.” Becky adds.

Graham Shulman, Consultant Child and Adolescent Psychotherapist and Lead for Infant Mental Health Service, NHS Lanarkshire commented: “This systematic review is a timely and welcome contribution to awareness of effective interventions in parent and infant mental health. It is a helpful validation for the development and design of perinatal and infant mental health services. Child Psychotherapists using psychoanalytic interventions have had a significant role in the establishment, design and delivery of these services and the interventions they offer.”

Notes to Editors

The full title of the research study is: The Evidence Base for Psychoanalytic and Psychodynamic Interventions with Children Under 5 Years of Age and Their Caregivers: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis.

The study was commissioned by the Association of Child Psychotherapists from the Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families. The aim was to systematically review, synthesise, and critically appraise evidence for the efficacy and/or effectiveness of psychoanalytic and psychodynamic interventions for children under five years of age and their caregivers. The study was undertaken by the Anna Freud team: Dr Michelle Sleed, Ms Elizabeth Li, Dr Isabella Vainieri, Prof Nick Midgley (all who have availability for interview).

Key data

The interventions included in the review fell into three broad categories:

- contemporary psychodynamic, mentalization-based interventions
- psychodynamically-informed attachment-based interventions
- Dyadic (or triadic) psychoanalytic and psychodynamic psychotherapies

The studies showed that the changes from pre- to post-intervention were mostly positive (70-80% of the time for all outcomes).

No harmful outcomes were reported.

The meta-analysis of controlled studies found significant effects compared to control interventions on:

- Parental Reflective Functioning (95%CI -0.68 to -0.06, $p = 0.02$; $I^2 = 82\%$)
- Maternal depression (95%CI 0.13 to 0.45, $p < 0.000$; $I^2 = 44\%$)
- Infant behaviour (95%CI 0.00 to 0.43, $p = 0.04$; $I^2 = 35\%$)
- Infant attachment (95%CI -0.95 to -0.19, $p < 0.00$; $I^2 = 49\%$)

What this means is that outcomes improved more over time for families receiving these interventions than they did for those receiving alternative types of support in different domains.

These findings are statistically significant, meaning that they likely point to a real impact of the interventions.

The full report and executive summary can be viewed at: www.annafreud.org/systematicreview

About the Association of Child Psychotherapists

The Association of Child Psychotherapists (ACP) is the professional body, and Accredited Register of the Professional Standards Authority, for Child and Adolescent Psychotherapists in the UK. It has been working to improve the mental health of infants, children, young people and families since 1949. For further information go to <https://childpsychotherapy.org.uk/>

ACP believes that everyone who requires the highly skilled care provided by Child and Adolescent Psychotherapists should be able to access this support when and where needed. It campaigns to increase this support and care to champion high quality mental health support for children, young people and their families.

As a professional register under the Professional Standards Authority (PSA), the ACP protects the public by ensuring child and adolescent psychotherapy meets strict ethical and professional training and practice standards to ensure that the highest quality and safest services are provided to the infants, children, young people and families who need it most.

Child and Adolescent Psychotherapists:

1. are core NHS psychological professionals working in a wide range of community and hospital based services;
2. are trained specifically to work with infants and parents, children and young people up to age 25;
3. undertake a four-year clinical doctorate training, funded by the NHS and which is aligned to NHS priorities;
4. have high standards of practice regulated by the ACP, which is accredited by the Professional Standards Authority;
5. assess and treat mental health difficulties that can be severe or long-standing and provide leadership and supervision to colleagues.

About the Anna Freud Centre: www.annafreud.org

The Anna Freud Centre is a children's mental health charity bringing together research, clinical expertise, and training. Building on 70 years' experience, we turn research into practice to give more children and young people the help they need, when they need it. At the Anna Freud Centre, neuroscientists and practitioners in mental health, social care and education work together with children and young people to transform mental health for children, young people and their families.

For further press information and interviews please contact:

Judy Cloughton

PR Consultant

judyclopr@outlook.com

Mobile: 07789 713 876

Michelle Cunliffe

Media Relations Officer

Michelle.Cunliffe@annafreud.org

Mobile: 07776 760943

Tel: 0207 443 2954

Ext: 1007