

Helping little minds thrive

RESEARCH SUMMARY

Identifying the golden threads of programmes that support children's mental health in the earliest years



The central goal of **Helping Little Minds Thrive** is to support services to provide every family who needs it with meaningful, effective, and accessible support early on to help strengthen the foundations of babies' and young children's mental health. As part of this, **The Golden Threads Project** will use a common elements approach to identify the shared building blocks of programmes that we know work.

The early years last a lifetime

The first years of children's lives can help lay the foundations that support them in enjoying healthy, happy, and productive lives now and into the future.

We know that one in six children will experience a mental health problem during childhood. When these problems last, it can be harder for children to reach their full potential and there can be knock-on effects for their education, work, and social lives.

Supportive early relationships can help children to develop strong mental health that can last into adulthood. Providing support to families right from the start of their children's lives can be especially powerful.

We know from decades of high-quality research that programmes that support caregivers to provide nurturing care can make a real difference to children's lives. However, it can be hard for these programmes to reach all families who might benefit, due to a range of factors, such as the time and resource involved in their delivery or their suitability for specific contexts.

Drawing out the golden threads of programmes

One way to increase the reach of support for families is to identify the common building blocks of programmes that seem to be most helpful for children and their caregivers.

This is not about replacing or watering down programmes we know work, but about finding new ways to improve services and support to reach those families not currently benefiting from existing services. By identifying the common elements or golden threads of programmes, we might be able to support the adaption of existing programmes or the development of new interventions. Evidence-based golden threads could also be weaved through existing services in individualised ways during everyday contacts with families of 0-4 year olds.

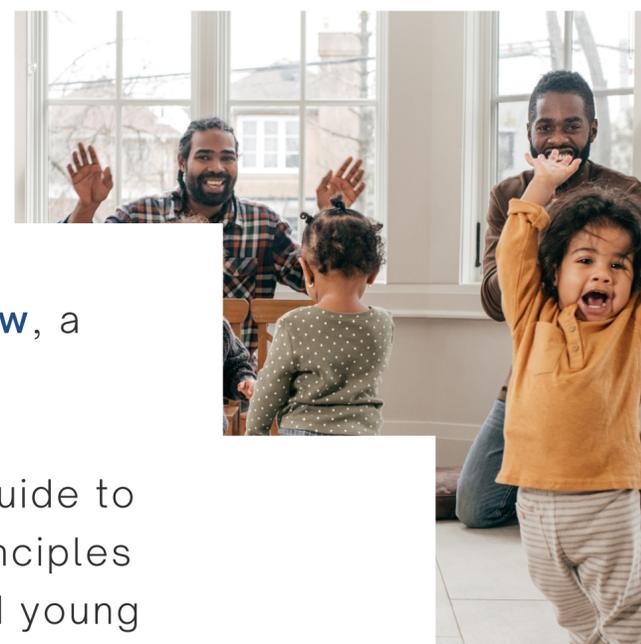
This approach has the potential to ensure that the unique needs of young children, families, and communities are being met in more flexible and accessible ways, on a wider scale, through techniques and strategies that we know work.



Using a common elements approach to identify the shared building blocks of helpful programmes to draw out the *golden threads*



Steps to the golden threads of early mental health support



Our research involves four stages including a **systematic review**, a **common elements analysis**, and a **qualitative synthesis**.

We will draw on the findings of these analyses to generate a guide to the **golden threads**. This will summarise the strategies and principles that we know are helpful for families with babies, toddlers, and young children.

1 FINDING HELPFUL PROGRAMMES



We will search research databases to identify existing programmes that have been shown to be effective in helping families with 0-4 year olds. We will focus on programmes that aim to improve child mental health, the parent-infant relationship, and parents' experiences. More information about our process for selecting programmes is on page 4.

2 PICKING OUT THE GOLDEN THREADS



We will run statistical analyses to identify the common elements of programmes that are most strongly associated with improvements in children's mental health, the parent-infant relationship, and/or parents' experiences. We will focus on elements related to: 1) parenting techniques, 2) the delivery of the programme, and 3) the implementation of the programme. See page 3 for more detail.

3 LEARNING FROM FAMILIES & SERVICES



We will review interviews from parents and carers who have received the programmes and service providers who have delivered the programmes to identify common priorities in terms of what makes programmes meaningful, accessible, and feasible to receive and deliver.

4 DEVELOPING A GUIDE TO THE GOLDEN THREADS



We will draw together all that we learn to provide a detailed guide to the golden threads of effective programmes for families of 0-4 year olds. This guide might be used by those looking to improve existing services, who could consider how the golden threads might be applied within universal and targeted services, or how existing programmes could be adapted to maximise the potential of their most effective elements.

Impact of the golden threads

In this project, we will draw out different types of programme elements to ensure that what we learn can be as useful as possible for services and families. We are interested in understanding not only which parenting techniques are helpful for young children and their families, but also how these techniques can be encouraged, and what is needed for services to do this.



Types of golden threads



Parenting techniques and approaches: Features of caregiving that programmes aim to help parents learn more about or adjust (e.g. limit setting, praise)



Strategies to help deliver the programme's content: Ways for practitioners to communicate, and caregivers to engage in, the content of the programme (e.g. role play, video-feedback)

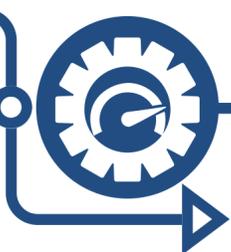


Factors needed to implement the programme. Resources, skills, and support needed for practitioners to implement the programme (e.g. training, clinical supervision)

The Golden Threads Project will identify common programme elements related to techniques for parents, delivery strategies, and implementation requirements

Uses of the golden threads

We hope this collection of golden threads will be used in different ways, so that there is flexibility to adapt to the structures of, and resources available to, different services, and to the varying needs and contexts of the children, families, and communities they work with.



OPTIMISATION

Optimise and adapt the most promising parenting programmes so that they can be better delivered at scale.



DIFFUSION

Identify practices that could be diffused more widely through early years services so that children and families receive consistent support and so support can reach more families who need it.



ACCESSIBILITY

Consider new ways in which effective support could be delivered to break down barriers to access for services and families (e.g. through virtual/digital delivery)

The Golden Threads Project could help us to optimise and adapt programmes and expand services' abilities to widen the reach and accessibility of support

Selecting programmes for review

Before including programmes in our review, we will read more about each of them to check that they meet the criteria outlined in the checklists below. This is to make sure that the programmes we analyse are of a high quality, are focused on what we're most interested in improving for families, and are realistic for local services to deliver. Once we've completed this first step, we will move to Steps 2 - 4, as outlined on Page 2.



To be included in the review, programmes must:

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Have most programme sessions focused on **supporting parenting and parent-child interactions**
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Aim to **improve child development or parenting outcomes**
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Be brief, with a **maximum of 16 sessions** for families to take part in
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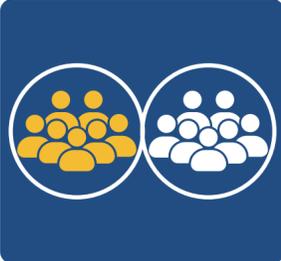
Have at least **two studies** that show the programme is **effective** in helping families
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Have a **clear guide or manual** that people delivering the programme can follow

Studies testing the programmes will need to:

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Include children with an average age of between **0 and 4 years**
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Have studied at least **50 children**
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Have a group receiving the programme and a **group for comparison**
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Be **conducted in a high-quality way** that meets research standards
- 

Have a version of the study findings **written up in English**

Getting the findings out there

We will let people know what we find through a summary guide to the golden threads, a more detailed academic paper, and a range of comms resources targeted at organisations and services working with families and communities. Preliminary findings will be out in Autumn 2023.

