Early and collaborative: the new way forward

ECINS

Solve the small problems before they become big.

Laozi

While the stories of individuals and the groups they belong to are different, there are many patterns that people have in common.

It is in recognising these patterns exist, and addressing them while they are just beginning, that gives us the opportunity to steer lives in new and more positive directions. The benefits of this approach is not just to the people at the centre, but their families, their communities and society as a whole.

While early intervention can seem like a radical concept, this approach has documented economic and efficacy benefits that make it an approach well worth considering across every sector.

Too little, too late

As many who work in the social support services already know, the most urgent and expensive pressures we as a society face, stem from systems that are set up to react to problems rather than prevent and solve them.

We see people at the point when they have already committed or become the victim of a crime, or when they have become homeless or addicted, and we try to deal with that immediate problem. But most of us are aware that these crisis points in a person's life are built on years of missed opportunities for intervention.

Layered problems, nuanced solutions

On top of the missed opportunities for intervention, for most people, there are complex layers to their problems. These layers can include (but are not limited to): the entrenched inequality of belonging to a certain race or gender, generations of trauma, limited education, lack of employment, limited social and family support. When you take all of these factors into account it is not surprising that most problems need more than one support service to make a shift.

An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure

Benjamin Franklin
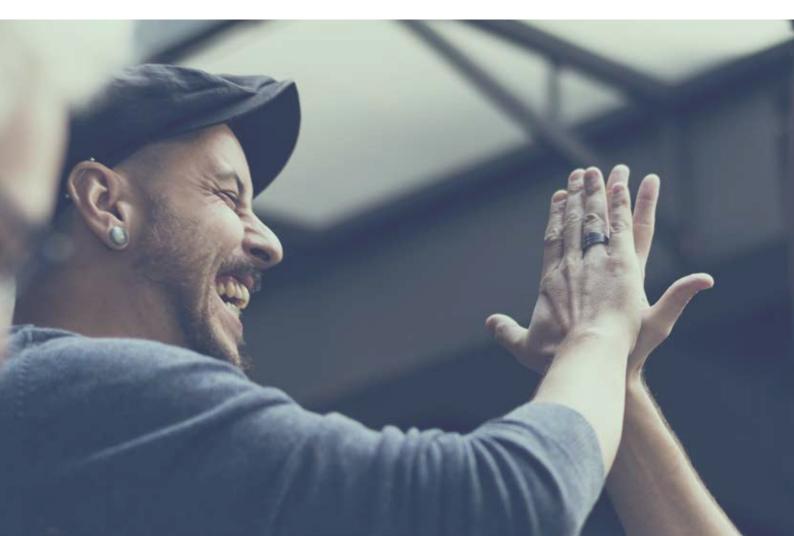
Working together to amplify results

While many support services may be working with the same person to help in their own niche area, many remain siloed, not sharing information, insights or administrative and technological solutions that have the potential to deliver better outcomes in less time and for less cost.

In order to be effective, early intervention approaches need to be reinforced by other parts of the wider system in which a person operates, including collaboration with other support services the person is accessing.

How to make early intervention work

Putting early intervention into action can be a challenging process. It involves people and resources from a wide range of services. It includes many moving parts. But it can be done. We have been involved in many successful programs that have put early intervention into action to deliver amazing results for individuals and communities. In this e-book, we want to share some of the foundations we have seen as key to making this approach work .

> *Allowing problems to snowball makes them more damaging and difficult to address. If real results is the goal, early intervention is the answer.*

Early intervention in action

When you have worked in a reactive way for a long time, the idea of making a fundamental change to how, and importantly, when, you deliver an intervention, can feel hard. This is especially true when your workforce is already stretched and you feel like you are in a race against other organisations to win funding.

But there are ways to shift to a more preventative and collaborative model that will allow services to pool resources and share administrative costs all while delivering a more comprehensive range of supports to people with complex problems.

But before we explore this further, we need to look at some of the main concepts that underpin early intervention.

The two main concepts that beat at the heart of early collaboration are:

1. The earlier the better
2. Many hands make light work

The earlier the better

What is early intervention?
Early intervention is the process of identifying early warning signs and providing effective support to people while their problems are still relatively small. Early intervention prevents escalation and aims to eliminate the need for more serious intervention in the future.

How does it work?
Early intervention works to reduce the **risk factors** and increase the **protective factors** that allow a person to head off trouble before it escalates. It allows people to divert their lives in a new direction, improving outcomes across a wide variety of measures.

What kinds of societal issues does early intervention work well for?
Often when people hear the phrase "early intervention," they think of supporting children who have in some way been identified as at risk, through underlying disability, being part of a group identified as disadvantaged, struggling with schoolwork etc. But the same process of early intervention works just as well in complex societal problems that affect adults as well.

Some of the problems that are improved through early intervention include:

- addiction
- multi-generational trauma
- anti-social behaviour
- child sexual exploitation
- dementia
- domestic and family violence
- sexual violence
- environmental health
- family intervention programs
- frequent attendees to custody
- gangs and gang violence
- hate crime
- integrated offender management
- homelessness
- 'troubled families'
- youth crime

The effects of disadvantage and adversity can be negative, but they are by no means universal or irreversible. While early intervention cannot solve every problem, it can substantially improve the lives of those who need it most.

Improving outcomes and response effectiveness

The ultimate aim of early intervention is to prevent larger issues down the track. Of course, we know that not every problem is preventable. But even with more intractable problems, early intervention can improve outcomes, reduce severity and increase the effectiveness of the responses employed.

When the early intervention process is repeated while problems are small, over time it can lead to a mindshift in the vulnerable person. They can begin to see themselves as the kind of person who can make effective changes in their own life. From this improved perspective they can make more positive choices for themselves, which can in turn, reduce the need for outside intervention.

So what is the process of early intervention?

No matter what issue you are trying to tackle, the process of how to get started on an early intervention framework usually follows a similar course of action.

1. Identify risk factors
2. Determine protective factors
3. Provide support
4. Empower people to take charge of their problems

What are risk and protective factors?

Risk factors are characteristics at the biological, psychological, family, community, or cultural level that are associated with a higher likelihood of negative outcomes. According to a recent report from the U.S. Surgeon General they can also be defined as "anything that increases the probability that a person will suffer harm."

Protective factors are characteristics associated with reducing the likelihood of negative outcomes. They are positive, countering effects that work to reduce a risk factor's impact. For example, poverty is often seen as a risk factor, but the presence of supportive, involved parents may mediate the negative influence of poverty to lessen a youth's chance of becoming delinquent.

Variable factors

Some risk and protective factors don't change over time. As an example, a person may belong to an immigrant community, a certain race or have a childhood history of family violence. These demographics may be identified as risk factors, but not ones that can be changed.

Other risk and protective factors are variable and can change over time. These are the ones that we have the most potential to work directly with to change permanently. For example, a protective factor that helps to mitigate the risk of belonging to an immigrant community is employment. So focusing on employment as an early intervention strategy is a solid choice.

> *When designing and evaluating prevention interventions, prevention professionals need to assess and prioritize the risk and protective factors that most impact their community.*

Identifying risk factors

One approach to early intervention is screening for risk and protective factors before negative behaviour has occurred. Using this preventative approach, it is important to recognise that the presence of any one risk factor isn't significant in and of itself. However, two or more combined factors increases the risk.

Risk factors limit social and economic opportunities, and increase the likelihood of mental and physical health problems, criminal involvement, substance misuse, or exploitation or abuse. These factors interact in complex ways.

They include things like:

- educational level
- income level
- physical health issues
- intellectual disability
- psychiatric and mental health issues
- addiction issues
- belonging to minority groups
- prior victimisation
- geographical location
- peer groups
- family group
- connection with community
- employment opportunities
- exposure to physical or sexual violence

Risk factors like these don't mean that an individual is destined to go on to have negative consequences. But they can help us to identify people who are vulnerable and who may need extra support. Studies show that early intervention works best when it is made available to people on the basis of pre-identified risks. They have the potential to keep more serious problems from occurring or direct the trajectory of a person's life in a new direction.

Taking a big picture view

Targeting only one context when addressing a person's risk or protective factors is unlikely to be successful, because people don't exist in isolation. As an example, a risk factor might include neighbourhood poverty and violence. Here, protective factors could include the availability of after-school activities, education about the impact of gender roles in domestic violence, free school lunches and buddy programs to expose people to positive role models.

Though many of these preventive interventions are often designed to produce a single outcome, both risk and protective factors often have a knock-on positive effect for multiple people, and communities as a whole. For example, domestic violence is often associated with substance use and mental health issues. Prevention efforts that help support people address these underlying issues can have the knock-on effect of improving mental health for the perpetrator, victim and other family members.

An example

The knock-on benefits to helping one person deal with their substance use and mental health issues can be:

For children

Because Dad is behaving less erratically, the children are less anxious. They in turn get more rest. Mum is also more available to the children because she is no longer spending all her time trying to keep them away from their dad. She can now help them pack their bags with all the things they need. As a result, the children begin to do better in school, including behaving in a more regulated way in the classroom, which allows other children to focus and improves the quality of education acquired by a classroom group.

For the partner

As her husband begins to get help for his drinking and violence, Miriam realises that she has a problem with her own drinking. She begins to get help for this and starts attending a local AA group. After a few months her confidence grows and her sponsor supports her to develop her CV. She starts to look for part-time work and ends up with a job at a local bakery. This helps her self-esteem and takes some of the financial pressure off the relationship. Miriam's daughter also sees her mother working, which helps to undo some of the rigid role modelling that she has been used to, which in turn helps her choose a different, more equal partnership in the future.

Major categories of intervention

Prevention interventions fall into three broad categories:

Universal preventive interventions

Universal preventative interventions take a broad approach and are designed to reach entire groups or populations. Universal prevention interventions might target specific neighbourhoods, schools, whole communities, geographical areas or workplaces.

Selective interventions

Selective interventions target biological, psychological, or social risk factors that are more prominent among high-risk groups than among the wider population. Examples include prevention education for immigrant families with young children or peer support groups for adults with a family history of substance use disorders.

Indicated preventive interventions

Indicated preventative interventions target individuals who show signs of being at risk. In the case of someone presenting with potential addiction issues for instance, this might mean referral to support groups, rehabilitation programs, support for families of those admitted to hospitals with potential alcohol-related injuries etc.

The benefits of early intervention

Preventative approaches are based on equipping individuals and communities with the tools they need to succeed, rather than imposing interventions once they are in trouble (which is similar to locking the gate once the horse has already bolted).

Early intervention is cost effective when delivered at the right time and creates savings across a number of public sector services further down the line by taking demand out the system.

Early intervention also has multiplying benefits. For example, if a parent receives early help and support for their addiction, they are better placed to make wiser choices for their children, who in turn may not be wandering the streets and becoming identified as targets for people recruiting for gangs etc.

The broader benefits to society through the potential for prevention of crime, not to mention the cost savings of diverting people from incarceration and court proceedings, also need to be acknowledged.

Addressing Offending in Texas

Faced with a rapidly expanding prison population, state officials in Texas rejected plans to spend $500 million on building a new prison. They instead invested the money in tackling some of the problems that underpin crime.

The approach became known as Justice Reinvestment, which involved redirecting spending from capital or institutional Investment towards rehabilitation and earlier intervention at a community level.

Initiatives that were implemented included substance abuse and mental health facilities, reinvestment in the Nurse-Family Partnerships Program (pairing nurses with low income mothers during their child's infancy), halfway houses, and methods to ensure adequate supervision for parole.

Reinvesting the resources diverted from capital spending into community-based approaches allowed the State of Texas to grow the capacity of local, community services and social enterprises in delivering services to prevent offending.

The result of this approach delivered some tangible results that proved the merit of the program

- 25 per cent drop in parole revocations
- 90 per cent reduction in anticipated prison population growth
- estimated savings of $201.5 million in 2008-09
- savings from averted prison construction of an additional $233 million
- average fall of 27 per cent in re-offending rates

Early intervention to reduce inequality

There is a strong relationship between poverty and inequality and crime and anti-social behaviour. So it makes sense that if early interventions address some of the underlying causes of social problems they can stop the onset of related problems.

Some underlying inequality issues that can be addressed through a taking a holistic approach to early intervention are:

- availability of work
- affordable and accessible transport
- social services
- improved community connection
- improved living and working conditions
- access to greenspace
- qualifications and learning

Preventative approaches can achieve significant cost savings for the public sector by reducing the need for expensive multiple and acute interventions over the long term, enabling people and communities to realise their potential.

Larger shifts in thinking

But there are a number of mental shifts we need to make before we can before we can move to an early intervention model.

Some of the things we need to change are:

- short-term thinking and planning
- siloed working, particularly in the public sector
- fear of changing tactics
- not having the skills or methodology to work differently
- lack the leadership and accountability structures to make needed changes
- not wanting to shift resources at a time of scarcity
- prioritising immediate benefits over better long-term outcomes

How to shift thinking to an early intervention model

- Incorporate prevention and early intervention into new planning approaches from the outset
- Develop success measures and accountability structures for delivery partners based on early intervention actions
- Align resources and more effectively join up commissioning and procurement programmes
- Ensure the efficient use of resources and value for money by taking duplication out of the system
- Work collaboratively with service users and local communities to develop solutions and give them a stronger sense of ownership and control of their services (often referred to as co-production).
- Develop more collaborative relationships, including interdisciplinary working, across all agencies and sectors and strengthen partnership working at locality and neighbourhood level

Empathy is the starting point for creating a community and taking action. It's the impetus for creating change.

Max Carver

Innovation through collaboration

For a long time, approaches to support have been based on a top down model. Policy makers see that a problem exists and come up with an approach they hope will solve it. Instead it is time to draw on the expertise and insight of frontline workers, service users and communities.

Many studies have shown that community-led initiatives not only allow a stronger sense of ownership by the service providers, but also by the people who are using the services. In addition, when people who are trying to tackle the same problem from different angles come together and share insights, there is enormous potential for innovation that can lead to real impact.

Problems can't be tackled in isolation

When one service tries to solve one problem, without recognising the underlying and interconnected environmental, social and economic factors that contribute to that problem, there is little chance of a successful outcome. People are complex and the problems they face don't exist in isolation. That's why moving to a more collaborative approach, where people can see the other issues a person is facing outside of the problem they know about, is proven to deliver better results.

> *The foundation of an early intervention model is recognising the early warning signs that can lead to quicker and more problematic behaviours, and offering greater engagement and support at this earlier stage, to prevent escalation.*

An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure

Let's use an example of a man called Bill.

Bill is 35 years of age and has been the perpetrator of a number of acts of violence against his partner, Anne. In the reactive model of response, the only intervention that has happened for Bill has been a police response at the time of the violent incident, followed by an expensive court process. This means not only have Bill's partner and children been hurt on a number of occasions, but as the underlying drivers of his behaviour are not understood or supported, there is a high chance he will repeat his behaviour.

Now let's look at Bill through the eyes of the early intervention model. In this model, Bill has worked with his social support worker and community to look at the issues that contribute to his violent behaviour. These following things have been recognised.

Bill has an issue with gambling. A heavy loss at gambling is a known trigger for excessive drinking, which is further understood as a trigger for his violence.

But if we break it down further, we see that this issue of gambling is related to his lack of employment, which is a common problem in the rural town in which he lives.

As part of the suggested early support, Bill attends a support group for his gambling problem. There he develops some friends who say that he can call on them when he is feeling the urge to take a punt again.

To support the problem of his lack of employment, a volunteer role is set up for Bill at a local shelter for lost dogs. This work not only begins the process of building Bill's CV, it improves his sense of purpose and direction.

As drinking is one of the triggers he wants to avoid, Bill volunteers to submit his photo to the local pub. If he enters the premises the publican notifies Bill's support worker who comes down to have a chat with him to ensure he doesn't return home to his family until he is in the right frame of mind.

Allocating more staff time at this end of the spectrum prevents the need for a wider range of service support later in order to mitigate a crisis. It should be emphasised that not all services need to make big changes —sometimes small changes can have a big effect.

Alone, we can do so little; together, we can do so much.

Helen Keller.

Working together

Working together with other support services is important to ensure the success of preventative measures. Partnerships and collaboration, however, also require institutional structures in order to ensure networked delivery of support. While many different organisations form part of the preventative mix, the advantage of this model to the vulnerable person is that the "network" is experienced as a single offering of complete support.

In this collaborative model, there is the additional benefit of the individual having to tell their story only once. This is something that comes up as a stress point for vulnerable people, who are often forced to relive often traumatic stories of their lives over and over again in order to access the help they need. This process has the potential to be both re-traumatising and dehumanising.

But what about privacy? While many people rightly have concerns about privacy issues related to information sharing, there are platforms (like our collaborative software, ECINS) that allow safe sharing of even the most sensitive information with those who have permission to know it.

Using one system to save on administration time

There is much evidence suggests that support staff spend significantly more time on administrative duties than on face-to-face time with service users. In some organisations running multiple out of date systems, including handwritten referral forms that are faxed or posted, the amount of time this administrative load takes can be up to 85% of the time. This, however, does not have to be the case. Sophisticated collaborative case management and referral software like ECINS can slash the amount of time it takes to get people on the system and receiving support.

How early intervention improves society

It isn't only the lives of individuals and families that are affected if we leave problems to fester and grow. One person's journey can have an impact on an extended family, a peer group and society a large, in terms of undermining the wellbeing of communities and reducing people's opportunities to live positive and successful lives. Early intervention aims to support people to fulfil their potential which in turn builds a healthier, happier and more productive society.

Don't judge each day by the harvest you reap but by the seeds that you plant.

Robert Louis Stevenson

How early intervention improves the economy

But it is not only a more enriched society that early intervention has the power to create. There is evidence to suggest that preventing or resolving problems earlier can lead to significant economic benefits. In particular, resolution of underlying issues can lead to improvements in employment, earnings and education which offer particularly large long-term payoffs.

The scale of these benefits grows once we take into account overall gains not just to the individual, but also in terms of increases in tax revenue and spill-over benefits to employers that their participation in the workforce can create. From this perspective, there is good evidence that even small improvements can have large long-term benefits.

How early intervention benefits the public sector

There is a compelling argument that well targeted and implemented early intervention i.e. effectively dealing with problems while they are still small, can lead to reductions in use of support services over a lifetime. This not only eases the demands placed on frontline practitioners, it saves money. If early intervention measures are not applied and a problem is allowed to grow bigger and more complicated, a person is more likely to need more intensive and expensive interventions such as public housing, criminal and legal costs, over the course of their life, which is an enormous drain on the public purse.

In a Closing the Gap report by the Australian government report called Law and justice: prevention and early intervention programs for Indigenous youth, it has been identified that despite multiple policy and practice reforms, Indigenous young people are dramatically over-represented in the juvenile criminal justice system.

It is not only individual risk factors in Indigenous young people compared with non-Indigenous youth, but also a range of structural, community-level and societal factors that contribute to this. These factors include chronic social and economic disadvantage, the ongoing effects of historical factors and events. It is also likely that the absence of community Elders—due to early deaths or imprisonment—add an additional risk factor.

Unsuccessful approaches have included:

- interventions that fail to integrate and actively engage with local Indigenous people at all stages (including development, implementation and evaluation)
- interventions that fail to take into account and target the multiple and complex issues that lead to offending (for example, alcohol and substance misuse, unemployment, lack of education)
- low levels of funding and staff resourcing that can limit the reach and effects of intervention programs.

Successful approaches have included:

- programs that are designed for the right participants and address identified risk factors
- adequately resourced interventions that are based on clear program logic
- family-based programs, including behavioural parent training
- community involvement and engagement (including Indigenous-specific programs where possible)
- cultural appropriateness and cultural competence at all levels of program design and delivery
- effective collaboration across organisations and between Indigenous and non-Indigenous individuals and communities
- addressing multiple and complex needs by adopting a holistic and comprehensive approach

Homelessness and early intervention

Understanding risk factors in homelessness

One of the most pressing social issues facing western countries is the high rate of homelessness. The distress of not having a settled home can cause or intensify social isolation, create barriers to education, training and paid work and undermine mental and physical health. When homelessness becomes prolonged, or is repeatedly experienced, there are further deteriorations in health and well-being.

Every homeless person has a different journey, often harrowing and traumatic, and the reasons why people end up without a secure and stable home are myriad and diverse. Often they can be completely out of the person's control. Without understanding the underlying causes of homelessness, intervention measures may be ineffective at best, counterproductive at worst.

> *If 40,000 people were prevented from becoming homeless for one year in England it would save the public purse £370 million. Comparative research in the USA and Australia shows that the cost of preventing and solving homelessness is less than the cost of doing nothing at all.*
>
> *— Risk Factors for Homelessness: Evidence From a Population-Based Study*

A study called *Risk Factors for Homelessness: Evidence From a Population-Based Study,* identified these risk factors as significant contributors to the path to homelessness:

- mental disorders (three to four times higher among the homeless population)
- affective and anxiety disorders
- physical disorders
- drug and alcohol abuse
- childhood adversity (including poor relationships with parents, neglect, physical and sexual abuse, and being forced or placed out of the home)
- school expulsion and lack of academic qualifications
- poor social networks
- antisocial and offending behaviour (including experiences in prison)
- relationship breakdown
- lack of support when leaving care/ armed forces/ prison/ hospital
- unemployment
- lack of qualifications
- previous family homelessness
- housing affordability
- larger social and economic problems (such as COVID-19)

The many benefits of early intervention

Human Benefits

The effects of early intervention on individuals can be profound and long-lasting. But it can also ripple out to cause impacts on the health and wellbeing of their families, workplaces and society as a whole.

The issues individuals face don't affect just them. They put a major strain on society, support and government services and the fabric of relationships tie people and communities together. Helping people while their problems are small will make communities safer and enable them to function better. Generational patterns of trauma and disadvantage can be interrupted.

Economic Benefits

The economic cost of social problems is enormous. The majority of these costs are borne by individuals, with substantial costs to governments, employers, and the community. This does not take into account the enormous emotional and psychological costs to victims and families.

Shared awareness of the benefits of early intervention

Social problems occur in a social and cultural environment which are shaped by attitudes, beliefs, behaviours, structures and systems. Social norms exist that enable inequalities in public and private life to continue. Early intervention is about recognising these inequalities and providing support early to prevent problems growing to unmanageable sizes.

Important considerations in the approach to early intervention

Not one size fits all

Different individuals and community groups experience different degrees of systemic, social, political and economic disadvantage and discrimination. Characteristics including race, religion, ethnicity, sexuality and gender identity, age and disability need to be taken into account when designing and delivering early intervention activities. There can't be a one-size-fits-all solution when experiences are so diverse.

The higher the risk, the more support

Identifying where people are marginalised and challenging systemic discrimination, will improve access to support for the most vulnerable people in society. Individuals and communities considered to be at higher risk include Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, people from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Communities, people with disability and mental ill-health, people who identify as Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transsexual, Intersex and Queer, children and young people and people living in regional, rural and remote communities.

Integrated responses amplify results

Preventing and intervening in complex social problems needs to involve people across a wide variety of services. One vulnerable person may need help across issues involving teams from justice, police, health, psychological, addiction, employment, education, child protection, domestic violence, social housing, homelessness and more. The closer these teams can knit together the more support is wrapped around a person, providing them with the safety net that prevents them crashing.

Making real and lasting change

Most people who dedicate themselves to supporting others, would like to make real and lasting change in the lives of the people they help. But unless we treat people as complex humans with many challenges on their plate, this type of lasting change is difficult to achieve.

Early intervention, combined with collaborative work practices, has the potential to examine the myriad of problems a person is facing, and to develop a program of support that can deliver genuine, lasting changes in a person's life. It also helps in identifying and bolstering the protective resources that can better help people navigate their problems into a more positive direction.

While a shift to early intervention and collaborating with other support services may seem like an overwhelming prospect, it doesn't have to be. There are ways to automate administrative tasks and safely share case information so you can deliver more comprehensive and more considered solutions at no extra cost to your business.

Find out more

As a not-for-profit social enterprise, our aim is to create a better society by encouraging smarter, more collaborative working across social and third sectors. After more than twenty years in business as the most widely used collaborative case management software solution in the UK, we have learnt how to make this approach work. If you would like to find out more about how you could do the same, don't hesitate to get in touch via support@empoweringcommunities.org.

ECINS

Empowering Communities with
Integrated Network Systems

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