



# THEORY OF CHANGE

## About MELC

The [Margate Early Learning Community](#) (MELC) was established in 2018 and aims to improve early learning outcomes for children aged 0-5 growing up in poverty.

Evidence shows that a child's earliest years are crucial to their outcomes in later life. Positive experiences early in life are closely associated with better performance at school, better social and emotional development, improved work outcomes, higher income and better lifelong health, including longer life expectancy (Marmot et al. 2020).

MELC is a place-based, systems change initiative, meaning the project seeks to stimulate impactful and sustainable improvements across the local early years community over a sustained period.

We have supported the piloting of several innovation projects co-designed with practitioners and families from across the community. These projects have included new services and adaptations to existing provision for families such as [fast-referral counselling](#) for parents/carers delivered by [Fegans](#) and supporting [Roma families to access health services](#).



Cory, one, at a Parenting Together session in Margate, UK. Credit: Anna Gordon/Save the Children.

## MELC's Theory of Change

**Our Theory of Change explains how MELC's activities will achieve intended outcomes and impact.**

MELC is currently in the final phase of full-scale project delivery, with funding due to end in December 2026, after which the project will be significantly scaled back over the course of a 2-year transition period. During the final phase, MELC's primary activities will be:

- Investing in innovation projects in the community, supporting local organisations and services to test and learn from new approaches for the benefit of children and families
- Facilitating an Early Years Network for local professionals
- Distributing financial support to families through its Early Years Grants programme.

One in five children in England start school without the language skills they need to succeed, but for the poorest children this is one in three (Save the Children 2015). Addressing educational attainment in childhood is one of the best evidenced ways of disrupting the impact of poverty. Supporting young children to develop their speech, language and communication skills; and their social and emotional development are essential for reducing the impact of poverty.

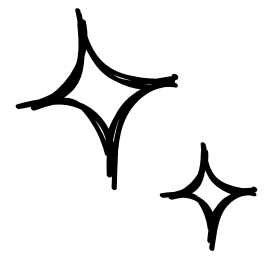
Understanding how poverty impacts on children's development is key to prevention and developing appropriate interventions to mitigate risk. Mechanisms of influence have been identified as key processes by which poverty impacts on children's development. These include parenting style, the home learning environment and family stress (Waldfogel and Washbrook 2010; Cooper and Reader 2013).

**MELC's work is primarily focused across two broad workstreams, which have been identified over the first phase of the project as clearly linked to poor early learning outcomes for local children growing up in poverty:**

- Confident parenting – parents/carers are aware of and engaging with existing support, including support focused on children's early learning and any additional needs.
- Family mental health and wellbeing – both children and their parents/carers have access to support relating to their mental health and wellbeing.

While we know there are a range of other barriers to learning affecting young children in the community, by narrowing MELC's focus we hope to better support the local early years community to collaborate on and learn more deeply about how best to address these two priority areas.





## Outcome 1

**MELC's first outcome will therefore be that 'local parents/carers living in poverty are more confident in their parenting knowledge and skills', primarily achieved by funding and supporting innovation projects.**

Evidence is clear that the role of parents/carers is by far the most important influence in a child's early learning and development, and they should be valued, respected, and supported in carrying out crucial work.

When parents/carers have the knowledge, skills, and confidence to provide the kind of relationships and experiences that children need in the early years, as well as to access any support services that may be needed, this has the potential to reduce the way in which poverty diminishes children's life chances (Roulestone et al., 2010; Gutman and Feinstein, 2007; Sylva et al., 2004; Desforges and Abouchar, 2003).

Children benefit the most when parents/carers play an active and meaningful role in their learning and development through everyday playful experiences, opportunities, and activities, alongside providing emotional support, encouragement, and praise.

## Outcome 2

**MELC's second outcome will be that 'the mental health and wellbeing of local children and families living in poverty is better', achieved by funding and supporting innovation projects; and distributing financial support (Early Years Grants).**

Poverty and financial insecurity create stress and anxiety, and often leaves parents/carers feeling frustrated and depressed. This can make it harder for parents/carers to show consistently positive behaviour and to stay engaged with their children's learning. It can also reduce their ability to pay for resources that support learning.

Parent/carer mental health impacts a child's mental health. High quality interactions and positive parental engagement in early years have been found to lead to positive outcomes in terms of children's language and development and better outcomes in school and beyond. For example, when children have nurturing relationships with caregivers who co-regulate their emotions, they build self-regulation skills and they are more likely to learn, engage and achieve in early years education and in school.

Early Years Grants can enable low-income families to meet some of their immediate financial needs which should reduce some of the practical issues that they are facing, as well as lessen the emotional and mental burden of struggling on a low income. Grants should go some of the way (alongside additional learning resources) towards enabling families to be best able to provide a strong home learning environment.

## Outcome 3

**MELC's third outcome will be that 'local children and families living in poverty participate to change early years services for the better for children', achieved by funding and supporting innovation projects; and facilitating an Early Years Network.**

For MELC, participation is about giving children and their families living in poverty the opportunity to express their opinions, contribute their ideas, and actively participate in informing policies and processes that impact them.

Meaningful participation prioritises the inclusion of children, young people and families whose views and ideas have not previously been heard; whose experiences of working with professionals haven't always been positive; or for whom services are not easily accessible ([Anna Freud 2023](#)). Without the inclusion of families whose needs haven't previously been met, there is a risk of repeatedly designing services that do not meet the needs of some of the most marginalised families ([Anna Freud 2023](#)).

Involving communities in the design and development of solutions should therefore result in services and programmes that are better matched with needs (South 2015).



# Margate Early Learning Community - Theory of Change



## ASSUMPTIONS

- Addressing educational attainment in childhood is one of the best evidenced ways of disrupting the impact of poverty on children. Supporting children to achieve their potential at school starts in the early years
- Key processes by which poverty impacts on children's learning and development include parenting style and family stress
- The role of parents is by far the most important influence in a child's early learning and development; and stress and anxiety (often caused by poverty and financial insecurity) can make it harder for parents to show consistently positive behaviour and to stay engaged with their children's learning
- More confident parents, and better family mental health and wellbeing, will reduce the impact of poverty on a child's early learning and development
- Involving communities in the design and development of solutions will result in services and programmes that are better matched with local needs, improving early years outcomes

## IMPACT

Better early learning outcomes for children aged 0 to 5 growing up in poverty in Margate.

## OUTCOMES

Local children and families living in poverty participate to change early years services for the better for children

Local parents/carers living in poverty are more confident in their parenting knowledge and skills

The mental health and wellbeing of local children and families living in poverty is better

## OUTPUTS

Early years services commit to participation; know how to facilitate participation; are able to facilitate participation

Local children and families living in poverty feel that they participate in the design of early years services

MELC's innovation partners participation sessions are inclusive and reach a positive collective outcome

MELC's innovation projects are high quality

MELC's innovation projects reach the intended recipients

Attendees of MELC's innovation projects benefit

MELC's innovation projects are high quality

MELC's innovation projects reach the intended recipients

Attendees of MELC's innovation projects benefit

## ACTIVITIES

Funding and supporting innovation projects  
Facilitating an Early Years Network

Funding and supporting innovation projects

Funding and supporting innovation projects  
Distributing financial support (Early Years Grants)