

what works  
centre for

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**CHILDREN'S  
SOCIAL  
CARE**

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**Safely reducing  
the need for  
children to  
enter care:  
Executive  
Summary**

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## Contributors

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## About the What Works Centre for Children's Social Care

The What Works Centre for Children's Social Care seeks better outcomes for children, young people and families by bringing the best available evidence to practitioners and other decision makers across the children's social care sector. Our mission is to foster a culture of evidence-informed practice. We will generate evidence where it is found

to be lacking, improve its accessibility and relevance to the practice community, and support practice leaders (e.g. principal social workers, heads of service, assistant directors and directors) to create the conditions for more evidence-informed practice in their organisations.

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## About CASCADE

CASCADE is concerned with all aspects of community-based responses to social need in children and families, including family support services, children in need services,

child protection, looked after children and adoption. It is the only centre of its kind in Wales and has strong links with policy and practice.

To find out more visit the Centre at: [whatworks-csc.org.uk](http://whatworks-csc.org.uk), or CASCADE at: [sites.cardiff.ac.uk/cascade](http://sites.cardiff.ac.uk/cascade)

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

### Introduction

The steadily increasing annual numbers of children and young people in care in the UK are of significant current concern. While there will always be some children who need out-of-home care, there are many legal, ethical, social and economic arguments for safely keeping children with their birth families where possible. Reducing the need for care is one of the research priorities for the first phase of the What Works Centre for Children's Social Care. Identifying effective approaches to reduce the need for care is complex but critically important. Despite a proliferation of different interventions and approaches, evidence summaries on this topic are limited. This study is a scoping review to explore what research evidence exists about what works in safely reducing the number of children and young people in care. This is the first stage of reviewing the evidence in a complex field – identifying what is out there.

### What we did

The review utilises Arksey and O'Malley's scoping review methodology. We searched electronic databases and websites to identify studies targeting any one of three outcomes:

- reduction of initial entry to care
- reduction of re-entry to care
- increase in post-care reunification.

We consulted with international experts as a supplementary searching technique. In deciding which studies to include in the review, abstracts and full-text studies were independently screened by two reviewers. For 10 per cent of the selected studies, two reviewers independently extracted the data; for the remainder, data was extracted by a first reviewer then verified by a second. This process resulted in numerical summaries and a thematic qualitative synthesis.

Evidence was categorised in three different ways: firstly, the primary outcome (initial care entry, re-entry or reunification); secondly, the level of intervention (community, policy, organisation, family or child); and thirdly, the type of evidence, using the EMMIE framework (Effectiveness; Mechanisms of change; Moderators; Implementation; Economic evaluation).

## What we found

In the report, we present evidence maps of the clusters of evidence in the published literature. We present these maps in terms of the level of intervention: community, policy, organisation, family or child. We came up with the following categories of intervention type. For each of these, the number of studies we identified is stated in brackets:

- family or child skills training (44 studies)
- service integration or coordination (43 studies)
- change in what a worker does (42 studies)
- change in/ new therapeutic approach (42 studies)
- structure change in the child welfare system (18 studies)
- meetings that include the family and relevant workers (16 studies)
- interventions that change a family's finances (13 studies)
- mentors (10 studies)
- supervision of social workers (three studies)

## Next steps

The scoping review is only the first stage in reviewing the evidence on reducing the need for care. For each of the intervention themes listed above (except for supervision, where there are too few studies), we will now synthesise the evidence we have identified and write a report on what we find. We will consult with stakeholders to inform our interpretation of these clusters of evidence and work out their implications for social care practice. The findings from the evidence syntheses will also inform the primary research programme of the What Works Centre. For example, the evidence on change in a family's finances will be relevant to the Change Programme project on devolved budgets, and the evidence on service integration will be relevant to the project on social workers in schools.

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