

# Trends in Wales & Benefits of Parent Advocacy

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This included the first presentation of a study of interventions by children's services in Wales of a cohort of children born in 2019-20 before they reached their fifth birthday and some results of a consultancy for Pembrokeshire which reviewed all interventions in a year.

## Interventions before the age of 5

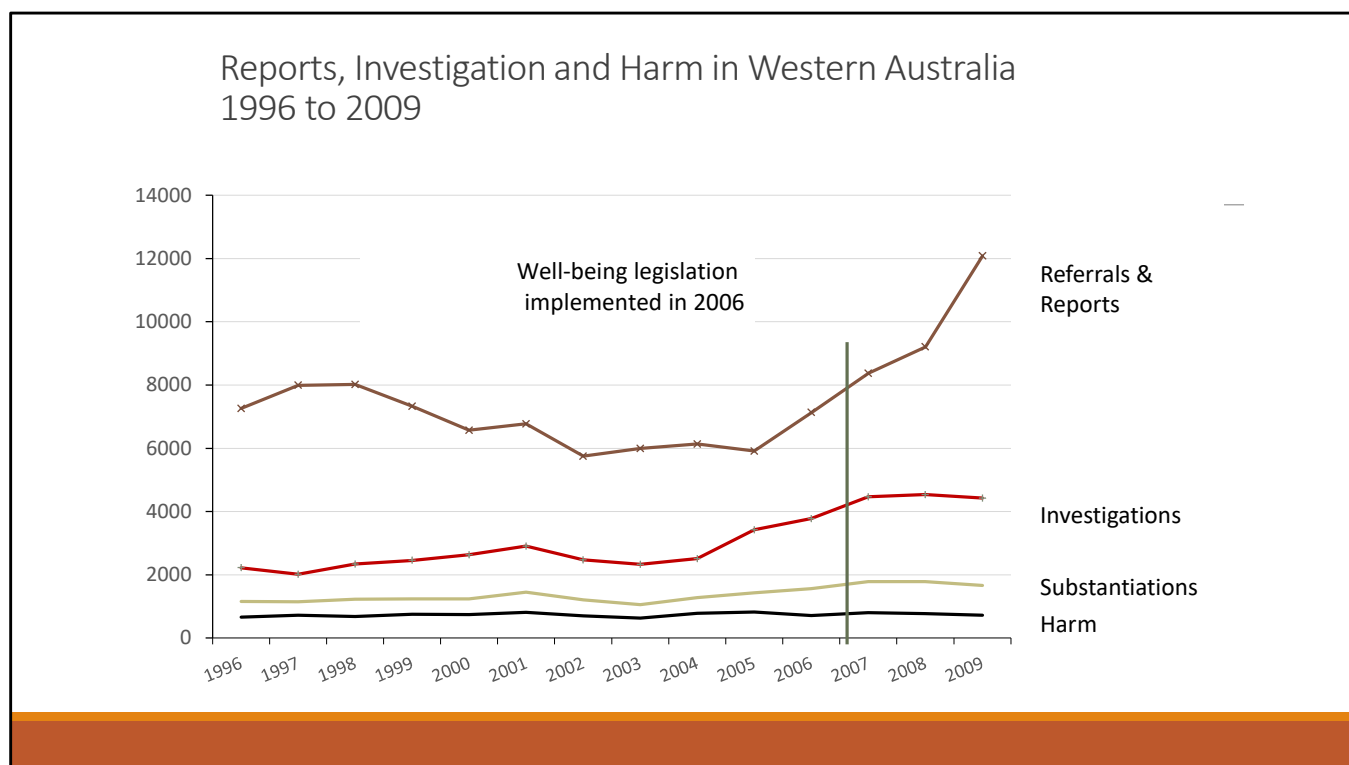
Measure	England	Northern Ireland	Scotland	Wales
<b>Referred</b>	21.1%	21.2%	26.5%	44.7%
<b>Care &amp; support plan</b>	14.0%	17.9%	-	9.9%
<b>Strategy Meeting</b>	6.2%	-	-	12.0%
<b>Investigated</b>	6.4%	4.1%	6.0%	9.2%
<b>CP Register</b>	3.8%	3.2%	3.8%	4.2%
<b>Looked after</b>	1.73%	1.70%	1.96%	2.86%
<b>Adopted</b>	0.56%	0.30%	0.38%	0.70%

This first presentation of the initial results of a study undertaken by people with lived experience of the child protection system alongside Andy Bilson.

It shows the levels of interventions by the age of 5 in Wales and this table compares the results with similar studies in England, Northern Ireland and Scotland.

It shows that Wales had substantially higher rates of children referred to children's services – more than twice the rate in England and Northern Ireland. There were also higher rates of strategy discussions, children formally investigated for abuse and placed in care. Children placed on the child protection register was only slightly higher than in England and Scotland. Strategy discussion/meetings are supposed to be undertaken only if initial information indicates there is reasonable cause to suspect a child is suffering, or likely to suffer, significant harm – almost 1 in 8 children had been subject of a strategy discussion before their 5<sup>th</sup> birthday – almost twice the rate found in England.

Whilst Wales has higher levels of deprivation than England, Northern Ireland which is even more deprived did not have such high rates as Wales.



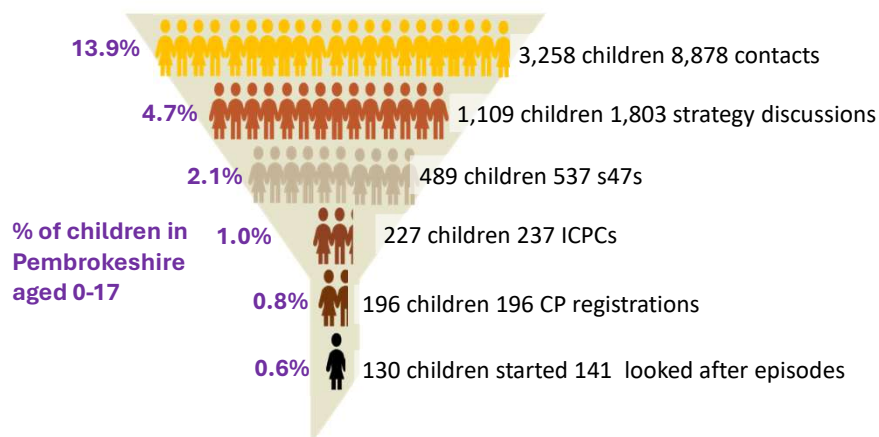
This graph shows that rates of referral and investigations have no impact on harm to children which remained unchanged despite large increases in both after Western Australia, like Wales, introduced legislation intended to promote well-being and reduce the need for statutory interventions in 2006.

O'Donnell et al. (2010:143) found that in WA between 1990 and 2005, 93.6% of those found to have been maltreated did not have a 'maltreatment' related hospital admission.

Gilbert et al. (2012a) used data in a comparison of six countries to consider trends in physical abuse and neglect in reports and outcomes focusing on children younger than eleven. Their conclusion was that:

*Our results show no clear evidence for an overall decrease in child maltreatment despite decades of policies designed to achieve such reductions (Gilbert et al., 2012, p. 770).*

All interventions in Pembrokeshire in year ending 31<sup>st</sup> May 24



This is a study of all interventions in the year ending 31<sup>st</sup> May 2024 carried out as a consultancy for Pembrokeshire Children’s Social Care. It shows that 13.9% of all children – almost 1 in 7 children – had a contact recorded in that year and that 1 in every 24 children were subject of a strategy discussion though only 196 were placed on the child protection register. This suggests that 5 out of 6 strategy discussions which are called only if initial information indicates there is reasonable cause to suspect a child is suffering, or likely to suffer, significant harm did not lead to a finding that they are suffering or likely to suffer significant harm and they are at continuing risk.

## Initial change in Pembrokeshire

*Initial change in Pembrokeshire following systems-based intervention  
(December to February, 2024–25 vs 2025–26)*

Measure	Dec–Feb 2024–25	Dec–Feb 2025–26	Reduction
Strategy discussions	419	257	39%
Section 47 enquiries	142	101	29%
Entries to care	44	18	59%

The study of trends in Pembrokeshire allowed staff their to critically review their practice with initial results showing considerable reductions in children being put through unnecessary strategy discussions and section 47 enquiries and entering care in the three months from December to February in comparison to previous practice. More analysis will be done to better understand the nature and longevity of these changes.

## Northern Ireland study: Parents' views

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Contact with services feels less like help and more like surveillance:

*"It doesn't feel like support; it feels like they're waiting for you to slip."*

*"being watched in your own home, even when nothing has happened."*

Struggles associated with deprivation - housing insecurity, stress, mental health difficulties - were treated as risk indicators that triggered intervention rather than as needs requiring support.

*"When you ask for help, you don't get help - you get assessed."*

Families felt unable to seek support with some avoiding schools, GP services, or mental health care because they feared renewed involvement:

*"Once they're in your life, you're always scared they'll come back."*

Pre-birth risk assessments made pregnancy a period of heightened scrutiny rather than preparation, and, in some cases, fear:

*"I was afraid to bond with my baby in case they took her." "It doesn't feel like support; it feels like they're waiting for you to slip."*

Parents were involved in understanding the results of the study of interventions with children before the age of 5 in Northern Ireland

Bilson et al (In Press) *Social Work Interventions in Northern Ireland before the Age of Five*

## Northern Ireland study: Parents' views

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Previous research in Northern Ireland highlights:

- the value of community-based support
- Family Support Hubs.

Parents in this study identified similar sources of strength:

- relational practice,
- informal networks, and
- above all, **peer advocacy**:

*"When someone sits beside you who has been there, you can breathe again."*

# Benefits of Parent Advocacy

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A review of over 100 papers :

- Improved parent and family engagement and partnership
- Reduction of maltreatment
- Reductions in entry to care
- Increased reunification
- Speedier placement with kin or permanency
- Promoting Sobriety
- Agency Culture Change



This review is in my book

Tobis D, Bilson, A. & Katugampala I. (2020) *International Review of Parent Advocacy in Child Welfare: Strengthening Children's Care and Protection Through Parent Participation*. Better Care Network and IPAN. [https://bettercarenetwork.org/sites/default/files/2020-10/BCN\\_Parent\\_Advocacy\\_In\\_Child\\_Welfare.pdf](https://bettercarenetwork.org/sites/default/files/2020-10/BCN_Parent_Advocacy_In_Child_Welfare.pdf)