

What works in promoting good outcomes for children in need through enhanced parenting skills?



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Introduction

This paper has been prepared to support the commissioning of children in need services in Wales as part of the Better Outcomes for Children in Need Programme sponsored by the Social Services Improvement Agency (SSIA). The overarching aim of the Programme is to achieve more cost effective and improved matching of services for children in need through effective strategic commissioning, focussing on areas such as:

- The overall distribution of resources and services across family support and substitute care.
- The targeting of services towards effective points and methods of intervention that meet the needs of children and young people at risk of entering the care system.
- Improved quality of placement and other services for looked after children and young people, leading to improved outcomes.

Four background reports from The Institute of Public Care were published by SSIA in January 2007 to support this development programme:

- The Role of Commissioning in Improving Services to Children in Need.
- National Trends in Children in Need Services.
- What Works in Promoting Good Outcomes for Children in Need in the Community?
- What Works in Promoting Good Outcomes for Looked After Children and Young People?

Subsequent feedback from local authority commissioners in Wales has highlighted a demand for research and best practice findings looking in-depth at how to promote good outcomes for children in need where there is domestic violence, parental substance misuse, and / or poor parenting in particular. This paper and a further two¹ have been published in response to this demand.

Why enhance parenting skills?

The way a child is looked after at home has a crucial impact on their development, educationally, emotionally and physically². Parenting style has been shown to have a pervasive influence on health and well-being in childhood and adult life, and adequate or good parenting has been shown to have a protective influence against some of the negative outcomes linked to deprivation. There is growing research knowledge about the impact that different styles of parenting have on outcomes for children, including what constitutes 'positive' and 'negative' qualities of parenting³.

| Positive and negative qualities in parenting | |
|--|---|
| Positive | Negative |
| Authoritative | Authoritarian |
| Warm and affectionate | Cold and hostile (high criticism, low warmth) |
| Clear limit setting | Inconsistent rules |
| Quick to recognise needs | Unresponsive to needs/inflexible |
| Accepting of faults | Rejecting |
| Predictable and consistent | Unpredictable |
| Respecting the individual | Disrespectful |
| Open and effective communication | Inadequate supervision |
| Recognising good qualities/behaviour | Punishing bad qualities/behaviour |
| Empathic | Inappropriate expectations |

The literature suggests that negative parenting styles have a strong association with emotional and behavioural difficulties in children and young people, while positive, nurturing relationships between children and parents/carers are a crucial foundation for well-adjusted development. Parental communication style and conflict resolution style in particular have been described as key variables in the development of child conduct and peer relationships.

However, the inherited temperament of the child and other child or environmental factors will also have an impact on parenting and child outcomes generally. "Thus, it is by no means certain that improving the parenting style will automatically lead to much better outcomes, desirable though it may be for its own sake⁴."

National drivers for improved parenting skills

The Welsh Assembly Government has adopted the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child as the basis for all of their work with children and young people in Wales, and this has been translated into 7 core aims⁵:

- A flying start in life.
- A comprehensive range of education, training and learning opportunities.
- The best possible health, free from abuse, victimisation and exploitation.
- Play, leisure, sporting and cultural activities.
- Treated with respect and have their race and cultural identity recognised.
- A safe home and community.
- Children and young people not disadvantaged by poverty.

Parenting is seen by the Welsh Assembly Government as an important element in supporting families, and to complement these seven core aims there are a number of initiatives which are specifically relevant to parenting support, including the following.

Cymorth⁶

Cymorth is a national programme to develop services for children and young people in disadvantaged communities across Wales, focussing on targeted early intervention support within the context of universal provision². It brings together into a single scheme a number of existing programmes: Sure Start, Children and Youth Partnership Fund, National Childcare Strategy, Youth Access Initiative and Play Grant. Local investment is directed towards specific age groups, and across the following six themes:

- Family support.
- Health improvement.
- Play, leisure and enrichment.
- Empowerment, participation, and active citizenship.
- Training, mentoring, and information.
- Building childcare provision.

The development of parenting skills is a key part of the family support strand. Example provision includes: parenting programmes, promoting alternatives to smacking, parent-toddler groups, Home Start, and single parents' groups.

National Service Framework for Children, Young People and Maternity Services in Wales⁷

The Welsh National Service Framework for Children, Young People and Maternity services (NSF) aims to improve the quality and equity of service delivery by establishing national standards for health and social care for all children from before birth, through childhood and adolescence and into adulthood, in all settings. The NSF contains a specific standard on parenting, and three related key actions aimed at Children and Young People's Framework Partnerships, Local Health Boards, NHS Trusts and local authorities. The standard is that:

'Parents and carers have access to a range of services to help them to nurture the physical, social and emotional growth of children and young people in their care.'

Key actions specified within this standard include:

- Ready access for parents/carers to evidence-based information about parenting issues through a range of appropriate media.
- Programmes designed with the participation of parents.
- Service delivery in a variety of settings, including homes.
- Finding creative solutions for barriers to participation.
- Suggesting appropriate methods for managing children's behaviour that supports the Welsh Assembly Government's views that physical punishment of children is unacceptable.

Children First⁸

Children First is a Welsh Assembly Government programme that aims to improve the management and delivery of social services for children in need and their families. Originally a three-year programme introduced in 1999, Children First has been extended and continues to operate. The programme sets key objectives for children's services covering the whole spectrum of services that vulnerable children depend upon, including social services, health and education.

Each local authority is asked to provide evidence of how it will improve services provided to children, and these are evaluated against set targets. The main objectives of the programme relevant to parenting support are:

- To ensure that children in need gain maximum life chance benefits from education opportunities, health care and social care.
- To ensure that children are protected from emotional, physical, sexual abuse and neglect (significant harm).
- To ensure that children are securely attached to carers capable of providing safe and effective care.
- To ensure that children with specific social needs arising out of disability or a health condition are living in families or other appropriate settings in the community where their assessed needs are adequately met and reviewed.
- To ensure that referral and assessment processes discriminate between different types and levels of need and produce a timely and effective service response and actively involve users and carers in tailoring individual packages of care.

The Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families⁹ is a key component of the Children First Programme. It recognises that early intervention is essential to support children and families before problems, which have an impact on parenting capacity and family life, escalate into crisis or abuse.

Parenting Action Plan²

The Welsh Assembly Government published its Parenting Action Plan in 2005, setting out proposals to support parents and carers with raising their children. The plan seeks to ensure that a more coherent approach is taken to the development of parenting support services in Wales, and aims to:

- Raise the profile of parenting among policy makers and service providers in Wales.
- Further the development of policies and services that support mothers, fathers and carers in their caring roles.
- Make connections with other policies and activities that have an impact on parenting.
- Identify key actions to be taken by the Welsh Assembly Government to support parenting in Wales.

A number of key principles underpin the action plan:

- 'Parenting' is an activity undertaken by those who bring up children.
- The approach is based on the rights of the child and on the principle of respect.
- The diversity of families and different ways of providing care for children should be respected.
- Participation, listening and responding to mothers, fathers, carers, children and young people, is key to the success of the plan.
- Positive parenting should be promoted.
- Support for mothers, fathers, and carers needs to be co-ordinated and the result of joined up policy making and planning at national and local levels.
- A commitment to promoting bilingualism, and the use of Welsh and other languages of choice and other forms of communication.

Flying Start

The “Flying Start” initiative¹⁰ offers part-time childcare and other support for children in the 0-3 age group and their parents in the poorest areas of Wales. This programme is based on the principle of early intervention within these communities to reduce the potential for future disadvantage.

The central objective is to improve outcomes for children, both in preparation for school and in the longer term. Initially, children who will benefit from the programme will live in the catchment areas of specified infant and primary schools. The centrepiece of services delivered will be free part time good quality childcare for two year olds. Depending on local discretion and the pattern of existing services, the funding should also deliver increased health visitor support and well-evaluated parenting programmes to target communities, including wherever possible from Integrated Children’s Centres or community-focused schools. The priority outcomes for children to be targeted by Flying Start are:

- Language development.
- Cognitive development.
- Social and emotional development.
- Physical health.
- Early identification of high needs.

The services to be provided by Flying Start have been carefully prescribed by the Welsh Assembly Government, drawing on a menu generated from a range of options that have demonstrated effectiveness. The menu includes parenting programmes, both in the home and in groups. The focus is on programmes providing support and skills training for parents in order to promote children’s wellbeing by enhancing protective factors and reducing their exposure to risk. Parenting programmes must have demonstrated effectiveness for child outcomes, and be delivered by trained professional personnel such as health visitors.

Incredible Years Parenting Programme – Wales¹¹

The Incredible Years parenting programmes are aimed at parents of children whose behaviour is so difficult that it causes problems for themselves and their friends, and also for their parents and teachers. Results have shown that children’s difficult behaviour becomes less of a problem for those parents who have attended the Incredible Years parenting programmes. The Welsh Assembly Government has extended funding to 2008 to enable the training of leaders in delivering the Incredible Years programmes, which may be delivered as part of the Flying Start initiative or as part of a wider parenting strategy.

What constitutes support for enhanced parenting skills?

The complex nature of the family environment means that, in practice, support for enhanced parenting skills is difficult to define and describe accurately. Parenting support covers a range of interventions and services, with other terms such as family support and parent education/training often used interchangeably. It has been defined as:

‘Any intervention for parents aimed at reducing risks and promoting protective factors for their children, in relation to their social, physical and emotional well being¹²,

and might include, for example: youth offending teams, child and adolescent mental health services, and youth services. Support aimed at improving parenting skills is one significant element of this wider agenda, often broadly grouped into:

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- Informal: from family, friends, neighbours arising from parents existing networks.
- Semi-formal parenting programmes, often provided through community based organisations, and mixed with more generalised support, for example: befriending.
- Formal: organised parenting programmes, provided by the statutory sector or in partnership with the voluntary sector.

The main goals of semi-formal or formal parenting support programmes are to enable parents to improve their relationship with their child, and to improve their child's behaviour¹³. The term 'parent' applies to the main carer of the child, and the term 'programme' indicates that the intervention is structured and that its key components are documented, allowing it to be reliably applied by different workers with appropriate training. There are two main types of formal parenting programmes, though most combine elements of both¹³:

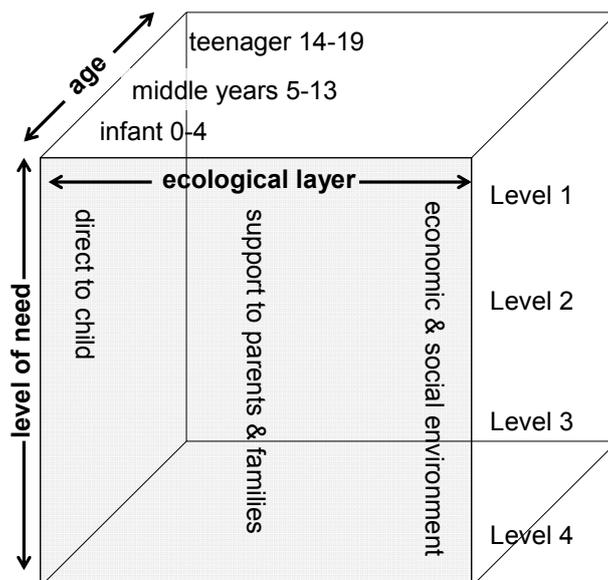
- Behavioural programmes: which focus on teaching the parenting skills needed to address the causes of the problem behaviour(s).
- Relationship programmes: which aim to help parents understand both their own and their child's emotions and behaviour and to improve their communication with the child.

Dimensions of Parenting Support

It is helpful to think of parenting support in terms of a series of three dimensions:

- Child age
- Level of need
- Focus of Intervention: or 'ecological layer'

These are described pictorially in the model below¹⁴.



Dimension One: Age of Child

Parenting support, including services and programmes aimed at enhancing parenting skills, should be focused on parents of children or young people of a particular age (infant, middle years, and teenager tend to be the ages described in the best practice literature) rather than provided in a uniform way for parents of all age groups together.

Dimension Two: Level of Need

The second dimension considers differing levels of need. There are different models used to describe levels or tiers of need in the field of family or parenting support, including The Hardiker model¹⁵ described in our earlier papers. The aim of these models is to differentiate between the needs of most parents (who are likely to require more universal, less specialist services) and the needs of parents who are struggling to provide good enough parenting, or whose children are at risk of significant harm.

Dimension Three: Focus of Intervention

The third dimension considers the focus of intervention, often considered in terms of different ecological “layers”. In the model above, these are described as: direct work with the child or young person; support to parents and families; and changes to the economic and social environment within which parenting is taking place. All elements may be instrumental in improving outcomes for the child or young person, and as such need to be considered in the context of developing a parenting strategy. The focus for this paper is mainly on the middle layer: support to parents and families at the higher levels of need, but across all age ranges.

What can parenting programmes achieve?

Moran et al¹² describe how services across the dimensions described above can be divided into those that focus on three different types of outcomes: child outcomes; parent outcomes (including improved parenting skills), and parent-child outcomes. However, there is a significant overlap between these, and it could be argued that ultimately all parenting support programmes aim to improve child outcomes. The distinction in this paper between child outcomes and parenting skills are concerning the effectiveness measures used. For child outcomes they focus on the impact on the child, for example, reduction in aggression or behavioural difficulties, or better school grades. Where as for parenting skills they focus on the impact on the parent - for example, parent satisfaction, or increased knowledge. It is useful to arrange the evidence using these three types of outcomes as they reflect the specific areas that may need to be addressed in practice.

Child Outcomes: Focus on Emotional and Behavioural Development

Most of the literature concerning the way in which parents can be supported in improving emotional and behavioural outcomes for their children focuses on their role in reducing non-compliant or antisocial behaviour. Parenting practices in particular often form the target for interventions because of the associations between harsh, inconsistent parental discipline, poor monitoring and supervision, and emotional and behaviour problems in children.

Some interventions for parents that aim to improve the child or young person’s behaviour are based on group work with parents, while others involve working with individual families. Some focus on parental behavioural training (teaching parents specific child management skills, in some cases using video modelling scenarios that illustrate typical child-parent interactions and prompt discussion about optimal parenting skills) while others take a relational approach to addressing problems (one that focuses on improving the relationships between parent and child), and some involve elements of both. The age of the child, the behavioural problem, the family context, and the context in which the service is being delivered are all likely to influence the nature of the intervention. For example, in terms of the child’s age:

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- Pre school children – work may focus on positive interaction patterns between mother and child.
- Primary school age – work may focus on contingent discipline and reinforcement.
- Adolescents – work may focus on supervision and monitoring skills.

Programmes that have worked for early intervention for parents of children aged up to 12 years with conduct disorder problems (at the highest level of need) involve:

- Behavioural parent training on an individual or group basis (The National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence recommends group-based programmes, and these are likely to be more cost effective than individual clinic based training. Individual programmes are recommended in the management of children with conduct disorders only in situations where there are particular difficulties in engaging with parents, or the family's needs are too complex to be met by group-based programmes¹⁶).
- For all programmes, whether individual or group-based:
 - Structured interventions, with a curriculum informed by principles of social-learning theory.
 - The inclusion of relationship-enhancing strategies.
 - A sufficient number of sessions, with an optimum of 8-12, to maximise the possible benefits for participants.
 - An opportunity for parents to identify their own parenting objectives.
 - Role-play during sessions, as well as homework to be undertaken between sessions, to achieve generalisation of newly rehearsed behaviours to the home situation.
 - Delivery by appropriately trained and skilled facilitators who are supervised, have access to ongoing professional development, and are able to engage well with parents¹⁷.

Examples parenting programmes which aim to impact on child behaviour at higher levels of need are as follows:

The Incredible Years Parenting Programmes

The Incredible Years parenting programmes have been developed for parents of children aged 3-8 years who are already exhibiting behavioural and related problems. Incredible Years parent, teacher and child training programs are guided by developmental theory concerning the role of multiple interacting risk and protective factors (child, family, and school) in the development of conduct problems. A comprehensive set of curricula are designed to promote social competence and prevent, reduce, and treat aggression and related conduct problems in young children (ages 4 to 8 years). They are delivered in small groups or to entire classrooms.

Developed by Carolyn Webster Stratton, these programmes are recommended by the American Psychological Association Task Force, and classed as a 'model programme' by the Blueprints for Violence Prevention Programme at the University of Colorado. Six randomized control group evaluations of the parenting series indicated significant:

- Reductions in parental depression and increases in self-confidence.
- Increases in positive family communication and problem-solving.
- Reduced conduct problems in children's interactions with parents.

The accumulated research evidence has demonstrated the effectiveness of these programmes in both preventing and treating conduct problems among children aged 2-8 years and increasing their social competence¹⁸.

In North Wales, Sure Start projects have been delivering the Incredible Years Webster-Stratton Parenting Programme as part of their services to families for several years. Some of the centres are working with referred children with behavioural problems, their families and teachers. Others are working with whole classrooms of young children, in preventive early intervention initiatives, to teach them social, friendship and problem-solving skills, and to increase their confidence. The programmes enable parents and professionals to improve their communication with children, and enable children as young as two years old to recognise other children's emotions and to deal sensitively and effectively with social situations. The evaluation of Incredible Years Webster-Stratton Parenting Programme in Sure Start centres across North Wales have shown that children's difficult behaviour became less intense and less problematic for those parents who had attended the programme².

Triple P Project¹⁹

The Triple P Programme focuses on improving parenting skills for parents of 'middle age' children and teenagers who are experiencing behaviour problems. Evaluations of the programme show that it has a positive impact on the behaviour of most children whose parents are involved in it. In Hillingdon, the local Primary Care Trust and the London Borough of Hillingdon have worked together to provide real, integrated, parenting support. Central to this joined up working is the use of the Triple P or Positive Parenting Programme, as a baseline model of parenting intervention. The main aims of this approach are to:

- Develop a more unified vision for parenting support.
- Better integrate service delivery to children and families.
- Balance prevention and crisis intervention.

Practitioners in Hillingdon have reported a number of benefits associated with the Triple P Project, including: increased confidence in parenting, greater satisfaction for parents in their own abilities, better family relations, and significant behavioural change in their children.

Strengthening Families Programme (SFP)

This programme was developed in the United States, and works primarily with young people aged 10-14 and their parents to improve behaviour (where there is problem behaviour), and in particular to:

- Reduce use of drugs and alcohol by the young person
- Reduce problems with conduct and behaviour in school settings
- Improve parent-child relationships and parenting skills (including setting appropriate limits, improved general child management skills, and building positive relationships)

The number of sessions varies, but usually includes a maximum of 14. The focus is on improving family skills and reducing risk factors for substance misuse, depression, aggression and delinquency. The programme has been very positively evaluated in the United States, and is currently being piloted in local authority areas across the United Kingdom. National evaluations are seeking in particular to identify the extent to which social and cultural differences between the United States and the United Kingdom mean that positive results from US programmes can translate into the UK.

Multi-Systemic Therapy (MST)

MST is another treatment programme that emanates originally from the United States, and aims to work with young people with complex clinical, social and educational problems (e.g. violence, drug abuse, school expulsion), and their parents to:

- Reduce criminal activity
- Reduce other types of anti-social behaviour such as drug abuse and sexual offending
- Reducing the need for care or incarceration

It is an example of a successfully evaluated programme that works with parents and families on an individual basis, rather than within the context of a group-based programme. Over a period of three to six months, MST is delivered in homes, neighbourhoods, schools and communities by a team of professionals with low caseloads. A crucial aspect of MST is its emphasis on promoting behaviour change in the young person's natural environment. Initial family sessions identify the strengths and weaknesses of the young person, the family, and their interactions with peers, friends, school, and parental workplace. Identified problems throughout the family are explicitly targeted for change, and the strengths of each system are used to facilitate such change. Examples areas for specific intervention include:

- Improved parental discipline practices
- Increased family affection
- Decreased association with deviant peers
- Increased association with pro-social peers
- Improved school / vocational performance
- Engagement in positive recreational activities
- Improved family – community relations
- Empowerment of the family to solve future difficulties

The Department for Education and Skills and Department of Health are in the process of piloting MST in six local authority areas across England to identify the extent to which its success in The United States can be replicated in the United Kingdom.

Parent outcomes

This section focuses on parent outcomes associated with measures which impact on the parent such as improved parenting skills, increased knowledge, or parent satisfaction. The parent outcomes described in this section are wider than parenting skills and include attitudes and beliefs, knowledge, emotional and mental health, and social support.

Parenting skills

Improving parenting skills or teaching new ones is a key objective of many parenting support interventions. Parenting skills are defined as things that parents do to do with children. This includes practices or behaviours employed by parents usually with a particular goal in mind (generally to discourage undesirable behaviours and/or encourage desirable ones).

Interventions that address parenting skills are typically described as behavioural programmes or some form of parent training. There are a number of well-established, structured programmes that teach parenting skills including Webster-Stratton's video-modelling programme (see best practice example above) and Parent-Child Interaction Therapy (PCIT

– Eyberg and Robinson, 1982, cited in Moran et al). The interventions typically take the form of a structured course of sessions and generally medium term (usually between 6 to 12 weeks in length), though some may be more intensive. Most programmes were initially developed for use amongst parents of school-aged children. However, over time, they have been developed to include early intervention programmes for pre-school children and also for parents of older children, including adolescents. Elements of the programme may include a manual, video-modelling and group discussion. Most take place outside of the home setting. Three sets of skills are commonly targeted by parenting support interventions:

- Supervision and monitoring.
- Boundary setting and discipline.
- Communication and negotiation.

Programmes that are usually considered most successful typically include:

- High attention to implementation issues to promote attendance and lasting engagement.
- Interactive methods of teaching rather than didactic approaches.
- Practically-focussed, offering 'take home and try' tips for modifying parents' behaviour.

Parenting education covers a wide variety of activities, methods and client groups; and can be offered on an individual or group basis, in clinics or community settings such as schools and family centres. Some programmes aim to help families learn more about how to bring up their children at different stages of their childhood; others are targeted at families whose children are exhibiting behavioural problems, or provide support and education to referred families where there is a risk of family breakdown.

Studies in both the US and Britain have identified that Webster-Stratton and other similar programmes can lead to significant improvements in children's behaviour, better parenting skills, and improved levels of stress and anxiety for parents, with effects that last over time²⁰. Other parenting programme models that have proved effective in trials include the Positive Parenting and the Strengthening Families / Strengthening Communities programmes.

Although targeted parenting education such as Webster-Stratton can be very effective, it does not work for all families. Up to a third of parents continue to experience difficulties after involvement in parenting programmes and although the reasons for this are not well understood, recent research seems to show that parental depression in particular reduces the effectiveness of programmes²¹. A further criticism has been the failure of these programmes to address wider problems with life circumstances²², including the repeated finding that parents from lower socio-economic backgrounds are less likely to engage with and are more likely to drop out of the parenting programmes²³.

The literature has identified the following characteristics of successful programmes to improve parenting skills:

- Behaviourally orientated programmes (where parents are trained to use praise and reinforcement effectively) seem to have more impact in changing children's behaviour than those which emphasise relationships and communication. Programmes combining behavioural parenting approaches with other techniques such as problem solving appear to be the most effective. However, relationship-based programmes do also have some positive outcomes for parents, and can lead in particular to decreased family conflict.

- The most effective facilitation approach seems to be an interactive model of learning that values parents' own ideas and experience, thereby increasing parents' confidence and providing peer support.
- Working with parents alone is not enough to achieve long-term change in children with severe or complex problems. Parenting programmes that include direct work with the child are likely to be more effective.
- Parent education needs to be offered in accessible locations, through the provision of transportation, day care and flexible scheduling.

Parenting attitudes and beliefs

Interventions that focus on parenting attitudes explore how parents feel and what they believe about their parenting, for example, parents' beliefs about child behaviour and development, their perceptions of their own competence, their sense of coping and their general confidence and enjoyment in parenting. They are often described as cognitively based interventions because they focus on stimulating reflection and self-evaluation of attitudes and beliefs about parenting rather than on practising specific skills and techniques for managing and interacting with children.

Well known cognitively-based interventions that address parenting attitudes and beliefs as a primary outcome include Parent Effectiveness Training (PET – based on the work of Carl Rogers) which emphasises democratic relationships within families and a 'no lose' approach to conflict management that minimise the exercise of parental power, and programmes that emphasise parents' understanding and comprehension of children's behaviours and thought processes. These programmes rely heavily on verbal and written methods of teaching, and there is usually a fixed number of sessions over a relatively short to medium period of time. Characteristics of programmes considered to be successful typically include:

- Higher socio-economic class or well-educated parents.
- Parents of older children.
- Parents of less delinquent children.
- Some practical (behavioural) component in addition to cognitively based methods.

Therefore, these programmes may be less suited to parents and children with higher levels of need.

Parenting knowledge

Parenting knowledge programmes focus on improving or extending parents' understanding and knowledge about child development, child care and child health. The assumption behind these programmes is that improving their understanding of how children think, grow and develop will enable parents to tailor their own responses and behaviours towards children more appropriately.

Interventions range widely from advertising and marketing (posters, leaflets and audio-visual materials), to short information sessions, telephone help line services, flexible and time-limited programmes for groups of parents, to more intensive and formal services over a standardised time and curriculum. Programmes usually considered most successful typically involve:

- Greatest gains for low-knowledge, high-risk groups (eg adolescent parents, recent immigrants, incarcerated fathers etc).
- Transmission of straightforward factual information using a range of media.
- Delivery by 'authoritative' professionals.

- Delivery over a range of formats, from low-level and short-term to longer and more intensive.
- A focus on concrete issues (eg health care; home safety; child development; substance misuse; monitoring and supervision).

Emotional and mental health

Programmes can focus on the general emotional well-being of parents as well as specific mental health issues such as prevention of depression and post natal depression.

Most interventions target mothers rather than fathers, often during the neonatal period or with pre-school age children. Most programmes are of 8 to 12 weeks duration, and the content varies enormously from discussion groups to formal educational training, including structured training in specific therapeutic techniques. Programmes usually considered successful typically involve:

- Group work lasting a minimum of 8 to 12 weeks.
- Mostly parents of pre-school age children, though there are exceptions, especially for parents of children with more severe behavioural/emotional difficulties.
- Staff whose level of training matches the type of intervention being delivered and the severity of the problem being targeted.

Social support

Social support refers to social relationships with both individuals and institutions that have the potential to provide emotional and practical support. Social support is thought to be important for parents as a means of buffering the effects that stressors have on mental and physical health. An absence of social support can lead to emotional, mental and physical ill health, which may impact on ability to cope with parenting. Support for parents comes from a variety of sources, often broadly grouped into informal (from family, friends and neighbours, arising from parents' own pre-existing networks), semi-formal (often provided through community-based organisations) and formal support (organised services, often needs led and provided by the statutory sector alone or in partnership with the voluntary sector).

Many interventions aimed at enhancing social support and reducing social isolation have focused on the parents of infants and pre-school children. The interventions take many different approaches, such as providing specific training in areas such as social skills as a means of enhancing parent's ability to interact with others, befriending support, or interventions that target a related but distinct area such as communication skills which will have a knock-on effect in improving social relations. 'Home Start' has come to epitomise this type of service, delivered through trained volunteers working with families in the community, and has been positively evaluated in the past. However, a recent large-scale evaluation of Home Start identified a more mixed picture in terms of the impact of the service on families in different locations across the United Kingdom. In particular, the study found that it was very difficult to attribute improvements for parents and children to the input from Home Start, as there was the same degree of improvement for samples receiving the service and a control group who did not²⁴.

Interventions designed to enhance social support and reduce social isolation include:

- Befriending schemes.
- Services that offer specific information and advice on accessing support from agencies in the local areas.

- Services that help isolated parents 'rehearse' how to seek help (eg through role-play).
- Some time-limited parent group programmes. Although the elements that make them successful or not are unclear, the group situation may lessen feelings of isolation and promote a sense of 'kinship' with others in similar situations.

Example services include:

Parents Altogether Lending Support (PALS)

PALS aims to increase the life chances of young children by supporting parents in their parenting roles. A variety of teaching methods are used to stimulate and guide discussion and, rather than being dependent upon professionals, parents meet in small groups to support and encourage one another by sharing their own experiences as parents. The programme was assessed from inception by the Department of Psychology at the University of Dundee which applauded:

"the extent to which PALS helped to transform the lives of parents and children, for example, one parent felt that without PALS she might have given up trying to change and let her child be taken into care".²⁵

Interviews with parents several years after they completed the course showed that:

- Participating in the short course had long-term benefits as parents were still able to apply the skills they had learned several years after finishing the programme.
- Even though the course was only six weeks long, parents showed a dramatic improvement in their ability to deal with difficult situations concerning their children.

Participation built up parents' self esteem and confidence, and increased their sense of efficacy for helping their children to learn.

YMCA's parenting teenagers initiative

YMCA's 'Parenting Teenagers' Initiative established a number of projects across the UK to provide YMCA centre-based help and support to the parents of teenagers. The main factors which led the YMCA to set up the initiative were the relative lack of support for parents of teenagers compared with that available for parents of younger children, and the increasing numbers of young people accessing accommodation at the YMCA, as a result of family breakdown. The initiative was evaluated by the Trust for the Study of Adolescence. Funding was agreed for 29 projects, which included group-based courses, 'Dad's and Lads' projects, mediation schemes, and transition evenings. A variety of outcomes were identified, including²⁶:

- Gaining information about their teenagers.
- About young people and their behaviour.
- Sharing ideas and experiences.
- Feeling supported in their parenting.
- Acquiring strategies to promote better communication and relationships.

Factors that worked well include using a 'hook' to attract parents and teenagers, offering taster sessions, advertising courses widely, being responsive to the needs of parents and willing to adapt programmes in particular to allow parents to have a greater input. Factors that did not work well include attracting sufficient parents, engaging parents in the specific part of the project that

addressed parenting and relationships, using the words 'parenting course' or 'parenting education', organising events that lasted too long for participants, and the use of poor quality or unattractive venues.

Parent-child outcomes - improved parent-child relationships

The quality of the parent-child relationship is considered to be fundamental to effective parenting. Outcomes in this area are usually measured in terms of changes in some aspect of family relationships, generally involving either parent-child communication and interaction or attachment patterns.

The types of intervention typically involve some form of skills training for parents, the nature of which tends to differ according to the age of the child. It seems to be particularly specific to parents of children under 5 years. For parents of newborns to pre-school aged children, many interventions focus on enhancing parental sensitivity to infant behavioural cues as a means of fostering more secure attachment in the infant. For older children, training parents in 'filial therapy' (which provides a means of non-verbal expression of children's feelings in a healthy, constructive way and involves a therapist facilitating child-centred play therapy with the parent) has been used with diverse groups of children to encourage expression of children's feelings and to foster greater empathy in parents. For even older children and young people, parenting programmes have focused on improving communication skills such as negotiation, alongside provision of information about adolescents' risk in relation to substance misuse and delinquency. Programmes that are generally considered most successful typically involve:

- For enhancing parental sensitivity and responsiveness to infants: the Brazelton Neonatal Behavioural Assessment tool; and home visiting involving skills-based training for mothers of irritable 6 month old babies.
- For enhancing parental empathy and acceptance: filial therapy.
- For enhancing parent-adolescent relations: skills-based programmes for adolescents and their parents that build on protective factors.
- For primary prevention of child abuse and neglect: home visitation programmes; multi-component programmes including education, advice, information and practical forms of support, and possibly banning all physical violence against children including physical punishment.

Examples of interventions aimed at improving parent-child relationships are explored below:

Mellow Parenting

Designed to support families whose relationship with their children is under severe stress, this programme was developed by a group of professionals with psychology and social work expertise. It combines personal group therapy with parenting support, and uses behaviour modification principles, and videotapes of parents' interactions with their children at home as an aid to group discussions.

Mothers attending the programme showed significant improvement in their mental state, and improvements in the child's behaviour and mother-child interaction were also noted. The key factor appeared to be mothers' willingness to invest emotional energy in the group and the child. However, improvements often weren't maintained where mothers' partners had been hostile to their involvement in the group, suggesting the importance of involving fathers as well as mothers in parenting programmes.²⁷

Mellow Parenting has been shown to be effective in engaging families who are often difficult to engage in such programmes, and in helping them make changes in their relationships with their children. An evaluation by the Department of Health showed that, compared with other family centre-

based programmes, Mellow Parenting improves mother-child interaction; child behaviour problems; mother's well-being, mother's effectiveness and confidence in parenting; children's language and non-verbal abilities.²⁸

Family Welfare Association NEWPIN

The evidence-based NEWPIN model has worked holistically since 1982 by considering both the mental health needs of the parent(s) and the young child's development, filling the gap that often exists between these services. FWA NEWPIN provides centre-based structured support for parents and their children under five where there is a range of identified mental health and parent-child relationship difficulties, or a high risk of developing these. The service aims to:

- improve the family's support network;
- improve the mental health of the parent;
- prevent emotional abuse and neglect leading to a reduction in physical abuse and neglect and sexual abuse; and
- improve social and emotional development and security of attachment for the child.

Research funded by the Department of Health reported that mothers attending NEWPIN had benefited from the service, but that sustained involvement of up to 12 months was necessary for the mothers' mental state to improve. A later study found that fewer than half of those referred to the service had gone on to use the service.²⁹ Of those who had, half had found that it had helped with child rearing problems, 'not hurting their children' or preventing their children being taken into care.

Overall Messages about Designing and Delivering Services

Whatever their focus, the way in which parenting programmes are delivered may be as critical a factor in achieving positive outcomes as their content. Key implementation issues include:

- 'Getting' parents – persuading parents to attend the service in the first place.
- 'Keeping' them – persuading parents to attend sessions regularly and complete the course.
- 'Engaging' parents – persuading/encouraging parents to listen, take part in the active elements, completing 'home-work' assignments, reading supporting materials etc.

Forehand and Kotchick cited in Moran et al¹² identified 4 groups of factors that can influence effective implementation.

1. Practical factors.
There are a range of practical factors that can contribute to the ease with which services can both get and keep parents, such as: child care facilities; provision of paid transport to and from the service; convenient time and location; non-stigmatising; service is properly advertised and marketed.
2. Relational factors.
The relationship between parents and those delivering the service can affect both 'getting' and 'keeping' parents as well as issues of 'engagement'. The quality of staff and programme delivery style and content affect implementation and delivery of parenting services.
3. Cultural, contextual and situational factors.
There are a number of ecological factors which influence services ability to get, keep and engage parents. These include: life circumstances and stresses; gender of parents; cultural sensitivity.

4. Strategic factors.
Strategic aspects of service delivery that can incentivise attendance and discourage drop out include: persistence in the recruitment of families; addressing parents concerns and anxieties about services; rewarding regular attendance.

Moran et al¹² summarised messages for policy about good practice and what works in supporting parents, which can be divided into issues relating to the design and to the delivery of services:

Design of services

Qualities associated with successful services include:

- Intervention with a strong theory-base and clearly articulated model of predicted mechanism of change: services need to know both where they want to go, and how they propose to get there.
- Interventions that have measurable, concrete objectives as well as overarching aims.
- Targeted interventions (aimed at specific populations or individuals deemed to be at risk for parenting difficulties) to tackle more complex types of parenting difficulties.
- Interventions of longer duration, with follow-up/booster sessions, for problems of greater severity or for higher risk groups of parents.
- Short, low level interventions for delivering factual information and fact-based advice to parents, increasing knowledge of child development and encouraging change in 'simple' behaviours.
- Behavioural interventions that focus on specific parenting skills and practical 'take home tips' for changing more complex parenting behaviours and impacting on child behaviours.
- 'Cognitive' interventions for changing beliefs, attitudes and self-perceptions about parenting.
- Group work, where the issues involved are suitable to be addressed in a 'public' format, and where parents can benefit from the social aspect of working in groups of peers.
- Individual work, where problems are severe / entrenched, or parents are not ready / able to work in a group, often including an element of home visiting, as part of a multi component service, providing one-to-one, tailored support.

Delivery of services

Qualities associated with successful delivery include:

- Both early intervention and later intervention; early interventions report better and more durable outcomes for children; but later intervention is better than none and may help parents deal with parenting under stress.
- Universal interventions (aimed at primary prevention amongst whole communities) for parenting problems and needs at the less severe end of the spectrum of common parenting difficulties – though some types of universal services require more evaluation to determine their effectiveness.
- Interventions that pay close attention to implementation factors for 'getting', 'keeping' and 'engaging' parents (practical, relational, cultural/contextual, and strategic).
- Services that allow multiple routes in for families (i.e. a variety of referral routes).
- Interventions using more than one method of delivery (i.e. multi-component interventions).
- Interventions delivered by appropriately trained and skilled staff, backed up by good management, support and supervision.

- Interventions that work in parallel (though not necessarily at the same time) with parents, families and children.
- Professionals need to work collaboratively to have most impact. Schools are important influences on children's lives and teachers need to be involved to ensure improvements at home are reproduced in the school.
- Parent education needs to be offered in accessible locations, through the provision of transportation, day care and flexible scheduling.
- Behaviourally orientated programmes (where parents are trained to use praise and reinforcement effectively) seem to have more impact in changing children's behaviour than those which emphasise relationships and communication. Programmes combining behavioural parenting approaches with other techniques such as problem solving appear to be the most effective. However, relationship-based programmes do also have some positive outcomes for parents, and can lead in particular to decreased family conflict.
- Group based programmes may be more successful in improving the behaviour of children aged 3-10 years, than working with parents on an individual basis, and are likely to be more cost effective as well as more acceptable to parents as non-stigmatised support.
- The most effective facilitation approach seems to be an interactive model of learning that values parents' own ideas and experience, thereby increasing parents' confidence and providing peer support.
- Working with parents alone is not enough to achieve long-term change in children with severe or complex problems. Parenting programmes that include direct work with the child are likely to be more effective.
- Radical changes in children's behaviour and parent/child relationships are unlikely if services do not address the context in which children are brought up. Parenting education alone cannot solve factors that adversely affect parenting such as poverty, lack of community and social support networks, and domestic violence.

The DfES has funded Parenting UK to develop a Commissioners' Toolkit, to equip commissioners with a greater knowledge of the current range of interventions and includes information on what research and evaluation suggests may be most effective. The toolkit is a searchable database on parenting programmes which can be accessed from www.toolkit.parentinguk.org.

Conclusion

This paper provides a starting point for commissioners seeking to develop their understanding of 'what works' in parenting support. However, this paper has been unable to focus specifically on what works for children in need as this has not been explicitly addressed by parenting support programmes. Parenting support is a wide term covering many different interventions with the goal of enabling parents to improve their relationship with their child and to improve their child's behaviour. Support can be located within dimensions that reflect the age of the child, focus on intervention and level of need.

For children in need it may be necessary to consider the more intensive programmes and those that acknowledge the difficulties of reaching disengaged parents and families or parents of vulnerable children or young people. Furthermore, there are a number of implementation issues which need to be considered in developing reorganising services, including in particular how to ensure families engage with services.

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