

# Supporting parents in the early years

## The way to avoid later behavioural problems?

### Summary

*This article presents seven early intervention programmes in two towns in southern England. Three are close linked to schools, one works with school-aged children but outside the school and three programs work exclusively with preschool children and parents in community settings. Although the evaluative investigation of these programs is still halfway, some tentative insight into what they do for parents can be given. It is the social support provided by the programs which parents value most. The author draws special attention to the phenomenon of dropping out of the program. Poverty, single parenthood, depression and family isolation are considered as main reasons.*

*Keywords: Early-intervention, preschool children, school-aged children parenting, criminality.*

### Introduction

*There has been a subtle change in the language in which disaffection and criminality among young people is now being discussed in the UK. Where such discussion was once likely to become a pass-the-parcel of blame - from parents to schools, from schools to the criminal justice system, from that back to parents - talk of partnership and collaboration now predominates. Parents, schools, the police and probation service, the voluntary sector are all supposed to be working together to help one another tackle these behaviors, and there is great interest in starting the process early, before disaffected or destructive behaviour becomes established.*

Because there has been no longitudinal research in England on the scale of the High/Scope Perry pre-School Curriculum Comparison Study, this is often cited as the justification for a whole range of intervention projects aimed to address behaviour in the early years (Schweinhart et al, 1993). Among the factors identified by researchers as indicating children at increased risk of criminality are 'Family Risk Factors', which include poor parental supervision, harsh or erratic discipline, parental conflict, separation from a biological parent and a parent with a criminal record (Utting, 1996). It is the first two of these that most parenting support programs aim to address.

There has been an exponential growth in 'parenting education' or 'parenting support' programs since a study in 1996 which estimated that approximately 28,000 (4%) parents a year were taking part in them (Smith, 1996). The national body which knows most about what is going on, the Parenting Forum, based at the National Children's Bureau in London, points out that the original estimate was very rough, and can only say that the number of programs that have begun recently is 'enormous'. This is a service for which the time seems to be ripe.

Most parenting programs are offered by non-profit-making voluntary organizations, often working in very limited geographical areas. Parents participate voluntarily, although sometimes health, education or social services staff may suggest that parents would find a group useful, and may even include attendance as part of the care plan for a child. There are some signs that building-based longer-term services for families where children have behaviour problems could be losing out in favor of these short-term, specialist interventions. Most are considerably cheaper than professional support services.

### Who uses these programs?

In her early survey of parenting programs, Celia Smith identified different types of need among the parents who used them. First are the parents who want to make a good enough job of parenting, and try to improve performance by getting some 'training'. That is, they are not motivated by any problems in the behaviour of their child. Then there are a group whose children present behaviour problems that come within the range of 'normal' but whose parents seek some guidance in dealing with them - sleeping and eating patterns, temper tantrums, hostility to new siblings and a host of other day-to-day nuisances which often pass naturally but which worry parents. Sometimes hard to distinguish from this group are the parents who are trying to deal with behaviour that is severe, may require clinical intervention, but which looks, at times, not much different from the 'normal' category. And finally there is a group of parents who is dealing with multiple problems besides the behaviour difficulties and whose self-esteem is very low, either because their parenting is not effective, or because of the context in which the parenting is taking place (Smith, 1996).

Smith suggested that certain types of parenting programs were suitable for different kinds of need. But the enormous burgeoning of programs in the four or five years since she produced her survey have made it difficult to understand what is suitable for whom. There is a real need for more descriptive work on parenting programs, the development of typologies which distinguish between them, and some investigation of whether they are successful or not.

In her systematic review of evaluations of parenting programs, Jane Barlow has shown that interventions have a record of helping children with behaviour problems, especially programs that are based on behaviour modification (Barlow, 1998). But she notes a great many gaps in knowledge, including the need to integrate gender, ethnicity and disability into the design of evaluations of programs and, particularly, the need to research the social spectrum of parents. Until studies confirm or refute it, the observer might be forgiven for suspecting that the 'good enough' parents tend to be well-heeled, but that many other parenting support groups involve better off people telling poor people how they should be bringing up their kids.

To accompany the analytical descriptions of programs we need to know:

- what motivates parents to enroll in, and keep coming to, parenting programs?
- how long do the effects of programs last?
- how do the programs bring about changes in parents and children?
- do they have negative effects?

To begin to address investigations - what the programs are and who is using them,- a small study in two towns in southern England is currently applying pre- and post-test measures to discover the impact of seven different programs, and is using observation and interview to explore the reaction of parents to them.

### An evaluative study of early intervention programs

The seven programs have been selected on the basis of who pays for them, rather than on the basis of what we can learn from comparing them, which is a pity. Like so many research projects this one would have been improved if it had started from somewhere else. But the purpose of the study is utilitarian, and it is the bodies that are putting the money into these programs that want to know how useful they are. One is a local authority, the other a local education authority.

This gives a clue to the current popularity of early intervention programs: it is hoped that children, entering school at ever younger ages in the UK, will be easier for schools to manage, with less like likelihood of the disruptive behaviour that has led to a rapid rise in exclusions from first schools in the past ten years (DfEE, 1997). And with the development of baseline assessment and standard assessment testing throughout the child's schooling, there is an in-built gauge which *could* be used to judge how effective behaviour interventions have been. (Parents of children who behaved badly at school and had terrible reputations there, but got good academic results, may question whether this is a valid basis for judgement).

### Linked to schools

Of the seven programs, three are closely linked to schools, a fourth works with school-aged children but outside the school premises. The remaining three programs work exclusively with pre-school children and parents, in community settings.

In the school-based programs, sessions with children are the main focus, but courses for parents are integrated into the approach. For example, one scheme uses therapeutic play techniques, in which classroom assistants are trained by a play therapist. A small number of children are referred to the program by their teachers. Each week they attend a special group called 'Time Together' which takes place in the school, but is separated from other activities. In a school where two assistants run a group for five children each week they write: *'We collect the children from their classes at the same time each week, and sit together for 5-10 minutes before playing. We use this time to ask the children how they are feeling and to say how we are feeling. This is recorded very briefly in a book... . At first we set the toys out in the room and left the children to choose their own*

*activity. We found that the children wanted some direction, so now we have one major activity ... About 15 minutes before the end of the session we get together again....We have decided to finish each session with a drink and food because the children chat while they eat, and, as at the beginning of the session, say how they feel before they leave.'*

The parents of these children have been consulted about the program and offered a support group, with the aim of teaching them similar techniques to those used in the group. These parents have not responded to the invitation, but a parenting support group has nevertheless been established, drawing on other parents whose children use these schools.

A second school-focused program works with whole schools, training teachers to use techniques and language not dissimilar to those of the 'Time Together' groups, with a whole class, not just those who have been labeled 'behaviour problems'. The parent support groups here are voluntary, and, of course, have far larger numbers of potential parent users. Parent groups last for ten weeks and participants learn to use nurturing techniques and used in their child's school. This approach has been very effective in attracting parents, who note that it provides them with a language with which to communicate with their children about feelings.

A school-based program which is based entirely on language development - a literacy project - claims to have a major impact on behaviour. It attributes disaffection to the child's inability to read properly, so provides intensive, one-to-one reading support, with some involvement of parents in support groups. Apart from identifying where parents themselves have literacy problems, this program simply encourages parents to read to and listen to their children. It does not offer groups for parents.

### **Based in the community**

Community based projects, for parents, but with a children's program alongside, draw their membership from a wider area, and parents are usually strangers to one another. There is no difficulty finding people to take part in 15-week programs, although numbers tend to reduce over this long period. It looks as though the families under the greatest stress find it hard to sustain such a long commitment.

In all programs tensions can arise between group members over matters of 'status' - which could be class difference. *'She seemed to think she was better than the rest of us,'* is a one comment which illustrates the type of difficulty that arises within groups. But troubles can occur between parents from the same neighborhoods, especially since the essence of parenting groups is a close examination of past and current personal experience. Some parents feel they are giving their neighbors a little too much insight into their lives!

Least likely to see these courses through until the end are those parents who have been encouraged to attend by social workers. However, this may be due to the range of stresses with which they have to cope. Struggling to get to a parenting group when you have at least one small child, little money and have to catch a bus there, can prove too much to sustain for over three months.

In one area such groups are based at a family center where the overwhelming majority of parents are of Asian origin. The pilot work here is of particular interest. So far, however, the

staff at the family center and the educational psychology department which is running the course have been so anxious for it to succeed that they have selected participants. For the first course this meant that Asian parents were in a minority in the group, not reflecting the usage of the family center. Early indications are that interventions do present particular difficulties for Asian families. Among the customs they do not take into account are the involvement of extended family members in the rearing of a child, especially the powerful role of in-laws. Another difficulty is language-based, introducing new languages to deal with behaviour is difficult for parents whose mother-tongue is not English.

### What works for parents

It is not possible to publish categorical conclusions about the impact of these interventions on children's behaviour halfway into the study. But there is some tentative insight into what they do for parents.

#### *The consolation of companionship*

The commonest 'good thing' that emerges from participation in any kind of group is the relationship with other members of the group. Without exception parents describe their feelings before contact with programs as being of isolation (which may be exacerbated by the behaviour of their children, but are not caused by it entirely). This isolation is a curious phenomenon. In many cases the parents who have made supportive friendships in parenting groups had actually seen, or even knew the people with whom they are now friends. Why did they not talk to one another, as they pushed their push-chairs around the same estates, to the same bus-stops, outside the same schools? There are a variety of personal explanations, and the absence of congenial places in which to meet others is one of them. But underlying the inability to 'connect' is a lack of confidence and self-esteem that is attributed to parenthood itself. Many parents have described how children had represented only limitations to their own development until they provided the reason to be in a group.

For many parents the membership of a group is seen as a privilege which they have because of their children. This has altered their view of their children. As one lone teenaged parent put it: *'I have learned that there is so much joy that you can get out of a child.'*

Another, describing the welcome she gets from other group members said, *'I think they make you feel at home and they make you feel like a person. You know? Like they all spoke to me - because when you go to a group everybody is in the same situation and you think, "Are they going to talk to me?" In this group we are all together and if you've got anything to say you can say it. And people tell you about things that have happened to them and it makes you feel better. You think, "Why are my kids behaving like this? Why are my kids throwing tantrums?" and you don't realize that other people are going through it.'*

### *A language for the personal*

All the programs are introducing parents (and children where they are old enough) to language in which to express how they feel. Reporting on their response to this, most parents note an initial squeamishness, but then report that the expressions, (for example 'Warm Fuzzy' for a pleasant feeling inside, 'Cold Prickly' for its antithesis) can provide a useful shorthand, especially when the child also uses this 'secret' language. One father, whose seven year old daughter has not shown empathy with others, described how thrilled he was when, laid out on the sofa with a bad back, she brought him a favorite soft toy and said it was to make him feel 'Warm fuzzy'. It was the first time she had acknowledged that he was in pain.

### *Relationship with a facilitating adult*

All groups are 'run' by trained individuals. Parents consider the relationships they develop with these individuals as particularly important. It is almost as though the facilitator is an approving and encouraging parent, who listens to group members' stories, offers support and advice, and makes sure that everyone gets their say. Parents do not always like the leader, but they need to respect her. (It is usually a her.) The leader models some of the behaviour that parents take home with them, especially the giving of undivided attention.

In all these interventions parents note that it is the way everyone listens to them (and they listen to other people) which is the unfamiliar element in the process.

Learning to listen is valuable, because it is a skill that usefully transfers into many situations. A couple who attended a parenting group together report that they now go to bed slightly later because they spend some time at the end of each day 'debriefing' one another on the day's experiences. Both say they feel more rested, even with less sleep, because they go to bed in a calmer state of mind. They feel their relationship has improved greatly.

## Conclusions

So far, then, we know more about the fringe benefits of these programs than we do about whether they fulfil their main aim - of improving behaviour in the long run. We should have more insight into this when the pre- and post-test results of the research are analyzed.

What we can say, however, is that it is the *social support* that is provided by the programs which parents value most.

This is interesting and reinforces the comments of Carolyn Webster Stratton, whose Family Nurturing approach is used by three of the programs we are investigating. In an article in 1997 entitled, '*From Parent Training to Community Building*' she notes that over 30% of parents fail to respond to parenting education in groups. The main reasons for this are poverty, single parenthood, depression and family isolation. Parents experiencing these difficulties drop out of parenting programs, fail to show up or fail to maintain changes.

She concludes that poverty, low levels of community involvement and thus poor social networks and greater isolation are the reasons for failure to respond to parenting programs (Webster-Stratton, 1997). And yet we are finding that it is the social networking and over-

coming of isolation which parents really appreciate in programs. So how do we get the parents who are most isolated to participate in groups which may conquer isolation - but which they find difficult to access because they are isolated? The following suggestions are offered:

- short-term parenting programs need to be offered *after a period of community development and consultation with parents* in small geographic areas, so that parents who find the concept most difficult can be introduced to it;
- *parents who have 'graduated' from programs* and have found them useful, need to be *recruited as 'trainers'*, reaching out to recruit in neighborhoods, and acting as role models for participants;
- *self-help* parenting groups need to be encouraged in order to provide the social support that is valued and to draw in 'expertise' - on behaviour modification techniques, but also, perhaps on other matters, like nutrition and early education - when participants want it.
- in areas of high disadvantage, *parents will need incentives* to participate in groups - a minimum of transport costs and feeding. In an ideal world parents who took the trouble to undertake this form of learning, would be remunerated. Most jobs include a period of paid training. In less ideal situations they might lose certain benefits if they did not participate, which would be a very bad idea.

The chief reward for parents at present is the effectiveness of learning from programs on their children's behaviour. Between 50% and 70% think it makes a difference. The rest either drops out before they find out, or is faced with behavioral problems beyond the reach of this kind of intervention. Only long-term follow-up of their children will tell us if they should have stayed.

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