

REPORT

Centre for
Mental Health



Wanting the best for my children: Parents' voices

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1. Introduction

All children misbehave from time to time, but in a small minority behavioural problems become persistent and severe. When a child gets stuck in a pattern of challenging behaviour they often feel unhappy, unsafe and out of control; and so do their parents.

One child in five has behavioural problems that can affect their future life chances, while 5% of children have the most severe behavioural problems, known as conduct disorder. Prevalence rates are twice as high among boys as girls and are higher among children from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Persistent challenging behaviour early in life has been consistently noted to create problems for children later in life and prevents them from achieving their potential.

Good quality parenting programmes can make a real difference to these children, helping parents pick up simple techniques to more effectively manage behaviour and support their child's wellbeing. These programmes not only have the potential to improve children's life chances, they also improve parents' wellbeing and reduce family stress. They also potentially contribute to substantial cost savings in the public sector. Despite these opportunities, only a small minority of children and families get the help they need to protect their children's life chances.

In 2010, with funding from the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, Centre for Mental Health completed a major investigation in four local areas in England to understand how high quality and proven programmes could be made more available and accessible for parents who need them (Centre for Mental Health, 2012).

'Wanting the best for my children' is part of a wider programme of work building on learning from this study. It summarises parents' experiences and dilemmas about seeking help as well as their thoughts on how systems might work better to support families managing early behavioural difficulties. It focuses on:

- parents' perceptions of child behavioural problems and of parenting support
- how parents found their way to parenting programmes
- why some parents didn't enrol on programmes
- the barriers and enablers to engaging with and completing programmes
- parents' experiences of being on a parenting course
- what might improve their experience of these programmes.

We talked to 44 parents in all. Six were fathers and 38 were mothers. The majority had attended parenting programmes. Thirteen were parents facing multiple difficulties or whose children had some behavioural problems but who were reluctant to or had not attended parenting programmes. Just under a quarter were parents from Black and Minority Ethnic communities.

2. Seeking help

We know that most parents of children with severe behavioural problems seek help or advice, mostly from schools or general practitioners; however, only a small minority ever receives early help and even fewer have access to proven programmes with the best chance of making a difference to children's life chances. Even when parents hit crisis point and had real concerns about their child's behaviour and wellbeing, they were often delayed in getting help because they didn't know whether their child's behaviour was normal or outside healthy developmental ranges; what types of help might best support them; and where to find the assistance they needed.

Parents were most likely to seek help for their children because of mounting family stress and embarrassment. Children's challenging behaviour was often described as affecting wider family relationships prompting parents to seek advice and support:

All the arguments and the fighting; it was tearing us apart. I remember thinking to myself that I'd rather be in Afghanistan than be here right now...and it was just horrible.

I just want our life to be happy and you know, just calm and nice, and it's just not like that at the moment.

*It's embarrassing for me when we go out and he's kicking off and everybody's looking and saying, oh just smack him. It's not just a smack that he needs, he needs controlling. But you get lots of dirty looks off everybody else about how your child is.
(Mothers, programme attendees)*

Many parents also disclosed feelings of powerlessness when faced with their child's escalating behaviour:

*I think it knocked us both for six cos we didn't know how to deal with it and our other child was so different... [Our daughter's] very forceful and we'd lost some power.
(Father, programme attendee)*

You get stuck in a rut for so long that it takes going somewhere and talking to other people to put everything into perspective. From the first session I was looking forward to coming back.

*He's five but when he's in his temper, it's like fighting with a grown man. So if he's like that at five, what's he going to be like in a few years' time?... It's him that controls me and I can't get him out of it.
(Mother, programme attendee)*

Despite descriptions of mounting family stress, many parents described long delays between the time that problems first emerged and the point that they eventually sought or accessed help. Many reasons appeared to prompt these delays including:

- Difficulties identifying need
- Feelings of failure and stigma
- Lack of knowledge about effective help
- Requests for help going unmet.

Identifying need

The language used by parents to make sense of children's behaviour often hindered recognition of children's support needs. Parents were less likely to seek help if they perceived their child's behaviour as 'naughtiness':

*I've heard of things like parenting programmes but not just if a kid's naughty.
(Mother, non-attender of programme)*

*At first I thought he was just naughty. I actually thought he was just a generally naughty boy.
(Mother, programme attendee)*

They were more likely to seek help if they thought behaviour was indicative of an underlying health problem or developmental difficulty/delay:

Depends what kind of problems it were. If it was physical problems or mental problems with the child then, yeah [I'd attend a parenting programme...] I wouldn't

[attend] now, if she's just been naughty I'd just control that myself, but if it were like physical then yeah.

(Mother, non-attender of programme)

We've been having trouble with our eldest boy's behaviour who I've also noticed was a little bit delayed in his development and with his speech particularly. He was having a lot of tantrums, but then they do at that age. But it was more than that, there were lots of little things adding up that weren't quite right.

(Mother, ex-nurse, programme attendee)

She's got something up with her and they don't know what yet.

(Mother, programme attendee)

However, feedback from some parents also suggested a degree of wariness of premature 'mental health' labelling and a slight defensiveness because 'everyone wants to think their child is perfect'.

Parents also described other factors prompting delays. Many described prolonged periods of confusion and uncertainty about whether their child's behaviour was within 'normal' ranges - even when behaviour had become quite persistently challenging and extreme. Often parents described being 'stuck in a rut for so long' battling on until they hit a crisis:

[Our daughter] had hit an all-time low in terms of her behaviour. [My wife] had reached the desperation stage and I said I think we need some additional advice because we tried the 'softly, softly' approach, we'd tried scaring her or shouting at her (which had worked really well with our son) but that didn't work with her, it made matters worse.

(Father, programme attendee)

During these delays, some parents talked of significant unhappiness and tension often affecting the wellbeing of other children in the house. For example, in one family, the only person able to placate the five-year-old boy and calm his unpredictable aggression was his eight-year-old sister, placing excessive responsibility on her. This particular family had been asking for help unsuccessfully over a period of five years.

Feelings of failure and stigma

Some parents also described strong feelings of failure saying they blamed themselves for their children's behaviour:

You think your kid's a right terror and you think it's because of you, the way you're doing stuff - and when you get to groups you realise that they just all go through one of those phases and they show you different ways to handle it.

(Mother, programme attendee)

In some instances, these feelings led parents to conclude 'I have a right crap family' which deterred them from seeking help because 'before you know it, I'll have social workers on my back'.

Equally, although embarrassment could sometimes drive parents to seek help, it could also act as a disincentive - particularly when accompanied by feelings of failure:

We're more cautious about sharing [what we are doing] with my husband's family, because I think when I first mentioned it I was really judged and so it kind of shot me down so I haven't mentioned it again. I think there's a pre-conceived idea that if you ask for help you're failing. As if something with me and [my son] is really wrong, and it's not about that and it's explaining that to people.

(Mother, programme attendee)

Some parents also recalled feeling defensive at first, particularly when professionals raised initial concerns with them. It was clear that the language used by professionals during these early stages of identifying need was critical, potentially inflaming feelings of shame:

So I just felt a bit hurt, you know, saying that they were immature and they weren't complying and stuff like that. So I went, oh, are they that bad?

(Mother, programme attendee)

Even though you've no intentions of questioning people's parenting skills, even the offer of help can be seen as a put down really. Yeah, you see it's like a defence mechanism that comes, like oh, they don't think that I'm doing the right thing here.

(Father, non-attender of programme)

One woman told us that her partner refused to attend one group because:

*He feels that if he goes on one then he's accepting that he needs to be a better parent and he thinks he's doing the best he can. 'If I thought I could learn something from it then I'd do it but I don't need it'.
(Mother, programme attendee)*

Lack of knowledge about effective help

Many parents felt that parenting programmes were inadequately promoted and were 'a bit of an underworld':

If people knew about it more and what they do that would be a lot better.

It should be more communicated. I found out by accident.

I'm a bit disappointed that it's not more widely known about.

For me there was no information at all about courses. Nothing at my school or nothing on the borough website. It was very difficult to find information about courses like this.

It's very difficult to find information about parenting courses. So [my friend] asked her teacher and she referred me.

It's good, it's just not widely known. When you go to baby groups and things I don't think people really know about it.

(Mothers, all programme attendees)

Some parents were also taken aback (and a few described feeling initially defensive) that the solution to their child's problems might lie in adapting their own parenting style rather than in professionals directly focusing on their child's behaviour.

Requests for help not met

Some parents did not get the help they needed even after they had made great efforts to raise concerns – sometimes talking with multiple professionals. Their experiences pointed to a system which at times felt fragmented and ill-equipped to deal with parents' needs:

[They kept saying] 'I don't deal with it; you'll need to talk to someone [else]'.

I asked social services, I went to the doctors, they referred her to CAMHS and they said she hasn't got a mental illness so there's nothing they could do. I spoke to the health visitors, I spoke to other mums, I talked to the school and I thought 'do you know what, what do I know?... [Maybe] she's just a normal typical child?... What do I do now?' ... Cos maybe if we'd had help, maybe it wouldn't have reached that crisis.

(Mothers, all engaged with programmes)

Surprisingly, those with the most complex difficulties sometimes found it hardest to get the help they needed. In two instances, it took parents many years to feel listened to and get effective help. One family described struggling to manage a little boy with very unpredictable, aggressive and challenging behaviour;

It took five years for somebody to actually acknowledge what I was asking. I was seeing health visitors, they said they'd sort something out and get somebody to see you. Nobody would come. I explained it all to [the school parenting worker] and she got this other nurse to come and see me, we explained everything, the way [my son] were with [his sister] and me and his brothers and she got two other women to come and see me. They asked me about my pregnancy. They said, don't worry we'll take this a bit further... and I've not heard nowt from them since... then I saw [the parenting worker] about it [again] and she chased it up. I had to explain everything to her again and that's when she put a form in to refer him [to the parenting programme].

(Mother, engaged with programme)

In another instance, the situation in the family became increasingly stressed over a number of years resulting in mounting family conflict; an angry crisis then led to the police being called. Even at this point, although action was taken to monitor the family from a child protection perspective, this mother felt she had not also been offered meaningful and practical help to deal with the problems. It was only much later, via a parenting support group coordinated through her daughter's school, that she felt

that she got the help she needed to effectively manage her daughter's challenging behaviour.

Indeed, sometimes parents appeared to have a better understanding of the 'jigsaw' of risk factors potentially affecting their children's wellbeing and development than some professionals they approached for help:

*I did explain in my family I've got a brother and sister that's schizophrenic and my older brother, he'd been in and out of foster care (well, care homes and prisons) from being seven years old and he's only just come out of prison now. And he's 49 next year. Some of my nephews and nieces they've got ADHD. I've got a nephew that's got Obsessive Compulsive Disorder. Even though I explained this to them, none of them seemed to do anything.
(Mother, engaged eventually with programme)*

What did parents want when seeking help?

When parents accepted or went looking for help, they generally hoped to reduce family stress, feel more in control and 'learn new techniques that are less stressful instead of resorting to shouting and screaming':

I needed to make sure that I had tactics in place. And felt that you just don't know what's the right thing or what's the wrong thing, you don't have a child and suddenly, you learn how to do your job... you're not actually trained for this at all.

*Just to learn how to become a better parent and how to handle my children's behaviour better, things like that.
(Mothers, programme attendees)*

They also wanted to learn approaches which in some instances helped their children have better childhood experiences than their own:

*I want better for my children.
(Mother, programme attendee)*

*What's been good enough for me is certainly not good enough for my children
(Father, non-attender of programme but engaged in family therapy)*

Summary

When children's behaviour drifts outside healthy ranges, it can affect their wellbeing and future prospects. Parents described a general lack of awareness of the relationship between children's behaviour, children's healthy development and of the potential for positive parenting techniques to support their wellbeing. This lack of knowledge often led parents' to delay seeking early help. It also resulted in some families experiencing high levels of prolonged and damaging stress as parents continued unsupported.

The language used by parents (and broader society) to describe and understand children's behaviour often led to delays in seeking help. If parents saw children as 'naughty' they were less likely to seek it; but if they thought there was some health or developmental driver, they were more likely to consider seeking advice (although a few were nervous of labelling children). Parents often blamed themselves when children persistently misbehaved, feeling doubly embarrassed and stigmatised. Feeling a 'failure' could delay attempts to seek help.

Many parents felt there was insufficient information about parenting programmes in their locality. A few families with the most complex needs seemed to face the greatest challenges getting help. They described delays over many years with families experiencing fragmented systems and significant stress as they tried to continue unsupported – even after raising concerns with many professionals.

Parents and families were generally motivated to seek help due to the impact that their child's behaviour had on family stress levels and sometimes because they wanted positive or better childhood experiences for their children.

3. Promotion of programmes

Many parents felt opportunities were missed in their local communities to promote parenting programmes and made suggestions for improvements.

Parents suggested numerous ways in which leaflets and newsletters could be used more effectively to promote parenting programmes:

*If you could get a certain amount delivered through the door. I'm sure you must get them at your home, the majority of them are junk mail, but you still look at it first.
(Father, non-attender of programme)*

Schools, GP surgeries and dentists' waiting rooms were also identified as locations where parents might spot marketing initiatives. Schools were seen to provide particularly important places to disseminate information:

*You've got people from all walks of life, but one thing that every child has in common is that they all go to school. Now obviously cost effectiveness comes into things like advertising. [But] It wouldn't cost much to print off an A4 leaflet and it's positive for the school to engage, even if it's just in handing out the leaflets. Just where I live there's six or seven schools in the immediate area.
(Father, non-attender of programme)*

*For me, I go to playgroup or the school. I don't go to any other place. You can't get leaflets in the park. [School] is the only place I go. If it's not there [I would have] no other way [to find out]. I would prefer to get a leaflet in the school bag or the newsletter. It'd be lovely to get info twice a year for what's happening in your postcode.
(Mother, programme attendee)*

On the other hand, some parents also felt that leaflets had limitations as a means of communication with parents and suggested a broader multi-faceted approach to marketing.

*Talking to people is a lot better than a leaflet.
(Mother, programme attendee)*

A few mentioned that children's behaviour, its significance as a gauge of children's wellbeing, and behaviour management should all be raised during pregnancy as a preventative measure - something that parents can get additional help with if they ever find themselves struggling.

*It would almost be nice when you're pregnant with your first one to have some sort of idea, not a 6 -8 week programme, just [that behaviour is] something to be aware of [and] that this is a structure [for dealing with it].
(Mother, programme attendee)*

They felt that pregnancy was a time when parents were motivated to be the best parent they could and that such knowledge might shorten delays in seeking help making the process less stigmatising and less crisis-ridden.

Many others talked about the importance of face-to-face or word-of-mouth recommendation from trusted sources - particularly the part played by friends either promoting programmes or liaising with programmes they had completed to help their friend out.

My friend took this course and she said it's good so that's why I decided to come.

Some parents did the course last year and they said it was really good.

*A friend who went on a similar course a few months ago advised me as she has two boys like me. She asked her teacher about courses because it's very difficult to find information. And she referred me.
(Mothers, programme attendees)*

Many parents described the promotional 'power' of hearing about the benefits of programmes from parents who had gone through similar difficulties themselves. One father explained that parents like him, with lower trust of statutory agencies, might particularly be persuaded by those who had themselves gone through difficulties and who had been on the course. In two local areas, graduates of programmes had been mobilised to reach out to other parents in this way.

*They used parent coordinators who have completed the course then helped organise the venue and the scheduling of the next course for the next parent community.
(Mother, engaged in programme)*

Parents also explained the importance of selling programmes in the right way using the right language with simple success stories:

I think the problem is how you put it across, you know what I mean? So really you could introduce it along the lines of: 'What you're doing, how you're parenting your child is not just affecting your child in the present, but in the future. So if you don't overcome [problems] now they're going to come back to haunt [you and your child] later in life. A good way of doing it could be to use examples.

(Father, non-attender of programme)

Finally, others said that they wanted to get a better sense of what the programmes were like before they attended.

*If you had somebody telling you what to expect before you went, then I think that's nicer, it would encourage you to go, if you had someone to talk to about it before.
(Mother, non-attender of programme)*

Many felt that websites and leaflets held limitations in helping them understand what the group felt like; this was important to parents. Sometimes fears and misconceptions about the group were off-putting. A few parents were anxious that groups would be full of 'busy bodies' or that groups might require uncomfortable levels of self-disclosure. Some feared that they might end up being 'dragged into social services'. Others had misconceptions about the style of the group and particularly about 'being told what to do' or being judged:

*I can't have people telling me what to do and I think it's that kind of course; that they'd be like, 'Right you need to do this and you need to do that' and I wouldn't have them do that to me. I am quite loud-mouthed and I've got my own opinions as to how you fetch kids up and I wouldn't have somebody else dictating to me how to do it.
(Mother, non-attender of programme)*

A few parents suggested that they would have liked to see a video of what the group was like to get a better sense of what it felt like and to hear from parents directly about how it had benefitted them and their families.

(We have produced a video to do just that. You can see it on our website at www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk/parenting.)

Summary

Parents felt that there was insufficient awareness of parenting programmes and that services were missing multiple and wide-ranging opportunities to raise awareness across a range of organisations in regular contact with families and children.

They particularly valued word-of-mouth recommendation from credible sources; friends and graduates from parenting programmes were seen as particularly powerful and reliable advocates. Parents also wanted a better understanding of what groups felt like and advocated careful use of language in promotional exchanges which minimised stigma.

They also wanted preventative advice about when to take action about behaviour and where to go for help.

4. Targeting and stigma

Parenting programmes such as Triple P (levels 4 or 5) or Incredible Years can achieve the greatest benefits when places are taken up by parents with children whose behaviour is already outside healthy developmental ranges. Such parenting programmes make less difference to children without behavioural problems (although parents often enjoy them and report learning useful new skills). Inefficient targeting can also result in places being taken up by parents without high needs at the expense of those children with the greatest need for support thereby worsening health inequalities.

Some local areas in our study had established clear strategies for targeting parents and children in higher need of help. Parents who had lower-level needs were given less intensive help by professionals such as health visitors, children's centres, family support workers (often located in schools), school nurses and mentors; whereas children already showing signs of moving beyond healthy behavioural ranges were supported through parenting programmes. In one area, a very small number of children with the most complex needs were supported through multi-agency partnerships including parenting teams, special educational needs teams (SEN) and child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS).

For parents, however, targeting emerged as a sensitive and sometimes confusing issue. A few parents said they had been put off attending programmes because referrers' explanations suggested they were for 'failing families':

*I also think the Triple P course has a sense of stigma attached to it. It's so hard to get on the course, I almost got the impression that, unless you're in danger of doing some damage to your baby, you won't get a place.
(Mother, engaged with programme)*

Some also said that they avoided groups like these because they were wary of labelling or didn't want to acknowledge developmental difficulties:

*None of us want to think there's anything wrong with our children. They're all perfect!
(Mother, non-attender of programme)*

Some areas had tried to minimise stigma by recruiting a mix of parents onto their groups (e.g. parents whose children were outside healthy developmental ranges as well as parents with an interest in attending). In areas using this mixed approach, parents talked on the one hand of valuing the lack of stigma attached to programmes in the local area and the generally high importance placed on parenting by local authorities. On the other hand, other parents also described confusion and frustration at inconsistent eligibility criteria with some parents being refused places while others (in seemingly similar circumstances) were accepted.

Summary

Parents' feedback suggested that, to minimise stigma, the targeting of programmes (although critical to their success and effectiveness) generally needed highly delicate management and sensitive marketing and explanation by all those promoting, referring into and delivering programmes. It also, once again, reinforced the importance of parents, providers and referral agencies working together to shape acceptable promotional messages that minimise stigma.

5. Referral

Parents' experiences of being referred to parenting groups varied widely. Some described simple routes into programmes:

*I've never found anything so easy to get on.
(Mother, programme attendee)*

Others, as described earlier, faced sizeable challenges accessing support groups.

Referral agencies included:

- Health visitors (common referral route)

*She has a brilliant health visitor and we had regular contact with her. We all went through a really traumatic period with feeding our son and she was great. She tried really hard and she was really supportive. You have the confidence of having a health professional in the house; she just had a very good manner about her.
(Mother, engaged with programme)*

Health visitors and midwives were described as having opportunities not only to help parents with babies and children at the 30 month stage, but also, during routine visits, to spot older children causing parents stress in the household.

- General Practitioner (a rare referral route in this study)
- Children's centres (close partners in parenting work) or less commonly Child Development Centres
- Nurseries (an occasional referral route during this study)

*The main teacher at my daughter's nursery mentioned that Jill had contacted local schools in the area and that there were some spaces. With the way my little girl is they thought it might be an ideal thing and to see if we would feel a benefit.
(Mother, engaged with programme)*

- Schools (common referral route during this study)

A large-scale study in the United States showed that the Triple P parenting programmes resulted in fewer instances of maltreatment and considerable reductions in child protection costs compared with areas where parents had not access to these programmes.

*The head teacher there now, I can sit down with him, talk to him, laugh, cry, scream and he will listen and he'll give me updates on how I is getting on at school. I communicate with the school so that's good.
(Mother, engaged with programme)*

- Social workers (occasional referral route during this study)
*Basically social services got involved with us. And to try to help myself, I thought it would be beneficial if I came to a parenting course. I asked the social worker because I needed help.
(Mother, engaged with programme)*
- School nurses (rare referral route for non health-led parenting programmes during this study)

The importance of the referrer and their approach

Many parents described referral agencies playing an important role in strengthening their intention to do something about their situation and attend parenting programmes.

The quality of the relationship with the referrer and their style, knowledge and skill were vital to effective engagement with the following characteristics improving or jeopardising chances of enrolment:

- Being kind and genuinely concerned:
*She was very kind to me.
(Mother, engaged with programme)*
- Actively listening to parents and taking what they are saying seriously:

[My family worker] listened to me as a friend.

(Mother, engaged with programme)

- Some parents particularly highlighted the importance of a knowledgeable and well-prepared referrer in helping move beyond initial misconceptions and fears:

[My social worker said] you're not the only one that feels like this, you know. And she also said that it will help you; and watch this video. Honestly, I've seen parents go in there, and it doesn't work overnight, but you can really come out of this feeling better.

(Mother, programme attendee)

- Having a non-judgemental approach and not being patronising:

I don't trust anybody anyway but if I get someone talking down to me, I'm not going to trust them. Just because we need help doesn't mean you can speak down to us.

(Mother, non-attender of programme)

- Being persuasive and gently persistent:

I didn't even really want to come. In the end I come to shut the woman up. But once I came here I really enjoyed it. Like seeing the girls every week. Have a coffee and have a talk and you do learn. Because I thought I was the perfect parent, but I'm not. I thought I knew it all. When the attendance officer said you might pick up tips: 'but I've already got a teenager and he turned out alright'. Now coming here you see there are different ways to go about things.

(Mother, engaged with programme)

- Reliability and honesty:

What I worry about is what I say to them and then they go back and give a completely different story and I think that's wrong.

People come in and say one thing and then go and say something else; being honest [is important].

(Mother, non-attender of programme)

Due to parents' potential embarrassment or feelings of failure when struggling to manage children with challenging behaviour, it was particularly important for referral agencies (as well as parenting practitioners) to use careful,

motivational and non-judgmental approaches and language when introducing programmes.

The attendance officer for the school pushed me to come and try it. At first I didn't want to. She was just saying she thought it would be good and I would pick up some tips. At first I was offended, but then I realised it was a really good course.

(Mother, engaged with programme)

The name of the book even – Strengthening Families – makes me think 'what? Do I have a weak family?' Don't call it a course, but more a meeting with friends not a teacher telling you what to do.

(Mother, engaged with programme)

Maybe if you can put it in layman's terms that could appeal to people [like]: 'Get it right now and you improve your life chances of your children'. Because personally I'm a great believer that what's been good enough for me is certainly not good enough for my children.

(Father, non-attender of programme)

Although some defensiveness may be unavoidable, language focusing on picking up skills, and reinforcing the 'benefits' of parenting groups and capitalising on parents' 'wanting the best for my child' were seen to be persuasive messages as well as using parents' success stories and word of mouth recommendations.

Families whose children had emerging complex needs warranting further assessment (e.g. speech and language needs, Autism, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder etc.) sometimes said they remained unsupported during lengthy waiting periods to access specialist services after initial referral. Some also described 'pinging' between services, unable to access help because of arguments or uncertainty about diagnostic labels. These parents told us about the difficulties of being left unsupported during periods of delay. Some valued attending parenting programmes in the interim to pick up behaviour management strategies, to understand their child better, to help clarify what was going on and to get support:

While we were waiting for the appointment for my son, because he's stabbed me a few times I said I do need a bit of help in between while waiting for him to be assessed... I wouldn't mind going on some of these courses, but she said like because [my son] hasn't actually got the diagnosis yet it's a waste of time me going on some of them until I know exactly what it is with him so I can go on the courses that represents that area. But it wouldn't bother if me if I did waste it anyway, it's all there to be learnt. (Mother, non-attender of programme)

Summary

Many professionals in contact with families have brief and important opportunities to identify and mobilise support for children with persistent behavioural problems.

Schools were seen as important sources of information about programmes for parents. However, a wide range of other services in contact with parents also need:

- basic information about the significance of behavioural problems as a gauge of children's healthy development and wellbeing
- to know how to identify children who are more challenging to parent
- to know the most effective language to support parents' engagement with programmes
- sufficient working knowledge of programmes to know how to sell benefits, motivate sceptical parents and refer to local parenting programmes

Some parenting practitioners said that they routinely completed joint visits with referrers (such as social workers) to cascade knowledge and 'model' effective descriptions of programmes and their benefits.

Successful engagement with programmes also appeared reliant on strong relationships with referrers who listened to concerns, were gently persistent, used non stigmatising language and capitalised on brief motivational moments.

6. Engagement

Studies suggest that many parents referred to groups do not ultimately attend. Unused places on courses waste opportunities to support children's life chances; they also make courses less cost-effective and prevent others in need from taking up spare places. In our national survey of enrolment and drop-out rates, Centre for Mental Health found wide variations between localities in the number of parents attending groups after being offered a place and the number of parents dropping out after initial attendances. These variations suggest significant scope to learn further from variations or dips in performance and from successful engagement strategies employed by high performing areas.

Parents had a number of useful reflections on what helped them attend and complete parenting programmes.

Parental motivation

Parents revealed very different levels of motivation to attend programmes. Some parents were committed to doing whatever they could to address the problems they were struggling with; others described being highly sceptical about attending. Those with high motivation needed little more than efficient referral (though this did not always happen) and clear communication about group starting times, location and directions, crèche availability and reliable telephone numbers for parenting teams should referral plans go awry (again not always available). Some parents, initially sceptical about attendance, could be persuaded through effective promotion from knowledgeable referrers and outreach from parenting mentors/teams. Some parents facing multiple challenges remained adamant that they would not attend.

Scepticism about parenting programmes was fuelled by multiple factors including lack of faith that programmes could make a difference, feeling blamed or stigmatised, fears of being judged or patronised and suspicion of and fear of authority or intrusion by formal services

in family life. Many parents also told us that anxiety and shyness about involvement in groups (and in role-plays) frequently increased nervousness of engaging with programmes.

*I wasn't used to meeting people or in that routine of meeting people every week.
(Mother, non-attender of programme)*

*I think a lot of people are shy as well. I think it's that intimidation of going to a group you don't know.
(Mother, non-attender of programme)*

*It were quite scary at first.
(Mother, programme attendee)*

Sceptical parents needed more intensive (often outreach) pre-group contact with advocates for the programme who could address fears and provide reliable information about the feel of group experiences. In one local area, parent graduates acted as mentors to promote groups and support other parents' attendance.

One practitioner explained that around 10-20% of parent referrals needed more intensive home follow-up before and during the course to address fears, encourage attendance and monitor practical barriers that were hampering engagement. He relied heavily on information from schools and from referral agencies to establish who might require enhanced support and follow-up.

Although in the short term this extra investment of time and resources added to the costs of the programme, in the longer term successful attendance and completion increased the chance of behavioural improvements, and reduced the likelihood of children accumulating further risks as they grew up (such as problems in school) increasing the chance of life-course savings.

A small number of parents, overwhelmed by multiple and complex needs (e.g. mental health problems, high anxiety levels, substance misuse problems etc.) or highly suspicious of formal services remained adamant that they could not attend such groups. Many struggled with daily

tasks such as taking their children to school and mixing with other parents:

*Children's centres terrify me. I'm generally anxious in life, but I'm getting better. I want to be part of the children's centre but don't have the confidence. [I] couldn't get [my] older children to school and couldn't face people in the playground. Didn't go out on my own. For me, generally, if I'm not feeling confident I won't go out. I'm a nervous person. I have to be forced to go. I tried CBT [for anxiety] but I had to get to a place and stopped. Anything like that causes anxiety. You need to fix yourself by going... but [going] was making me ill. I'd rather not go [and] disappoint the therapist.
(Parent, not engaged in a programme)*

*I don't have family. My Mum hates me, so I don't really have a mother and I see [my family support worker], not as a mother, but as someone older that I can talk to I don't have friends because I don't trust anybody.
(Mother, non-attender of programme)*

*I have anxiety and panic attacks. And anxiety about new things.
(Mother, non-attender of programme)*

These parents were often in contact with outreach and engaging family support workers and parent mentors, helping them with parenting and a range of other challenges. One parent reinforced the importance of patiently building relationships and reliable attachments in helping her engage with and trust the support being offered:

*At the beginning [my support worker] was working with me on my depression and domestic problems, there was violence and stuff, and she used to talk to me. I didn't want to say too many things, but I think once I knew she was regular and would come round and help me when I needed her then I felt that I could say a bit more to her 'cause I knew she wouldn't just go like the others. I think that's the problem with me - I trust people and then they go so I tend to hold back. She's still here after 5 years.
(Mother, non-attender of programme)*

A few of these parents, with gentle persistence and practical support, were eventually successfully supported onto parenting groups.

For example, one teenage mother (with mental health problems and affected by domestic violence) explained how lack of insight had prevented her from recognising that she might need help and taking earlier action to attend courses.

*'Cos I was so immature, me and my partner were still acting like that... I didn't have a normal life and I was always on the streets, squats, squats, squats from when I was 16 and I was immature and so I didn't have a normal person's perspective...
(Mother, programme attendee)*

In contrast to previous social workers, this young woman's new worker had completed considerable preparatory work encouraging her to step back from and reflect upon the pros and cons of her own experiences of being parented thus prompting awareness of the benefits of trying different approaches and techniques with her son. This intervention led to changes in her parenting approach and safeguarding improvements.

In another instance, a family support worker attended the first session of a parenting programme with a young woman and liaised with providers so that strategies were in place to help her feel more settled in the group. On another occasion, programme content was delivered through one-to-one sessions in the home (although a potential downside of outreach delivery was not only its additional cost but also that it did little to build social capital and break the social isolation affecting some families). Group experiences and collaborative problem-solving were mentioned by many families to have been a significantly bonding experience.

Misconceptions about the ‘feel’ of groups

Many parents described misconceptions about the ‘feel’ of parenting groups before attending.

You get stuck in a rut for so long that it takes going to somewhere and talking to other people to put everything into perspective. From the first session I was looking forward to coming back. It was nothing like I thought it was going to be like.
(Mother, programme attendee)

One other mother thought the group would function “like Alcoholics’ Anonymous” requiring uncomfortable levels of self-disclosure; others thought it would involve professionals reprimanding parents, telling them what to do or talking down to them; many fathers feared feeling out of place and feared that groups would be a ‘talking shop’ instead of an opportunity to learn practical skills and techniques which were a stronger interest.

Practical incentives to attend

Research tell us that practical incentives have the greatest chance of successfully encouraging parents to attend and complete parenting groups. Parents in our study echoed these findings highlighting the following as being critical to their engagement:

Availability of crèches

The availability of a crèche was a significant incentive encouraging parents’ attendance of groups. This finding was common both among attendees and non- attendees of groups:

I don’t think [the learning] would have been done if all the kids were in the room...
(Mother, programme attendee)

I couldn’t [attend the last group] because of childcare. Then they sorted it out with social care to get childcare. So I’ve had someone to help me to be able to go on this course.
(Mother, programme attendee)

Because we couldn’t get childcare, I wouldn’t go.
(Mother, non-attender of one group who subsequently attended later)

I couldn’t come if there wasn’t a crèche.
(Mother, programme attendee)

Given the importance of crèches and childcare, it was worrying (as austerity was beginning to take effect on local authority budgets) that these incentives were beginning to be cut. In the long term, this is a false economy which is likely to affect parent engagement rates, children’s outcomes and the overall cost effectiveness of early intervention.

The venue and logistics

Many parents described the logistical challenges of getting children of different ages to where they needed to be and then attending programmes on time.

The stress of organising everything; getting ready with the children I don’t think I could do that [a Triple P course] again.
(Mother, programme attendee)

Venues for programmes needed to be accessible and conveniently located (i.e. not on complicated bus routes). Parents without cars talked about the challenge of negotiating buses with children and buggies. When buses were full, parents were sometimes refused entry and forced to wait for later buses. On more than one occasion this resulted in a parent’s late arrival at the group and disruption.

Generally, sceptical and anxious parents were much more likely to be put off by practical barriers:

If I came with the buses, I’d probably not, that’d probably put me off... it’s just the waiting in the cold and everything.
(Mother, non-attender of programme)

Once again, some parents in two minds about attending had been encouraged through being prioritised for additional practical support:

[The family support worker] takes me every week and picks me up. We drop the kids off at nursery and then she drops me off there. And then she goes, comes back, picks me up, picks the kids up and she drops me off again. Do you know what I mean? Because otherwise I wouldn't be able to get there, not at a time I need to.

(Mother, programme attendee)

A few parents described limited movement beyond their home area or child's school; practitioners told us that some parents could be anxious about moving outside familiar geographical confines and sometimes workers would walk new routes with parents to familiarise them with the journey.

Other important practical factors affecting parental engagement included the 'feel' of the venue and the timing of programmes. Most programmes were well-timed for mothers/home carers (scheduled during the school day and just before lunch), but were not always well scheduled for mothers and fathers who worked.

There were mixed views about what constituted an 'ideal' venue. The majority of parents liked groups running in schools or children's centres. These venues were familiar; schools particularly were a part of parent's everyday experience:

It's in the school, if it were a bit further I wouldn't have gone.

(Mother, programme attendee)

But a few (with bad educational experiences) described feelings of dread on returning to schools or found children's centres too formal or clinical. One woman, reluctant to attend children's centres or parenting support programmes, explained how a less formal setting had been successful in enticing her to engage with other less intensive parenting support groups. Support was offered in an unoccupied council house, converted into a local drop-in:

I did do a parenting group 7 – 8 years ago. It was in a council house [used to deliver programmes] by Home Start. I went with my sister, who's forceful and kicks me to go. Being in a house environment was better... more personal. I don't like the [children's] centre's layout, the smell, the lights are quite clinical ... [it's got] the same feeling as a hospital with notice boards. When I'm in there I'm thinking – get me out of here. I'd like it to be more relaxed, more homely, no reception area.

(Mother, programme attendee).

A few parents also commented positively on the part played by 'taster' groups in schools and children's centres which gave some parents their first experience of being part of a facilitative group.

[The parenting support worker] came a couple of times and had a chat to us and did us some family rules and stuff and then she said there were this nurturing course. I says, right, I'm up for anything, you know what I mean? And then I'm also doing a cooking course as well as doing this maths course.

(Mother, programme attendee)

Summary

To have the greatest chance of success, it is essential that parenting groups enrol as many high-need parents as possible. Once enrolled, parents need to complete the entirety of these programmes so that children, families and communities have the greatest chance of gaining maximum benefits from the support offered. Engagement rates vary significantly from area to area and require careful monitoring.

Parents described varying degrees of motivation and readiness to engage with groups. They were also generally nervous of attending and unclear about how the experience would feel.

- Highly motivated parents could largely ‘push through’ these anxieties needing little more than clear instructions to get to initial sessions.
- Parents with high scepticism, low motivation and multiple needs often required additional preparatory, outreach and practical support to attend. Skilled brief motivational work by referrers could also encourage attendance.
- Families with very complex needs were least likely to get to the programmes. More informal approaches with an emphasis on outreach and relationship-building were described as productive for these families; however, by not attending groups, parents missed out on the broader social benefits and empowerment which comes from problem solving with other parents. Literature suggests that children of families with complex needs may need on-going support to promote good outcomes for children.

Practical incentives such as crèches, welcoming and appealing venues, help with logistics (where travel routes were unfamiliar or complex) were most important in assisting parents in attending groups and paid dividends in terms of increasing the likelihood of enrolment and completion.

7. Groups and facilitators

The style of the group was central to encouraging parents to attend and avoid dropping out. Parents valued groups which were interactive and empowering:

*It was very interactive as in lots of role play...
(Mother, programme attendee)*

I like to be hands on, rather than just listening.

(Mother, programme attendee)

[If they're like] teachers, I start daydreaming and switch off and you don't want to feel like someone's preaching to you, either, do you?

(Mother, non-attender of programme)

They also valued groups that were relaxed, welcoming and light-hearted in feel:

I think if it's more [interactive], rather than somebody telling you [what you should do] all the time, and if you can smile about it, that's better.

(Mother, programme attendee)

It's pretty catered to our needs, there's always snacks and tea and coffee and there's a crèche and it's free, and it's close.

(Mother, programme attendee)

[You want to feel] more relaxed and things like that, don't you? A friendly environment.

(Mother, programme attendee)

Parents identified a wealth of characteristics which they valued in group facilitators. They rated facilitators who were kind, open and non-judgemental and who had gone through similar difficulties:

They were kind and I think it's important that they've been through it themselves...

(Mother, programme attendee)

They're just really, really nice people who make you feel so much better.

(Mother, programme attendee)

They're lovely, they don't judge, I feel like I've known them all for ages, I don't need to keep nothing in; the last time I wasn't so open, I wasn't so relaxed, we all have a laugh, we have a joke. If someone's crying we all get up and give them a cuddle. It's like a whole new family.

(Mother, programme attendee)

You don't want to feel like someone's preaching to you, do you? You want to feel like they've been through the experience.

(Mother, non-attender of programme)

If you could get someone who's willing to openly share their story.

(Mother, non-attender of programme)

I think it's imperative that you get someone [facilitating]... especially from the male gender, that they can relate to. In my experience, people in my lifetime have looked down on me, and on reflection, rightly so. But now them same people, they now look up to me, because they've seen that I've struggled and overcome my struggles, and they've seen that I'm constantly overcoming them. And some people do find it inspirational, just as I find some people inspirational that have helped me overcome my difficulties.

(Father, non-attender of programme)

Two areas had trained up parents who had graduated from the courses to facilitate future groups. Most parents supported greater involvement of parent graduates in the promotion and delivery of programmes.

It makes it easier for us because she's been through the same thing so when we're saying that our child is doing this and this and if she's saying well mine were doing that but we started doing this and he seems to be all right. So it's worth us thinking, well if it's going to work for her it might work for us because she's going through the same thing as us. So it's a bit easier for us.

(Mother, programme attendee)

Parents also valued facilitators who were empathetic, down-to-earth and injected fun into the group experience:

They're not like teachers or authority figures. If they were, I'd be out the door. I can't stand authority. But she's like one of the girls. You can sit and chat. There's nothing I don't think I couldn't tell [her].

You wouldn't want someone whose straight-laced, you need someone who can break the ice and make things light-hearted.

Oh, yeah. They've got to be nice and know what you're going through. Yeah they don't want to be I'm better than you. You want someone that is down to earth generally. (Mothers, programme attendees)

I wouldn't want some middle class [person] who's blatantly doing it to make themselves feel good. People that appeal to me are educated people... but not condescending. (Father, non-attender of programme)

Many BME parents (interviewed predominantly in a focus group) reinforced the value of having a dedicated space to discuss parenting within the context of their cultural experiences, learning and expectations. They also talked of valuing a facilitator who understood parents and parenting in the context of community and cultural experiences.

Summary

Parents valued groups which were interactive, felt informal, cohesive, relaxed and which injected light-heartedness as they developed knowledge and skills to support their child's behaviour.

Parents were most put off by the prospect of practitioners who were patronising or 'told them what to do'.

They most valued practitioners who were kind, non-judgemental, empowering and nurturing, and who themselves had gone through similar difficulties.

The use of parent graduates has been successfully established in some areas but requires energy, some investment of resources and support to be fully sustained.

Many BME parents valued a dedicated space to consider parenting within the context of their community and cultural background. They also valued having facilitators with a good knowledge of their community and cultural experiences.

8. Fathers and whole-family-approaches

We interviewed a small number of fathers attending parenting programmes. Some had easy access to groups but one father had to be more assertive to ensure that both partners attended. All talked of the benefits of both partners understanding and embedding a consistent approach to help manage their child's behaviour in the household. Some also talked of the greater support and sustainability that came from having 'two heads' working on implementing changes and techniques.

Male interviewees rated the very practical focus of the programme and the emphasis on building up skills; conversely they were most nervous of a 'talking shop' approach, being told what to do, being patronised and feeling out of place. As one mother explained, she had not been able to persuade her partner to attend 'because he's a 'man's man' and he thinks this sort of things is just a lot of mums'.

(Mother, programme attendee)

Some mothers talked of the difficulty of trying to implement new parenting strategies at home without the support of partners:

My husband's not very good because he thinks all these courses [are a waste of time]... "Oh, be an expert" and that's all right but I'm doing it all on me own. He just thinks his way's the [right way]... "Such a fabulous parent aren't you? Well that's why our house is like this; you're doing one thing, I'm doing another and none of them are working!"

(Mother, programme attendee)

Others who attended with their partners talked of the value (and sometimes the tensions) of trying to work towards a common approach:

Both of us needed to go... cos [my partner's] very, very strict - much more than me. His punishing's a lot more firmer than mine... I think he's too strict and [our son's] really horrible to his dad and sometimes I think that's why...he doesn't explain to him at the same time why he's telling him off and he complains that [our son] swears - but

he swears at the same time and he's just getting it back off him. He didn't even understand it until he went to this parenting course but he's changed and he hasn't even gone the 10 weeks. And he's seen an amazing improvement...

(Mother, programme attendee)

We still get it wrong, things slip and it's frustrating. And for me it's noticeable at weekends... when I can see [my partner] doing things and I'm like 'We can't do that, we're not being consistent, they're getting two messages - one from me and one from you'... the kids are getting confused. So I get the reputation for giving a bit of a bollocking about this in the household, which doesn't make me feel that good and once or twice [my wife's] been at a bit of a low ebb ... cos I've upset her by reminding her... which hasn't felt that good sometimes.

(Father, programme attendee)

With my husband it's been a great place for us to have discussions. Where we felt if we were coming from two different places it's really helped to discipline and to have great conversations, and it's definitely been a positive thing to talk about in our house.

(Mother, programme attendee)

'I do sometimes [see him using the techniques] but he's one of these people who needs it reinforced; after a bit things start to go back... I just try to explain to him if I'm saying things, I'm not having a go at him. Now I know different ways of doing it, it really pisses me off when he shouts at them and there's an atmosphere and then I'll have a go at him and the kids will sit there and they'll be laughing. And I think 'nice one mum, you've just fallen into the parent trap' so it's really hard... but now I let him get on with it and I pull him to one side after

(Mother, programme attendee)

In one group supporting Bangladeshi parents, it was considered important to invite some fathers along particularly in families where there were strong male power hierarchies. Without some fathers owning proposed changes, the

practitioner felt that it would be challenging for mothers to implement strategies and sustain change in the household.

Many mothers described trying to ‘cascade’ learning to their partners:

I go home and I talk to my partner about it. I don't think there's any way he'd come along to it. It's not his sort of thing. We both do the same time-out technique; he knows what we're rewarding her for. Sometimes we were not on the same sheet and it seems a bit easier now.

I think he might have been interested in doing it and I brought books back and tried to feedback what to do, because I know it's important that you're both singing from the same hymn sheet, and he takes it on board and says, perhaps we should try this and that.

(Mothers, programme attendees)

However, some were more successful than others in cultivating a consistent approach in the household. Those attending programmes explained that lack of consistency could often be a source of frustration in the family

He just finds it harder to put it in place when he's hearing it second hand.

My husband, I don't really have his support in implementing things. I think it was worth going, but it would have been more worthwhile if he had come too and I had his support.

(Mothers, programme attendees)

This lack of consistency was also described as confusing for children.

A few parents also raised the difficulty of maintaining consistent approaches when their extended family and their own parents contradicted key messages.

Summary

Males were likely to have particular reservations about attending programmes and could perceive programmes as inconsistent with their perception of male identity. Fears were often dispelled once they attended and experienced the very practical approach of the course.

Mothers often tried to cascade what they had learnt to partners to create a ‘whole-household approach’; this strategy could sometimes create tensions and was not always reliable and effective as a method of sustaining change.

Change could sometimes be sustained more effectively in households when both partners attend parenting groups; but the process of keeping each other on track also generated tension in the relationship on occasions.

In some households, where males held significant influence over household routines, it appeared important for fathers to be involved in the change process.

Some parents said that achieving change relied on partners ‘singing from the same hymn book’.

More research is required into the relative effectiveness and cost effectiveness of two as opposed to one partner attending parenting programmes.

9. Outcomes of parenting groups

Parents described a very broad range of positive outcomes resulting from their attendance of parenting programmes.

Outcomes for children

Parents reported wide-ranging improvements in their children's behaviour:

Because of loads of trouble we've had at home, she wouldn't settle at night, she won't go to bed unless I sit with her all night. And she used to scream all the time. Now she'll go to bed no problem. She'll stay in her own bed. I'll get one or two nights where she won't, but that could be like one or two nights in three weeks.

I've learned how to cope with the children's behaviour in different ways... My four year old, she's got some sort of behaviour problem. And sometimes you can handle it, sometimes you can't. But she has calmed down quite a lot. It's like they're all in set routines and things like that...

It's worked really, really, well, she's a lot calmer, she doesn't swear at me anymore... it was within a couple of weeks... I left Triple P [parenting programme] one week and I thought I can do this and then slowly, slowly that bad behaviour began to slip away. (Mothers, programme attendees)

One parent reported that the techniques she had learnt had 'worked like magic'. Another couple said that the course had helped them unlock their daughter's 'sunnier side' again. Often parents described being taken aback at how quickly changes occurred:

Some of the things worked straight away. I wish I'd realised how easy it was. (Mother, programme attendee)

But some parents also highlighted the challenge of sustaining gains and highlighted how quickly things could deteriorate if they failed to employ techniques consistently or if things changed at home. A few parents relapsed and were able to

learn from their mistakes; a few also described things 'slipping' after the course had finished.

[We were] learning new things and you're like, oh yeah, that sounds really good and I'm going to try, and you're really motivated. But then I suppose after the course has finished I think it, it's probably quite hard to keep going if things start slipping back and behaviour starts sneaking back in then that's when it gets a bit difficult. (Mother, programme attendee)

The consistency that [my wife and I] are still trying to establish... we're most of the way there but we've still got some work to do. (Father, programme attendee)

We found during the [course] that we weren't doing so badly, however, things have relapsed now. Things have got difficult again. Having said that I went back to work. It's a new challenge going back into work. (Mother, programme attendee)

Some parents expressed a wish for booster sessions or reminders to help them re-focus their efforts.

A small group of parents, whose children had the most complex needs (such as co-existing Autism, speech and language difficulties or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder) saw more moderate changes in their child's behaviour, with some tactics working better than others.

He still has his moments quite frequently. But yeah there are certainly bits that I've taken away from it, I think mostly the bit about being calm and neutral rather than ending up being in a bit of an argument... And he just feeds off that and it escalates. (Mother, engaged in parenting programme)

Better relationship with children

Many parents described developing a better relationship with their children and gaining ‘a little bit more understanding’ of what it felt like to be a child:

You have to go back and think about how you were treated and how you grew up and how you felt as a child and I thought, my God how did I feel I when my dad was standing over me and yelling at me... and it made me think maybe I'm doing it wrong and maybe I can turn this around and do it differently; but a lot of people say it, you don't get given a book when you become a parent, you learn from scratch, you make mistakes. But for me it's helped me a lot 'cos now I understand how the children feel, how scary it must feel when I am standing over them shouting and unrealistic goals - you ground them for a month and they know you're not going to stick to that.

(Mother, engaged in parenting programme)

Others said they were able to talk more effectively with their children, making space systematically for quality time, play and interaction with their family.

Even families whose children had more complex needs agreed that groups had improved their relationship with their child helping them become more tolerant, confident and understanding of their child's very different experience of the world.

Now he will, come to the stage, where if I say what's up with you, he'll tell me. I'm getting a little bit more control of him now than him having control of me, which makes it a little bit easier at home.

(Mother, engaged in parenting programme)

His behaviour's not changed. I don't think it will ever change, but I can understand him a little bit more now.

(Mother, engaged in parenting programme)

Many parents described a feedback loop whereby poor behaviour had previously resulted in incrementally strained parent-child relations; conversely, as the child's behaviour improved as a result of the programme, parents felt more

positive about their child again which in turn had a knock on effect on the quality of the parent/child attachment, on the child's self-esteem and on both parties' wellbeing.

Broader parenting strategies and improved confidence in parenting

There is good evidence that parenting programmes make a significant difference to the health of mothers, potentially reducing depression, increasing self-esteem, improving partner relationships and reducing anxiety and stress.

Most parents attending the programme talked of feeling more in control, being more confident and skilled in parenting and feeling less of a ‘failure’ by the end of the programme. They described picking up a constructive repertoire of techniques to use with their children. These included:

Seventeen bullet points of strategies... [which were] really, really useful and you can apply [them] in a practical manner, in practical situations... it makes complete sense, and that's why it goes back to that common sense, and it does make sense.
(Mother, engaged in parenting programme)

Many were designed to pre-empt problems and avoid tension points as well as manage behavioural crises:

It's not about managing misbehaviour, but trying to prevent misbehaviour... you think through problems before they occur so that you've got ways to stop them getting into trouble basically.
(Mother, engaged in parenting programme)

We put a chart up that they made... we sat down and said what do you think our house rules are... and they couldn't stop, they came up with all these rules, so you've made them all and it's easier for you to follow through. I [also] learnt to be more specific about what I wanted her to do and then lots of praise: 'Well done you did that really nicely; what a good girl'... Upping the praise...
(Father, engaged in parenting programme)

Solutions were often simple and bespoke to the family's needs ranging from simple changes to daily routines (e.g. keeping another toothbrush for the child to use in a downstairs cloakroom to avoid pre school-run arguments) to a watershed on social visits after 9pm in a busy Bangladeshi family where routine late visits prompted chaotic sleeping routines for children, persistent over-tiredness and ongoing behavioural problems.

Approaches relied on parents being more self-aware of their environment and of their impact of their own behaviour on their children – as well as responses to behaviour:

*We were taught to look at our surroundings a bit more, try and look at the bigger picture, so like 'why do you think she is like that, could it be anything to do with your behaviour ... how you treat her?' 'Wow... I never thought it could be to do with me'.
(Father, engaged in parenting programme)*

Parents also described learning how to positively reinforce good behaviour through rewards:

*As soon as you explain to kids, right we've got this for when things have been good at home, whoever's been good can put a sticker on. It's amazing how good they've been.
(Mother, engaged in parenting programme)*

But also through spending quality time with their children:

*They told us you can reward kids with all sorts, do you know what I mean? Not just go and buy them something or things like that. Like rewarding means in taking them somewhere.
(Mother, engaged in parenting programme)*

In contrast to how they felt before the course, when parents talked of feeling out of control, many parents talked of feeling significantly more confident after the course as a result of the skills they had learnt and the support they had received in standing back from and reflecting on their situation.

*Well I feel a lot more confident, I feel like it's hopeless being a parent and just letting it happen to me. I'm like a victim instead of a parent, but really being an active member in this and I can change things and be a good parent. And I don't want to feel guilty, that's my big [fear], I didn't want to feel guilty about the way I'm parenting my boys. And I'm much happier about it, I'm so much more happy, it's definitely positive for me and a lot of reflection's gone on for me too, I'll actively try new things.
(Mother, engaged in parenting programme)*

*It's given me a lot more confidence in being a parent and helped me understand the importance of being a mum rather than someone who argues with them all the time and being able to give them that love and the cuddles and kisses even when I am still angry.
(Mother, engaged with parenting group)*

A few parents also talked of other people seeing differences either in their management of their children or in their general wellbeing. On two occasions, this had prompted interest in the programme from others. Colleagues of one father, who worked in a very male-dominated setting 'where we don't generally discuss our problems' were struck by the impact it had made on him, prompting further interest in the course. Another mother explained:

*We have a regular play day on a Friday where all the kids are together and I think [my friends] can see how I sometimes operate differently, or would discipline differently than they would now. And I really notice it as well, they might shout and yell and whereas I wouldn't, having learnt not to on this course, or having learnt that different strategies are better. And they can see that and they say, oh we really want to do [the course], tell us about the course - we want to learn more about it.
(Mother, engaged in parenting programme)*

Better family relationships

Many parents experienced deteriorating family relationships before seeking help and enrolling on the parenting programme and often talked of improved relationships and less stress in the family after completing the course:

'It's been a bonding experience for us as well'.

(Father, engaged in parenting programme).

One mother also described how violence in the home had reduced as a result of her and her partner attending the programme.

Improved parental mental health and reduced social isolation

In keeping with research findings, some parents noted significant improvements to their mental health and emotional wellbeing as a result of attending the course. One woman, who had suffered from depression since the age of 16, said that her self-esteem and wellbeing had so improved during the programme that she had made the decision to wean herself off long-term medication. She also felt that the programme had made her step back and mature:

It's made me grow up a lot more, I was really childish with my children and I used to think it was funny when he did something naughty and now I see it in a different way. I was 19 when I had him, same as my mum, so it's so funny how that happens... they'd mentioned [the programme] for some time and we said that that wasn't our thing and then when they said that it might help us get off the child protection plan we agreed... cos we thought oh God, anything that's gonna help us we'll do it... and it wasn't as bad as we thought and my partner hates doing things like that and even he said he quite enjoyed going.

(Mother, engaged in parenting programme)

A father explained that for the first time he had realised the benefit of talking to others about his stresses (rather than subsuming them, creating a build-up of pressure):

One other lovely element of it, I don't get to talk much about my home or family life to anyone... ever... you know I work on a building site with loads of blokes... and it was like free therapy, like a free counselling session and it's like 'oh someone wants to listen to all my stuff and... they're even pretending it's interesting'... and maybe it is for them! So for me it made me think I ought to do this with someone more often... on a regular basis. Cos it's very different, [my wife] will meet up with other mums and they talk about all this stuff all the time ...but I don't have that system.

(Father, engaged in parenting programme)

Many mothers described how the programme had reduced their sense of isolation and loneliness often raising their self-esteem:

It's good for me to get out and meet other mums because I felt quite isolated and alone because I'm not from London and I moved to this area not knowing anybody. Because of my insecurities, I haven't been able to go out and meet other mums and make friends. Getting out of the house and being able to speak to people [is difficult] because I find myself being alone most of the time. I don't get on with my family. And I find I needed to get support from elsewhere.

When you go to groups, you realise that you're not on your own with that sort of behaviour.

You get to speak to the others in the same situation.

To know that you're not the only person going through it. You think you've got the only naughty kid about, but to hear that everyone is going through the same... or something worse. I like coming here every week even if it's coffee. I like seeing everyone. Everyone's nice. You all get on and have a chat about the problems we've got and how to solve things.

(Mothers, engaged in parenting programmes)

*Now it's stopped what am I going to do for my Friday mornings now? It also gets me out of house, because I'm in house constantly, do you know what I mean? You don't get to do nowt because I've got kids all the time. And that set time I've got no kids.
(Mother, engaged in parenting programme)*

Better relationships with schools

A number of parents interviewed as part of this study (and attending parenting programmes run in partnership with schools) felt that their experience had promoted a closer relationship with their child's school. They also felt that schools could do more to promote programmes.

Child protection outcomes

In two instances, parents made significant progress during the course and children were removed from local child protection registers.

*I've stuck to it and they can see a change in my son and they've took him off the child protection list.
(Mother, engaged in parenting programme).*

Research confirms that proven parenting programmes can result in considerable child protection cost savings.

Summary

Parents described a range of benefits following their attendance of parenting programmes.

Children's behaviour was often reported by parents to have speedily and dramatically improved; however, for some maintaining progress could be a struggle and some children and parents with multiple and complex needs required on-going support.

Other benefits cited by parents included:

- Improved understanding of and relationships/attachments with children
- Improvements in objective assessments of the safety of their children in the household.

Improved outcomes for parents included:

- Better mental health
- Increased confidence in their parenting skills and behaviour management strategies
- Reduced family stress
- Stronger relationships with partners for a few parents
- Decreased social isolation
- Improved relationships with schools

Parents were broadly very happy with experiences of parenting programmes; they did, however, suggest better promotion of programmes and simpler access routes to groups. They also valued marginally more time for delivery and more extensive use of parent graduates as part of engagement strategies and delivery approaches.

Some socially isolated parents wanted more systematic action to link them up with other community resources thus sustaining improvements to their wellbeing.

10. Conclusions

This study summarises the voices of over forty parents in four areas in England, exploring their experiences and concerns when parenting a child whose behaviour falls outside healthy ranges. It explores the meanings they attach to children’s behaviour and the implications of this on their decision-making and action taken to support their child’s progress. It also documents their routes to, perspectives of and reservations about local evidence-based parenting programmes and other support offered, particularly investigating what prompted, delayed or prevented parents from seeking help. Finally, it explored what helped parents engage with programmes and their experiences of the benefits of being a parent attending such groups.

Implications for practice

Parents’ experiences raise a number of potential implications for practice:

1. Many parents described reaching a point of considerable family crisis before seeking help. Services should provide better information at an early stage about the importance of behaviour as a gauge of children’s healthy child development and wellbeing. Parents also wanted clear information about what can make a difference and where they can access help.
2. Children’s services should ensure more systematic and coordinated tracking of children’s behaviour and emotional wellbeing during early years and in schools to eliminate the impact of chance and help parents get earlier help. This could be achieved through universal delivery of the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) by health visitors during 30-month checks and at key points during primary and secondary schools.
3. Most parents of children whose SDQ scores lie outside healthy behavioural ranges will benefit from attending simple parenting programmes; some children with very high SDQ scores will need further, more detailed, holistic assessment with access to more specialised speech and language, special educational needs (SEN) or child and adolescent mental health (CAMHS) assessment. Greater integration between early years work, parenting, SEN and CAMHS teams would help parents and children get the right help as early as possible.
4. Local providers should engage parents who have gone through a parenting course to act as champions. These parents could help local services through encouraging other parents to attend groups, by helping promote programmes and by shaping local promotional messages.
5. Parenting teams should engage closely with referral agencies to ensure that non-stigmatising language and messages are used to promote initial parental interest and engagement with programmes. Given current delivery and resourcing pressures, parent ‘champions’ could also support promotional work with referral agencies.
6. Commissioners and those involved in delivery should ensure that practical incentives to attend programmes (such as crèches) are not cut; this is a false economy undermining parents’ engagement.
7. Commissioners should make sure they have a clear single gateway for all child referrals. This gateway must be well publicised with multi-sector referral agencies and parents.
8. Low engagement of parents and high drop-out rates waste critical opportunities to improve the life chances of children. Providers should systematically identify and outreach to reluctant parents building strong relationships and providing additional motivational support to encourage better engagement. Parenting mentors could help with this important work.

Recommendations from A Chance to Change

Based on the findings set out in the report of the first part of this work, *A Chance to Change*, we made the following recommendations:

1. National outcome and inspectorate frameworks should include targets relating to improved outcomes for children with behavioural problems and the quality of parenting programmes.
2. The Department for Education and the Department of Health should spearhead a national campaign to broaden public and professional awareness of childhood conduct problems.
3. Health and Wellbeing Boards should promote greater awareness of maternal mental health problems.
4. Health and Wellbeing Boards should promote the development of integrated pathways for children with severe behavioural problems.
5. Health and Wellbeing Boards should review local arrangements for partnership working.
6. Joint Strategic Needs Assessments should include estimates of the numbers of children with behavioural problems.
7. Health and Wellbeing Boards should ensure that parenting programmes are targeted at the families who need them most.
8. Commissioners of parenting programmes should always ensure that contracts with providers include an allowance for expenditure on measures designed to maximise take-up and minimise drop-out, especially among socially-excluded and high-risk groups.
9. Local children's services should improve staff recruitment and ongoing training.
10. Central guidance and tools should be prepared to support greater consistency across the country in programme-specific supervision, fidelity and outcome monitoring and other quality control systems for parenting programmes.
11. Local children's services should identify a high-level champion and 'orchestrator' for family-based programmes.
12. Local children's services should provide parents with simple and engaging ways of getting support.
13. Health and Wellbeing Boards, local commissioners and providers should ensure that parents have a greater role in the commissioning, planning and delivery of family-based programmes.
14. The Office for National Statistics should undertake a new national survey of childhood mental health.

Wanting the best for my children: parents' voices

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