



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is part of a programme of work on early intervention undertaken by Centre for Mental Health with funding from the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation. It uses economic analysis to explore the long-term consequences of severe behavioural problems that start in childhood and the benefits of effective early intervention, including possible savings in public expenditure. A large body of evidence shows that, if well implemented, parenting programmes are not only very effective in improving children's behaviour but also very good value for money.



Early behavioural problems

About 5% of children aged 5-10 display behavioural problems which are sufficiently severe, frequent and persistent that they justify diagnosis as a mental health condition: conduct disorder. A further 15-20% have problems which fall below this threshold but are still serious enough to merit concern.

Depending on age, problem behaviours may include: persistent disobedience, angry outbursts and tantrums, physical aggression, fighting, destruction of property, stealing, lying and bullying. For about half of the children affected, serious problems will persist into adolescence and beyond.

A wide range of risk factors may be implicated in the early development of severe behavioural problems. Particular importance attaches to adverse influences within the family environment, such as maltreatment and harsh, inconsistent or neglectful parenting.

Outcomes over the life course

Severe and persistent behavioural problems in young children are associated with a wide range of adverse outcomes throughout the life course and even extending into succeeding generations. Many different domains of life may be affected:

- **Mental health:** increased rates of depression and anxiety, alcohol and drug abuse, personality disorder, self-harm and suicide.
- **Physical health:** increased rates of morbidity, disability and premature mortality, often associated with risky behaviours such as smoking and alcohol or drug misuse; high rates of teenage pregnancy.
- **Child protection:** high risk of being placed on child protection registers and being taken into care.
- **Education:** high rates of truancy and school exclusion; frequent involvement in bullying as both perpetrator and victim; poor educational attainment.
- **Employment:** high rates of unemployment; increased likelihood of employment in low-paid or short-term jobs; increased dependency on welfare benefits.
- **Crime:** high rates of involvement in criminal activity including violent crime, often starting at an early age.
- **Homelessness:** substantially increased risk of experiencing homelessness.
- **Social networks:** few if any friends; limited involvement in social activities.
- **Relationships:** high rates of involvement in personal relationships which are short-lived and characterised by abuse and violence, including mutual violence.
- **Parenthood:** increased rates of child abuse and maltreatment; children at increased risk of being taken into care and of developing behavioural problems.

WHAT ARE SEVERE BEHAVIOURAL PROBLEMS?

All children behave badly from time to time, but some display behavioural problems which are so severe, frequent and persistent that they justify diagnosis as a mental health condition: conduct disorder.

For about half of the children concerned, these problems will persist into adolescence and beyond and are associated with a wide range of damaging

and costly outcomes throughout the life course and even extending into succeeding generations.

Depending on age, problem behaviours may include: persistent disobedience, angry outbursts and tantrums, physical aggression, fighting, destruction of property, stealing, lying and bullying.

HOW COMMON ARE THEY?



ABOUT **5%** OF CHILDREN AGED 5-10 HAVE CONDUCT DISORDER



CONDUCT DISORDER IS TWICE AS HIGH AMONG BOYS AS GIRLS



RATES OF CONDUCT DISORDER ARE HIGHER AMONG CHILDREN FROM DISADVANTAGED BACKGROUNDS

A FURTHER **15-20%** DISPLAY BEHAVIOURAL PROBLEMS

WHICH FALL BELOW THIS THRESHOLD BUT ARE STILL SERIOUS ENOUGH TO MERIT CONCERN BECAUSE OF THE INCREASED RISK OF ADVERSE OUTCOMES IN LATER LIFE

WHAT IS THE COST?

ESTIMATED LIFETIME COST OF SEVERE BEHAVIOURAL PROBLEMS

£260,000
PER CHILD

£1,300

PER CHILD

ESTIMATED OF COST OF A PARENTING PROGRAMME

NEGATIVE OUTCOMES

2 X MORE LIKELY TO LEAVE SCHOOL WITH NO QUALIFICATIONS



6 X MORE LIKELY TO DIE BEFORE AGE 30



3 X MORE LIKELY TO BECOME A TEENAGE PARENT



8 X MORE LIKELY TO BE ON THE CHILD PROTECTION REGISTER



4 X MORE LIKELY TO BE DEPENDENT ON DRUGS



20 X MORE LIKELY TO END UP IN PRISON



WHAT CAN WE DO?

Parenting is a critical determinant of child outcomes. In particular, positive parenting protects children from developing severe behavioural problems. Proven parenting programmes improve the quality of parent-child relationships and the skill of parents in managing challenging behaviour in their children.

This report looks in detail at the large and compelling body of evidence which demonstrates the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of this type of early intervention.

WHY INVEST IN THIS INTERVENTION?

Provided that they are well implemented, parenting programmes are very good value for money. The potential benefits of early intervention are so high relative to its cost that only a modest improvement in outcomes is needed to support a strong economic case.

These programmes more than pay for themselves through future savings in public spending, spread across a range of budgets including education, health, social care and criminal justice. And there are also substantial benefits to wider society and to individuals and their families, not all of which can easily be measured in monetary terms.

The costs of behavioural problems

Various attempts have been made to estimate the long-term costs of severe behavioural problems but all of these are likely to under-estimate the true costs by a substantial margin. Reasons for this include the very broad range of adverse outcomes and the difficulty of expressing some of these in monetary terms, e.g. the impact of severe behavioural problems on wellbeing and quality of life.

Most studies focus on costs falling on the public sector, particularly during childhood and adolescence. A broad average of these estimates suggests an annual cost to the Exchequer of around £5,000 per child with severe behavioural problems, taking into account the extra costs falling on health, social care, education and, from age 10 onwards, the criminal justice system.



£5000

THE ANNUAL COST OF CONDUCT DISORDER TO PUBLIC SERVICES

*ESTIMATE OF THREE STUDIES



£3000

THE ANNUAL COST OF CONDUCT DISORDER TO EDUCATION PER CHILD

*ESTIMATE OF THREE STUDIES

One attempt to measure costs from a societal rather than public sector perspective suggests that the overall lifetime costs of severe behavioural problems amount to around £260,000 per case. (The lifetime costs of moderate problems are put at around £85,000 per case.) Costs relating to crime are the biggest single component, accounting for more than two-thirds of the total.

The effectiveness of parenting programmes

A large body of evidence shows that, if well implemented, parenting programmes can be very effective in improving child behaviour, particularly by encouraging positive parenting. They also improve the behaviour of siblings and the mental health and wellbeing of participating parents.

In broad terms, the effectiveness of parenting programmes is much the same across a wide range of family types and ethnic groups. They are also at least as effective for children with the most severe behavioural problems as for those with more moderate difficulties.

The costs and benefits of intervention

Few studies of parenting programmes have collected detailed economic data. Assessment of costs and benefits measured in monetary terms thus requires a modelling approach which combines quantitative data from effectiveness trials with economic information from other sources.

A number of studies have pursued this approach, addressing two main questions: are parenting programmes good value for money for society as a whole and do these programmes pay for themselves through future savings in public spending?

All studies under-estimate the aggregate returns from early intervention because of omitted benefits. In particular, no attempts are made to include an imputed monetary valuation for the benefits of improved mental health among children with behavioural problems in terms of its impact on their wellbeing and quality of life. Such benefits are the fundamental justification for service provision and yet they find no place in the economic literature on early intervention.

Even allowing for these limitations, the available evidence indicates that parenting programmes are very good value for money, both for society as a whole and from the narrower perspective of the public sector. This is not surprising, as the costs of intervention are relatively low while the potential benefits are extremely high, reflecting the many costly consequences of severe behavioural problems that may be mitigated by intervention.

Studies suggest that the average cost of bringing a child with conduct disorder below a clinical threshold as a result of a parenting programme is around £1,750 per case. Set against this, the lifetime costs of conduct disorder, measured against a baseline of moderate behavioural problems, have been put at around £175,000 per case. Lifetime costs thus need to be reduced by just 1% to cover the costs of the intervention – a strikingly small proportion. In practice, only a fraction of long-term costs are likely to be saved, but the general point that the costs of early intervention are very low relative to the potential benefits remains valid.

Finally, economic analysis highlights the importance of implementing programmes effectively, as failure to do this carries a very heavy penalty in terms of benefits forgone. Relatively low-cost measures which reduce the likelihood that participating parents will drop out mid-way through a programme, e.g. provision of free transport and crèche facilities, are likely to have a particularly high return. And, because the funds for early intervention are always likely to be constrained, it is important that parenting programmes are targeted at those families and children who are likely to benefit most.

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More briefings, the video and the accompanying reports on parenting programmes are all available at www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk/parenting

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