
IMPROVING CHILDREN'S BEHAVIOUR AND ATTENDANCE THROUGH THE USE OF PARENTING PROGRAMMES: AN EXAMINATION OF GOOD PRACTICE

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Background

The Department for Education and Skills (DfES) commissioned the Institute of Education to undertake research to examine when parenting programmes were most effective in the context of improving attendance and behaviour in school and to identify good practice. An initial survey of Local Education Authorities (LEAs) and parenting programme providers was carried out (Phase 1) followed by a second phase of case studies of 23 parenting programmes. The initial survey established that there was a relative lack of education focused programmes. Phase 2 therefore explored the issues in relation to the more general parenting programmes that were available and their impact on parenting skills and subsequently children's behaviour in a range of contexts.

Key findings

- There was wide variability in the number and type of parenting programmes available in LEAs.
- The systems in place for co-ordinating and providing parenting programmes in LEAs were fragile. Provision was generally inadequate to meet need and often operated in an un-co-ordinated way.
- To date, relatively few compulsory parenting orders had been made relating to education. If this changes as a result of the Anti-social Behaviour Act most LEAs may not have the capacity to cope with an increase in the number of parents attending programmes.
- In most cases, providers allocated parents from different referral routes to the same programmes, i.e. parents who had self-referred, been referred by others voluntarily or compulsorily.
- There were some examples of existing good practice of parenting programme co-ordination where there were well established networks providing information to the public about what was available and where voluntary and statutory bodies worked well together.
- A wide range of models and approaches were used as the basis for developing parenting programmes.
- Staff working on the programmes were recruited from a wide range of backgrounds. Many were hourly paid. Training was a requirement for all facilitators. There is no nationally recognized qualification framework for working with parents through parenting programmes.
- The programmes, overall, were reported by parents to have a very positive impact on their relationships with their children and their children's behaviour.
- Where provision was school-based it was welcomed by school staff and provided an important link between home and school.

Background

Recently, much emphasis has been put on the role that parents can play in improving the attendance and behaviour of their children. The Anti-social Behaviour Act 2003 introduced new powers for Local Education Authorities (LEAs) to apply for a parenting order to help address children's behaviour in school. This court order compels a parent to attend a parenting programme and to fulfil other requirements as determined necessary by the court for improving their child's behaviour. Some LEAs encourage parents to attend such programmes on a voluntary basis when their child's attendance or behaviour has given cause for concern. The aim of this research was to examine when parenting programmes were most effective in the context of improving attendance and behaviour in school and to identify good practice.

Methodology

A survey of LEA officers responsible for parenting programme provision and parenting programme providers was undertaken to establish the range of parenting programmes available, how they operated and were funded, their perceived success in changing parental behaviour and the impact on their children. Questionnaires were sent to 150 LEAs of whom 134 (89%) responded. Questionnaires were sent to 296 providers. 158 responses were received (53%).

On the basis of the survey, 23 parenting programmes were selected for more detailed investigation. These represented examples of contrasting approaches, serving different parent populations with children experiencing different types of problems. 142 parents from 20 programmes responded to a pre-programme questionnaire, 73 from 17 programmes to the post-programme questionnaire (51% of the initial sample). Interviews were undertaken with 33 programme providers/facilitators, 52 parents, 12 children and 20 teachers or other LEA staff whose work was linked to the programmes.

Findings

Infrastructure, organisation and funding: The systems in place for co-ordinating and providing parenting programmes in LEAs were fragile. Provision was generally inadequate to meet need

and often operated in an ad hoc way because of a lack of local co-ordination. Links between LEAs and providers were on the whole not well established and in many cases communication was limited.

There were some examples of existing good practice where well established networks provided information to the public about what was available and where voluntary and statutory bodies worked well together. The availability of parenting programmes depended on location. Overall, demand outstripped provision.

Responsibility for the provision of parenting programmes in relation to education lay with a wide range of personnel within LEAs most of whom had considerable responsibilities elsewhere. There was also a wide range of different types of providers.

Funding for the programmes came from a variety of sources and was reported to be insecure in the long and short term and inadequate to meet the need for programmes. This constituted a major difficulty for providers.

To date relatively few compulsory parenting orders had been made relating to education. Parents tended to be referred on a voluntary basis. This may change as a result of the Anti-social Behaviour Act. Most LEAs did not have the capacity in available programmes to cater for an increase of parents on compulsory orders.

The set up of programmes and referral procedures: There was wide variability in the number and type of parenting programmes available in LEAs. In most areas programmes were available for parents of children of different ages. Few programmes were specifically designed to address issues relating to education.

Provision for parents self-referred, referred by others voluntarily or compulsorily was usually delivered within the same programmes. This was successful where compulsorily referred parents were offered individual support prior to the programme and the facilitators were skilled in supporting them during it. Where parents were experiencing serious difficulties one-to-one provision was often made.

Referrals were made through a wide range of

agencies. 33% of providers indicated that they had referrals relating to behaviour and attendance at school. The criteria for referral to parenting programmes were varied. Some providers excluded particular groups of very needy parents, while others accepted any parents who genuinely wished to improve their parenting skills.

Participants and dropouts: The low response rates to questions regarding participation in parenting programmes from LEAs and providers made it difficult to draw any conclusions about the type of parents attending programmes.

It was difficult to persuade parents to join parenting programmes as attendance was perceived by parents as indicating some kind of inadequacy. Most providers in the survey reported substantial drop out rates, although the programmes that were visited had low rates. They followed up non-attendance and contacted parents prior to attendance. Skilled facilitators were able to successfully engage parents in such a way as to reduce drop out.

Types of programmes: There was a wide range of models which could be used as the basis for developing parenting programmes. Increasingly, LEAs were developing their own parenting programmes with a focus on the child's educational outcomes. This provision was sometimes school based and in some cases parallel programmes were provided for children. There was a range of examples of good practice in relation to these LEA and school based programmes. This was complemented by parenting programmes provided by other providers from the voluntary sector, the two sectors increasingly working together.

Programme content: There was a wide range of approaches to parenting programmes. However, most providers adopted an eclectic approach drawing on the best aspects of each. The key themes were assisting parents in managing children's behaviour largely using behaviourist techniques while concurrently improving relationships and communication in the family. Most programmes were based on facilitated discussion. The support systems which parents developed were important outcomes of the programmes. Crucial to the success of the programmes were the skills of the facilitators.

Some programmes had developed parallel programmes for children. Where the focus was educational outcomes this was particularly appropriate as children's behaviour was affected by circumstances at school over which the parent had no control.

Most programmes acted as brokers for other services and agencies but many were sceptical about the impact that other agencies had.

Programme delivery, evaluation and staff training: Most programmes were delivered in community centres, although some were delivered in schools. At primary level, school based programmes were welcomed by parents and staff, although there were sometimes difficulties with accommodation.

Programmes varied in their length, timing and duration. Most sessions were held weekly at a range of different times of day and times of year. Some LEAs provided a telephone helpline to support parents.

The provision for follow up sessions varied but all providers encouraged parents to develop their own self-help groups which would continue after the programme came to an end. The self-help groups were very successful, although there were sometimes difficulties with venues, transport and the provision of crèche facilities.

Most providers undertook systematic evaluation of the programmes through parent questionnaires in the final session. These provided positive indications of the outcomes. Some programmes went beyond this and assessed the perceived impact on the behaviour of the children. Most did not. Unless programmes were run by LEAs, they had no direct control over the way parenting programmes operated or their quality. While many providers had evaluation systems in place the information derived from these was not always fed back to the LEA.

Staff were recruited from a wide range of backgrounds. Many were hourly paid, although many were also highly qualified. Training was a requirement for all facilitators but its extent and depth varied depending on the particular programme being implemented. Some training was accredited. There is no nationally recognized qualification framework for working with parents.

Impact on parents and families: The programmes, overall, were reported by parents to have a very positive impact. They contributed to increased confidence in interacting with and understanding their children. Conflict at home was reduced and family life was calmer and happier. Parents' self-esteem and confidence improved, they developed support networks and some went on to attend further courses, gaining qualifications and employment.

The extent of change depended on the starting point of the parents. For those whose parenting skills were at a low level initially attendance at a single programme was insufficient and ongoing support was needed.

Impact on children and their behaviour: In most cases parents reported improvement in the child's behaviour at home and in interactions with the family. There was some evidence of improved behaviour and attendance. However, improved parental control of children's behaviour will not alleviate situations where problems are located specifically in the school environment for instance where children are being bullied or relationships with teachers have broken down.

Recommendations

There is a need for all Local Education Authorities to have a named person with responsibility for co-ordinating the provision of parenting programmes and for ensuring that provision is of a high quality. Working with providers each LEA should be able to offer a 'menu' of parenting services.

Where parenting programmes have an educational focus it may be beneficial to hold them in schools. It may also be beneficial to hold parallel programmes for pupils.

Systems need to be put in place to monitor children's attendance and behaviour when parents attend programmes and to facilitate long-term evaluation of the impact of programmes.

Schools might consider having a key contact with responsibility for parenting issues and also providing training for school staff in developing relationships with parents.

LEAs need to ensure that programmes are available

for the parents of pre-school, primary and secondary school pupils and that appropriate crèche facilities and transport are available.

Strategies for engaging the most needy parents in parenting programmes need to be developed. These may utilize the enthusiasm of parents in the community who have already attended programmes. In addition, wider availability of programmes for all parents may reduce the stigmatization of attending a parenting programme.

Where parents have been issued with compulsory orders contact should be made with them prior to the running of the programme to reduce any anxiety, enable them to express their anger and optimize the likelihood of their attending. Programme facilitators should offer additional support to these parents throughout the programme and receive specific training in dealing with difficulties that may arise as a result of any negative attitudes expressed in the group work.

Opportunities for follow up activities need to be made available. If this is through self-support groups appropriate venues need to be made available and consideration given to the provision of crèche facilities and transport.

There is a need to adopt common standards for parenting education. A national qualifications framework, to include core competencies, which acknowledges prior learning and experience needs to be developed. Modules addressing the skills and knowledge required to facilitate parenting programmes, which could be taken by staff already engaged in working with parents and children, could provide initial training and continuing professional development and provide an effective means of expanding provision.

Secure, long term, core funding is required if parenting programmes are to be in a position to meet possible demand following the implementation of the Anti-social Behaviour Act.

Additional Information

Copies of the full report RR585 - priced £4.95 - are available by writing to DfES Publications, PO Box 5050, Sherwood Park, Annesley, Nottingham NG15 0DJ.

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Further information about this research can be obtained from Liz Ison, 6D7, DfES, Sanctuary Buildings, Great Smith Street, London SW1P 3BT.

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