

What Works in Parenting Support?

The last few years have seen a significant increase in the number of parenting support programmes on offer to families, delivered by a range of professionals and in a variety of different settings. Many of these new services are based on practice wisdom rather than scientifically tried and tested models. Just how effective they are at preventing an escalation of low level problems or dealing with more complex family situations has been the subject of a recent research review of international evidence which was carried out by the independent Policy Research Bureau on behalf of the DfES. The report aimed to identify what works, what is promising and what doesn't work, both in the UK and elsewhere and to consider the implications for practice, future policy and further research. In the main those parenting support interventions reviewed here were aimed at parenting problems of relatively low severity and high frequency. The key points from their findings are summarised below. Pages 38 - 86 of the main report encapsulate much interesting information on specific programmes for children, parents and parents and children.

The authors suggest the following definition:

'Parenting support is any intervention for parents aimed at reducing risks and promoting protective factors for their children, in relation to their social, physical and emotional wellbeing'

Many parents need support at some point and messages which encourage all parents to seek advice, short term help or more long term support are more likely to increase uptake and bring longer term benefit. The research shows that is better to get in early; support that was available to parents before problems became more severe and was offered across the board to everyone in the community worked well, although late interventions were usually better than nothing and did help parents under stress.

Is it better to concentrate on targeted groups or offer universal services? Both appeared to be effective, but those interventions where there was a clear purpose and concrete aims, underpinned by a strong theory base and a clear model for achieving it appears to work best. Evidence based models of parenting which are linked to good outcomes for children; such as encouraging authoritative, non punitive parenting or promoting fathers' involvement in childcare; achieved the best results.

Parents responded positively to support services where thought was given about how best to contact them initially, encourage them to participate and work with the programmes on offer and how to keep them involved once started. Take up increased if families could access the services from different routes such as self referrals, being brought along by friends or other professionals and if the services were sensitive to the cultural needs of the local community.

Both group work and individual work were shown to be effective, groups can offer parents social as well as professional support but the group members need to feel comfortable about discussing issues in a more public way; individual work can be more effective with severe and entrenched problems or when the parent is not yet ready to join a group. Home visiting and one to one support which is specifically tailored to individual circumstances are often an important factor in success.

Group or individual support programmes for parents work best when they follow a well structured and coherent programme which is delivered by a skilled and well trained staff group, supported by an effective management team. When children's behaviour was not too difficult or challenging, parents responded well to brief, more informal interventions that gave them factual information and advice, especially when it increased their own knowledge about child development and led to change in their children's behaviour. They also responded well to services which focused on specific parenting skills where they were given practical tips they could use at home to try and change their own and their children's behaviour and from the opportunity to rethink and evaluate their own attitudes and beliefs about parenting. Work that involved all the family, including the children also brought benefits.

There may be a significant amount of evidence to support 'what works' but there is still much that is not known, whether this is due to a reluctance to further investigate negative findings or the extent to which programmes that work in one country, for instance the US, will translate to the very different context in the UK. There is still no clear evidence to determine whether positive changes in parenting and child behaviours can be sustained over the longer term, nor which particular aspects of individual programmes or individual participants contribute to success.

Many questions remain: how can changes in parents knowledge and attitudes be translated into changes in behaviour, how can 'high risk' parents be encouraged to take part in programmes which ensure better outcomes for them and their children, how do certain resilience or protective factors contribute?

Parenting support programmes need to reach out and address the needs of specific groups such as black and Asian parents, fathers not just mothers. What works best with these groups is still largely untested and evaluated. How children themselves feel about the programmes and what has been the impact from their point of view, which particular aspects of home visiting make a difference and whether parenting support interventions are cost effective are all still unanswered questions.

Inevitably this leads to a plea for more rigorous research, including more comparative research which should include randomised controlled trials and more qualitative research. Findings about what works need to be disseminated, but more research on what doesn't work could be equally helpful.

This review clearly shows that there are many actual and potential benefits for parents who take part in parenting support programmes and that hopeful and helpful outcomes for children can be realised. The continuing effort and investment in such services is worthwhile, but alongside messages for practice, the review calls for a wider research programme and a recognition that policies which contribute to the alleviation of environmental and psychological stressors for parents also bring clear benefits.

Reference:

P Moran, D Ghale & A van der Merwe (2004) *What Works in Parenting Support? A Review of International Evidence* Policy Research Bureau, published by DfES

The full report and summary are available on:

<http://www.dfes.gov.uk/research/data/uploadfiles/RR574.pdf>

Further information is available from
www.prb.org