

“What Works?” Series Summaries

What Works in Parenting Education?

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The 'What Works?' series

Some ways of dealing with problems work better than others. Every child has the right to expect that professionals intervening in their lives will do so on the basis of the best available knowledge. But the majority of interventions in social care are not evaluated before they are introduced. In that sense, much of the work done with children is an uncontrolled experiment.

Barnardo's has a special interest in evidence-based practice, that is, finding out what works, and ensuring that the interventions we and others make in children's lives are as good as they possibly can be.

As Roy Parker and his colleagues have pointed out:

'A hundred years ago, the benefits of providing separate care for deprived and disadvantaged children were thought to be self evident. It has since become increasingly apparent that unless outcomes in childcare can be adequately measured, we have no means of justifying the actions of social workers, which may have far reaching and permanent consequences for individuals.'

Qualitative work, and user studies, for which the UK has a good record, are important in understanding the processes which enable interventions to work well, and understand what service users most value. They do not, however, help us to know what interventions work best, or why.

In order to understand cause and effect - the relationship between a particular intervention and an outcome - randomised controlled trials are important. RCTs in the UK and North America include studies of day care, home visits, accident prevention, and other early childhood interventions.

The cohort studies, such as the National Child Development Study (NCDS) enable us to see who does well after a poor start in life, and understand what factors may lead to resilience.

Barnardo's What Works reports draw on a range of research designs and evaluations which suggest that particular interventions are worthwhile.

This report in brief

Parenting education is expanding rapidly and this growth is likely to continue. It is being promoted for a number of reasons – to help parents strengthen their relationships with their children, to find better ways of dealing with difficult behaviour and because being a parent is a demanding and skilful task which deserves support and recognition. A wide range of statutory health and social welfare agencies and voluntary bodies now provide parenting programmes of different kinds.

Good parenting and help to be good parents is increasingly seen as a solution to a range of social problems alongside action to reduce inequalities. The following government initiatives illustrate this – the establishment of a national Family and Parenting Institute, Sure Start, a co-ordinated response to the needs of families with children aged under 4, a new national helpline for parents, and the impending Social Exclusion Unit report on teenage parenthood.

Given the claims made for parenting education and the responsibility we have to support parents and children in the best way possible, it is important to be sure the methods used are effective. We need to be as sure as we can be that what is done makes a lasting difference and does not do harm. Ineffective programmes let families down and waste money.

Parenting Matters, part of Barnardo's *What Works?* series of reviews of the evidence-base for child welfare work, considers some of these issues. It has two main aims:

- to summarise robust research on effectiveness of parenting education
- to help practitioners develop methods of working with parents that are based on sound evidence of 'what works'.

Parenting education can be divided into three broad areas:

- preparation about parenthood and family life for school age children
- preparation for parenthood for young people and adults
- education on relationship and parenting skills for parents and carers

The report primarily focuses on the third area and is illustrated with examples of good practice in research from the UK and the USA. **Jane Barlow** describes a systematic review of research into parenting education. **Tony Newman** and **Helen Roberts** review effective research methodologies and how they can help us improve our practice, **Carolyn Webster-Stratton** describes the empirically validated programmes for parents, children and teachers developed at the University of Washington's Parenting Clinic in Seattle, USA and **Eva Lloyd** provides a general

introduction to the issues, and discusses the policy and practice implications we can draw from the research.

What does the research show?

What we know....

Despite the limitations of research to date there is evidence to show that parent education programmes can be an effective way of improving the behaviour of pre - adolescent children who have behaviour problems. The effects last over time, although in a number of studies as many as 50% of parents continued to experience difficulties.

Overall, **behaviorally oriented parent education programmes** seem to produce the biggest subsequent changes in children's behaviour. While programmes with a strong emphasis on communication and relationships increased positive parental outcomes and family cohesion and decreased family conflict, there is less evidence at present of reduction in deviant child behaviours.

The results also indicate that **group – based programmes** may produce more changes in children's behaviour and be possibly more cost-effective and user friendly than individual programmes. Group discussions can be a strong source of non–stigmatising support for parents.

In looking at the style of work, the most effective approach for the facilitator seems to be an **interactive model of learning** of teaching, leading and role playing which increases parents' confidence in their own ideas.

Much of the research demonstrates the link between conduct disorders in early childhood and later delinquency, and consequently the importance of intervening early in a child's life. Offering early intervention to families with young children who are aggressive and disruptive helps not only children and their families but has wider preventive implications for violence in society.

Being supported by **neighbours, friends and family living locally** are protective factors. Effective programmes will encourage strong relationships between parents, support the wider family and contribute to the building of more cohesive communities.

Parents, teachers and mental health professionals need to work collaboratively to provide **comprehensive community based services**.

Programmes where **both parents** are involved seem to be more successful than those where only the mother takes part. As parenting education develops, greater efforts need to be made to engage fathers and in particular young fathers.

Working with parents alone is not enough to achieve long-term change in children. Parenting programmes which include **direct work with the child** are likely to be more effective than those that do not.

Schools are important influences in children's lives. Effective programmes help parents and teachers develop good working relationships and support children's learning. Improvements in children's behaviour at home are not necessarily reproduced in the school. Teachers need to be involved in programmes to ensure consistency in discipline and management between home and school.

What we don't know...

It is still not clear to what extent changes in children's behaviour are due to the format, the intervention methods, the group support or the therapist or facilitator's skills.

Parenting programmes do not work for everybody. Even in the most well constructed programmes, up to a third of parents involved continued to report problems in their children after taking part.

We don't know enough about whether particular types of programmes are more suited to some parents than others. The current recruitment of parents to programmes often assumes that all parents can benefit from any programme, with the result that failure may be attributed to the parent rather than an inappropriate programme.

The growth in parent education programmes in the UK has not been accompanied by a similar interest in their evaluation. Although there is considerable anecdotal evidence concerning success or ineffectiveness, few programmes have been robustly assessed. While participants themselves report a high level of satisfaction with parenting programmes, the long-term benefits for parents, children and on the family as a whole are unclear.

There are some serious gaps in the research. Few UK studies so far have used randomised controlled trials (where one group receives a particular form of intervention and other groups receives a different intervention or none at all). This results in our not always being able to identify the most beneficial elements in programmes. Because child welfare services tend to focus on rectifying problems in specific – usually disadvantaged – groups, much of the research reflects this bias. This is particularly important when programmes are 'prescribed' by the courts, which they may be under the provisions of the Children Act 1989 and the Crime and Disorder Act 1998, where the new Parenting Orders require some parents of young people in trouble to attend parenting classes.

What are the implications for policy and practice?

Parent education should be subject to the same principles that underpin public investment in child care provision generally. That is, it should be **effective, deliver objectives valued by children and parents and do no harm**. If intensive work is to be done with families, the intervention should be based on the best current knowledge of what works. We may otherwise replicate earlier initiatives in the field of child welfare, which were thought to be beneficial at the time but which we now know to be misguided.

To achieve this, practitioners and policy-makers should seek to base intervention on sound evidence of effectiveness. This will only be possible if robust research is available which addresses issues important to parents and children, is widely disseminated and has direct policy and practice implications.

One of the difficulties of making informed choices is that there are many gaps in our knowledge. We need to know more about:

- **culture and ethnicity:** growing diversity in the USA and Europe means that different cultural practices and attitudes must be recognised and understood, and interventions developed that are culturally informed and appropriate for different groups.
- **parental and child age:** programmes for younger parents and for children over the age of 8 have been less frequently researched than those for parents in general and younger children.
- **disability:** the particular issues facing parents with children with disabilities, or parents who are themselves disabled, have received little attention.
- **gender:** more thought needs to be given to how the different patterns of parenting often adopted by men and women might influence the design and delivery of parenting programmes.

More attention also needs to be given to **normative studies of parenting** in the community, identifying the key skills that lead to successful parenting. There is still too much emphasis on exploring what has gone 'wrong' rather than learning what has gone 'right' – and learning this from parents themselves.

The **views of parents and children** are crucial. Parents need to be consulted about the usefulness of the parenting education they have received and given more information about the effectiveness of different kinds of approach. This is especially true of lone parents, gay and lesbian parents and step-parents whose voices are really good in parenting research, policy or practice. We also know very little of the views of children, particularly what aspects of parenting education are most important to them.

Some of our most vulnerable children are cared for by adoptive and foster carers. These families too need access to parent education programmes where the same principles of effectiveness apply.

Radical changes in children's behaviour and parent/child relationships are unlikely if we do not address the context in which children are brought up. Parenting education cannot solve such factors that adversely affect parenting such as poverty, unemployment and bad housing.

Conclusion

A review of methodologically sound research shows that well–designed parenting education is an important tool in the support of families, but only one amongst many. Alongside parenting education there must be a real attempt to address other factors which make it hard for parents to bring up their children successfully, especially poverty, social exclusion and poor education.

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