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## SUPPORTING PARENTS OF TEENAGERS

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### Introduction

A range of Government policies and initiatives currently aim to improve outcomes for children and young people by providing support to their parents. The Department for Education and Skills (DfES), while recognising that all parents benefit from good quality help and advice, has made support for parents of teenagers a particular priority. This report reviews what is currently known about services which support parents during their child's teenage years, in order to inform the development of such services.

### Main Findings

- Support services for parents of teenagers are still very sparse. In particular, parents of teenagers from black and minority ethnic (BME) groups and parents of teenagers with learning problems such as ADHD are not well served.
- Parents seek support for various reasons at all stages in their teenager's development. While some may want preventative advice when their children are as young as 10, others may first seek more targeted support when their teenager is leaving secondary school. Their varying needs require support to be available in multiple ways, which include parenting courses, informal support networks, one-to-one therapy, telephone and Internet helplines, information leaflets and newsletters.
- Well-delivered preventative services contribute to improved outcomes for teenagers and their parents. Respondents thought that many problems could be avoided if parents had access to advice and information at an earlier stage in their child's development. In many instances, parents had unsuccessfully sought support for preventative reasons and had subsequently needed more intensive support when problems with their teenager's behaviour became serious.
- When serious problems do develop, they require intensive levels of support which are often neither readily available nor easy to access. Parents are often only referred for help when their teenager becomes involved in criminal or sub-criminal activities. Statutory services are often under-resourced and high referral thresholds overload the system with extremely severe cases.
- Many parents of teenagers are reluctant to seek advice for fear of being judged or stigmatised. Some service providers felt that this was reinforced by some Government policies which were creating a culture of blame that discouraged parents from seeking help. Findings from the literature review indicate that parents with teenagers frequently struggle with a variety of insecurities, many of which stem from their past and/or midlife issues: improving their confidence is likely to be of greater benefit than highlighting their inadequacies.
- Despite the best efforts of providers, fathers are typically reluctant to attend generic parenting courses. They are more likely to seek support when problems with their teenage children become severe or, in their view, are not being addressed. In such cases they are initially more likely to use telephone or Internet helplines or look for written information.
- Parents of teenagers benefit from services which are flexible and responsive to a wide range of needs. Effective provision often supplies a range of support that includes: advice on specific issues, practices and strategies; information on teenage brain development, which helps parents understand teenage behaviour and allows them to reflect on why certain strategies work better than others; and practices that validate them in their role as a parent and reduce their sense of isolation.

## Methodology

The aim of the study was to understand the ways in which services can best support the needs of families with teenagers. It explored 'what works' and 'what could work' from three separate perspectives:

- A comprehensive literature review explored the most recent research regarding adolescent development, the parent/teenager relationship and what is currently known through research and evaluation about services for parents with teenagers. Additionally, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews were undertaken with 9 representatives of organisations that had a theoretical or practical interest in support services for parents of teenagers. The aim was to explore their views on effective practice for these parents, and to identify relevant services for inclusion as case studies.
- A brief scoping exercise provided an overview of services currently available in the US and UK for parents of teenagers. From this, 10 UK services for families with teenagers were sampled for the in-depth case studies.
- Interviews were conducted with 37 practitioners and stakeholders in the 10 case studies, and with 14 parents who used these services.

## Findings from the literature review

A series of physical, cognitive and social transitions experienced in early adolescence expose teenagers to a number of developmental risks, including academic failure, anti-social behaviour, and unsafe sex. The extent to which teenagers avoid these risks is largely influenced by environmental factors, such as the quality of their home life and their relationship with their parents.

Some parents benefit from learning about perspectives and strategies, such as authoritative parenting and consistent monitoring, which enable them to parent more effectively. However, those struggling with personal stresses are more likely to need additional support that enables them to cope and improves their relationship with their adolescent child.

Services offering generic parenting advice and support can improve adolescent outcomes, as well as prevent problems from arising in the first place.

Parents of teenagers are likely to value help that falls within one of three categories - *dispensing*, *relating* or *reflecting* support. *Dispensing* support generally provides specific information or advice, which parents are more likely to heed when it is coming from an expert. *Relating* support addresses parents' emotional needs, validates their role as a parent and reassures them that their feelings are normal. *Reflecting* support includes information or training that helps parents understand and consider why they should use certain strategies with their teenagers.

## Findings from the interviews with professionals

Parents of teenagers generally seek support either in anticipation of the difficulties associated with adolescence (to prevent problems from occurring) or because of a specific problem with their teenager that is causing disruption in the family. This means they need access to services when their child is as young as 10 or as old as 20.

A wide range of services is required to support the wide range of needs. This includes preventative services as well as intensive, targeted interventions.

Support should not be focused entirely on parenting courses. Helplines, newsletters and individual support should also be readily available to meet parents' preferences.

Parents are sometimes too embarrassed to seek help because they feel they should know how to parent by this stage of their child's life. They are also reluctant to seek support for fear of being blamed or stigmatised.

When parents do decide to seek help, they are typically unsure of where to find it. Advertising services can be useful but personal recommendation is most effective.

Factual information on teenage brain development helps parents to understand their children's behaviour and modify their own attitudes and responses.

Parents prefer services which are: easily accessible and community-based, but not in schools; provided during school hours and in the evenings (to meet the needs of working mothers and fathers); and delivered by people with personal experience of teenagers.

Provision for parents of teenagers from BME groups is especially poor, although many of their problems are identical to those of white parents. If service providers are suitably trained and sensitive to relevant cultural and religious factors, BME parents are best accommodated within mainstream provision.

Imaginative means are needed to attract fathers to parenting courses. They are less reluctant to seek 'anonymous' forms of help through helplines and written material.

Professionals mainly thought that parents preferred services delivered by the voluntary sector, since they are perceived as less threatening and less judgemental than those delivered by statutory agencies. However, they were not thought to be uniformly averse to statutory sector provision. Ideally the voluntary and statutory sectors should provide services jointly.

### **Findings from the interviews with parents**

Parents' satisfaction with a particular service is directly related to the extent to which it meets their needs. However, parents attend services for many reasons and differ in terms of the kinds of support they want and require.

Many parents want and benefit from preventative services. The majority of families in the sample either accessed support for preventative reasons or wished that these services had been available when their child was younger. Some parents had sought advice routinely throughout their child's development.

Intense problems require intense interventions. In particular, problems involving academic failure (especially ADHD), substance abuse or juvenile delinquency typically require interventions that include multiple components, are offered over a long period of time, and address a range of family problems.

Parents of teenagers with a school-related problem felt that the educational system had failed them in providing support for their child's difficulty and also in liaising with other services.

Parents resent and avoid provision that they believe is stigmatising or blaming. They prefer confidence-boosting activities such as workshops where problems are shared and isolation is reduced.

Parents with younger teenagers (under the age of 15) are more likely to make use of generically focused support, whereas parents with older teenagers are more likely to want help that is tailored to their individual needs and problems.

Universally available preventative support, in the form of parenting classes, was especially needed during the transition to secondary school. Parents would be willing to attend six or more classes if they felt that the information was relevant and effective.

### **Recommendations**

Parents would benefit from much more support, on three levels:

***Universal support that improves parents' awareness of adolescent development and the needs of teenagers.*** More needs to be done to ensure that parents receive responsible messages about parenting and the important role they play in teenagers' lives. Organisations such as Parentline Plus are particularly well suited to provide all parents with general guidance and advice on the needs of adolescents through newsletters and media campaigns.

***Preventative support that is universally available at the community level throughout England.*** Preventative support, in the form of parenting classes, is needed, especially during the transition to secondary school. It is likely that parents would benefit from multiple information sessions offered over several weeks. Such support could offer information and advice, as well as the opportunity for parents to share experiences.

***Targeted support that is sufficiently resourced so that it can flexibly address the needs of families with teenagers confronting very serious problems.*** Particular gaps in service provision

include support for families with teenagers who have ADHD and services for parents with children who engage in criminal or sub-criminal behaviour. Such services should be neither punitive nor judgemental.

An ideal scenario for the provision of services would be joint working between the voluntary and statutory sectors, where complementary skills and knowledge could be utilised.

### **Additional Information**

*Copies of the full report (RR830) - priced £4.95 - are available by writing to DfES Publications, PO Box 5050, Sherwood Park, Annesley, Nottingham NG15 0DJ.*

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