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## WHAT WORKS IN PARENTING SUPPORT? A REVIEW OF THE INTERNATIONAL EVIDENCE

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### Introduction

This is a summary of a review of the international (English language) evidence regarding the effectiveness of parenting support programmes, carried out by the independent Policy Research Bureau on behalf of the DfES. In the light of research evidence from recent decades linking various aspects of parenting with outcomes for children, many programmes have sprung up aimed at helping parents to enhance their ability to parent, in the hope that outcomes for children may ultimately improve. At the same time, a body of literature documenting the scientific evaluation of parent support programmes has also accumulated, assessing its effectiveness. The current study set out to review this growing body of literature. The task involved collating, grading, sorting and summarising parenting support evaluation literature (both published and unpublished) in order to delineate what is known about 'what works' both in the UK and elsewhere, and to distil key messages for policy makers regarding practice, research and overarching national policy.

### Aims of the Review

The aim of this review was to address a gap in the current literature. Although a number of reviews of parenting support programmes already exist, they tend to fall into one of two types. Many rigorous 'systematic reviews' set such scientifically stringent criteria for studies to be included for review that only a tiny proportion of the available literature is drawn upon. Alternatively, broader and more inclusive reviews exist but are often somewhat unscientific in their selection of material included. Moreover, only a handful consider findings from both qualitative and quantitative investigations, and relatively few consider the implications of their findings for policy and evaluation research as well as practice.

We therefore aimed to produce a review crossing these boundaries and covering a wide range of services that go under the banner of 'parenting support', combining scientific rigour with practice and policy relevance and accessibility. Programmes were sorted into four categories: 'what works', 'what is promising', 'what does not work', and those in which effectiveness is still 'not known'. We also aimed to identify gaps in the evidence base and to distil the key messages for research, policy and practice. The evidence was drawn from the international evaluation literature, and included both quantitative and qualitative evaluations in order to provide a fully rounded picture of effectiveness in terms not only of significant outcomes, but also in relation to programme implementation and delivery.

### Key terms and methods of the review

When selecting evaluation literature for inclusion, *parents* were taken to include all those who provide significant care for children in a home or family context, including biological parents, step-parents, foster parents, adoptive parents, grandparents or other relatives. We took *parenting support* to include any intervention for parents or carers aimed at reducing risks and/or promoting protective factors for their children, in relation to their social, physical and emotional well-being. Our focus throughout, with minor exceptions, was on programmes of *mainstream* relevance, i.e. interventions aimed at common problems of relatively low severity or relatively high frequency. Both *universal* services (those open to anyone irrespective of their levels of need) and *targeted* services (those offered only to specific groups or populations, in response

to a specific assessed need) were included. We included evaluations of interventions aimed at *primary* levels of prevention (intervening to prevent the onset of problems), and at *secondary* levels of prevention (intervening with high risk groups or where problems have begun but are not yet strongly entrenched) but rarely included those at tertiary levels of prevention and treatment (when problems are already strongly present and require active treatment).

A main report was produced, summarising the literature in a number of broadly-grouped areas of outcome for children, parents, and families. For each outcome area, a combination of individual evaluation studies and pre-existing reviews was used to provide a summary of key messages. In addition, descriptive profiles of many of the programmes were also provided. The main report was accompanied by a 'grid' (or chart) which can be downloaded from the Policy Research Bureau's website ([www.prb.org.uk](http://www.prb.org.uk)) providing details of a selection of individual parenting support interventions and their evaluations, and giving ratings of the scientific robustness of the evaluations as well as the effectiveness of the programmes. The eventual selection of evaluation studies and research reviews that formed the basis of the review was made from over two thousand potentially relevant journals, books and reports, both published and 'grey'. To be included, interventions had to involve parents or parents with their children (from birth to nineteen years), rather than children alone. It could target outcomes for parents in their own right as well as for children, but only to the extent that the existing literature clearly demonstrated that these parent-level outcomes have a strong and reasonably direct link with outcomes for children. Qualitative as well as quantitative evaluations were included, but had to be of sufficient methodological robustness in either case to merit inclusion. Generally, quantitative studies that used pre- and post-intervention assessments were included, often with a comparative or controlled design (ie, where people receiving an intervention are compared with those not receiving it). However, because of the large number of areas where no studies of this standard were unearthed, studies with weaker methods but judged to be of some merit were occasionally included, though conclusions are more tentative in these cases.

The selected literature was sorted according to the area of *actual* outcome that was reported by the study (rather than the study's *intended* outcomes), for children, parents and families. Each of these three broad outcome areas were then subdivided into narrower outcomes. Within these categories the literature was further sorted into: 'what works', 'what is promising', 'what does not work' and 'what is unknown', based on the presence of significant results showing support for programmes from a methodologically robust evaluation.

### **Key Findings: messages about practice, research and national policy**

The key findings of the review are summarised below. Because the review was written for policy-makers involved both in commissioning services and research about them, all of the messages extracted are relevant for policy but in relation to three broad themes: messages about practice; messages about research; and messages for national policy in family support.

#### **Below we summarise our conclusions for policy about 'what works' in practice:**

- Both early intervention and later intervention: early interventions report better and more durable outcomes for children; but late intervention is better than none and may help parents deal with parenting under stress
- Interventions with a strong theory-base and clearly articulated model of the predicted mechanism of change: services need to know both where they want to go, and how they propose to get there
- Interventions that have measurable, concrete objectives as well as overarching aims
- Universal interventions (aimed at primary prevention amongst whole communities) for parenting problems and needs at the less severe end of the spectrum of common parenting difficulties - though some types of universal services require more evaluation to determine their effectiveness
- Targeted interventions (aimed at specific populations or individuals deemed to be at risk for parenting difficulties) to tackle more complex types of parenting difficulties
- Interventions that pay close attention to implementation factors for 'getting', 'keeping' and 'engaging' parents (in practical, relational,

- cultural/contextual, strategic and structural domains; see Section Four of the main report)
- Services that allow multiple routes in for families (variety of referral routes)
  - Interventions using more than one method of delivery (ie, multi-component interventions)
  - Group work, where the issues involved are suitable to be addressed in a 'public' format, and where parents can benefit from the social aspect of working in groups of peers
  - Individual work, where problems are severe or entrenched or parents are not ready/able to work in a group, often including an element of home visiting as part of a multi component service, providing one-to-one, tailored support
  - Interventions that have manualised programmes where the core programme (ie: what is delivered) is carefully structured and controlled to maintain 'programme integrity'
  - Interventions delivered by appropriately trained and skilled staff, backed up by good management and support
  - Interventions of longer duration, with follow-up/booster sessions, for problems of greater severity or for higher risk groups of parents
  - Short, low level interventions for delivering factual information and fact-based advice to parents, increasing knowledge of child development and encouraging change in 'simple' behaviours
  - Behavioural interventions that focus on specific parenting skills and practical 'take-home tips' for changing more complex parenting behaviours and impacting on child behaviours
  - 'Cognitive' interventions for changing beliefs, attitudes and self-perceptions about parenting
  - Interventions that work in parallel (though not necessarily at the same time) with parents, families and children

There were also a number of messages for policy with regard to **what is still not known about 'what works' on the basis of current research:**

- How effective (as opposed to merely 'promising') UK parenting interventions are, which cannot be determined without more robustly scientific research methods than are currently the norm
- The extent to which interventions developed and shown to be effective in other countries such as the US can 'translate' to the very different UK context

- What 'doesn't work' (because of a bias against reporting negative or equivocal research findings)
- The specific characteristics of participants and programmes that contribute to success for programmes that show promise or are effective - i.e. not just 'what works', but 'for whom under what circumstances'
- Whether positive changes in parenting and child behaviours associated with parent support interventions can be sustained over the long term
- How changes in parents' knowledge and attitudes can be translated into changes at the behavioural level
- How to retain and engage families in 'high risk' groups in parenting support interventions more successfully, and how to ensure better outcomes for these groups more consistently
- What aspects of resilience and which protective factors in parenting moderate the outcomes of parenting support for both parents and children
- What aspects of parenting support interventions are most effective when working with fathers and how programmes may need to be better designed to meet their needs
- What aspects of parenting support interventions are most effective with black and Asian parents and how programmes may need to be better designed to meet their needs
- How children themselves perceive the effectiveness of parenting support programmes
- The optimal duration for different types of interventions to achieve the best outcomes
- The characteristics of home visiting that contribute to its success, i.e. training levels of staff, frequency and duration of visits, and content of the session
- Whether and to what extent parenting support interventions in the UK are cost-effective
- The relative efficacy of group versus one-to-one intervention in the medium to longer term

There were also **messages for policy about the research base more generally:**

- There is a need to commission more rigorous and robust research designs that can really tell us 'what works', including randomised controlled trials ('RCTs') wherever possible, and certainly more comparative and quasi-experimental designs; and also including better quality qualitative research

- There is a need to build capacity in this field, including funding 'developmental' studies that advance methodologies in this field
- Continued commitment to wide dissemination of research findings is essential, but not only of 'good' results that suggest effective practice. Negative and inconclusive results may also contain important learning. Commissioning a review of 'what doesn't work' in a number of areas might be enlightening
- Especially but not only at local level, there is a need for commissioners of research to be better trained in research methods so that they are able to assess and promote good design and execution in evaluation research

Finally, an important group of key findings concerned **messages for national policy from the evaluation literature:**

- Parenting support benefits families, and this review has clearly shown the potential benefits that may be realised through continuing investment in this type of social intervention
- Many parents need support at some point in their parenting career and efforts to 'normalise' access to support as a universal right seem likely to generate strong benefits. The message that it is not unusual to need support from time to time needs to be conveyed in policy rhetoric, to help increase rates of access, especially at critical points for early intervention
- There needs to be a consistent message about supporting parents delivered across the board, reflecting the wider ecology of parenting, from the provision of individual programmes to the implementation of national policies. The broad thrust of current policy in the UK appears to be in tune with this, but the impact of new policy initiatives needs to be monitored constantly to ensure that policy in one area does not inadvertently pull against policy in another.
- Across the board, in order to better support parents, policy needs to embody an evidence-based model of parenting linked to good outcomes for children, (e.g. encouraging authoritative, non-punitive parenting rather than harsh parenting; promoting and enabling fathers' involvement in childcare)
- Results show time and time again that it is difficult for stressed families to benefit from parenting programmes when they face multiple disadvantages, and thus policies that reduce

everyday stresses in the lives of families (including poverty, unemployment, poor health, housing and education) will support parents in caring for their children

- We need to recognise that there will always be a minority of parents who cannot or will not benefit from parenting support services. This does not mean a service is 'all bad', or that anyone is necessarily to blame. The media should be helped to understand this better
- It is questionable whether punishing those who fail to benefit from parenting support with draconian sanctions is consistent with promoting better outcomes for their children
- It will be vital for the future of this field that government invests in building capacity and skills in the social care workforce and related professions that provide parenting support. Supporting families without compromising their autonomy is a demanding and delicate job, and highly skilled and appropriately trained staff will get better results

### Concluding remarks

Research indicates that there are many families in the community who could benefit from parenting support in one form or another, although attracting parents and engaging them with programmes remains a challenge. Unfortunately, in the UK the burgeoning number of parenting support programmes in recent years has not been matched by a rise in the number of high quality quantitative and qualitative studies carried out to evaluate them. Consequently the evaluation literature only provides us with a partial picture of 'what works', and only partial understanding of why some programmes work better than others. Nevertheless, clear messages have emerged, showing that provision of parenting programmes still represents an important pathway to helping parents, especially when combined with local and national policies that address the broader contextual issues that affect parents' and children's lives.

### Additional Information

*Copies of the full report (RR574) - priced £4.95 - are available by writing to DfES Publications, PO Box 5050, Sherwood Park, Annesley, Nottingham NG15 0DJ.*

*Cheques should be made payable to "DfES Priced Publications".*

*Copies of this Research Brief (RB574) are available free of charge from the above address (tel: 0845 60 222 60). Research Briefs and Research Reports can also be accessed at [www.dfes.gov.uk/research/](http://www.dfes.gov.uk/research/)*

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