



Positive Parenting

**The National Evaluation of the Youth Justice Board's
Parenting Programme**

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Policy Research Bureau for the Youth Justice Board
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The National Evaluation of the Youth Justice Board's Parenting Programme

Introduction, policy background and research methods

The last few years have seen profound changes in the youth justice system in England and Wales. One key and controversial innovation has been the introduction of a new disposal, the *Parenting Order*, for parents of young people who are at risk of or known to be engaged in offending, or who are failing to attend school. Under the terms of a Parenting Order, parents must engage with a parenting support and education service in a form directed by the court or their local multi-agency Youth Offending Team (YOT). Failure to comply with the terms of the Order can result in criminal 'breach' proceedings, a return to court, and potentially a fine or a further Order being made.

Yots are charged with the responsibility of providing or identifying suitable services for these parents, as well as other parents who are not in receipt of an Order but who may benefit from preventive intervention. In support of this, the YJB's Parenting Programme funded the development of 42 new parenting projects across England, set up and run by Yots in partnership with other local agencies, both voluntary and statutory. This report documents the results of a three year national evaluation of the effectiveness of the YJB's Parenting Programme, carried out by the independent Policy Research Bureau. The research took place between June 1999 and December 2001. Thirty four projects were included in the national evaluation, each of which were also assessed by locally-based research teams. Data collected by these teams form the basis of this report.

The research explored the process of setting up and implementing the projects, and the outcomes in terms of impact on parents and young people. Both quantitative and qualitative methods were used. Around 800 parents and 500 young people provided information for the national evaluation. In addition, around 800 project workers provided assessments of parents' progress. The key findings on the impact of the Programme are based on a sub-sample of 200 'before' and 'after' questionnaires provided by participating parents, 78 questionnaires from young people, and a study of the official reconviction rates of nearly 300 young people using data from the Police National Computer.

Objectives, medium and mode of delivery

- Diversity and evolution were the key terms that describe how the Parenting Programme developed. No two projects assumed the same form, and most evolved considerably from the original designs that were put forward at the beginning.
- Project aims and objectives varied in terms of whether they saw themselves as primarily 'preventive' in nature (aimed at a wide group of parents in need), or 'therapeutic' (aimed at the 'higher tariff' families, who were often in crisis and with entrenched psycho-social problems), or some combination of the two. However, almost all projects shared in common a focus on parents as their primary users; few succeeded in doing any direct work with young people or other family members, despite initial intentions to do so. The work with parents typically addressed:
 - ◆ Dealing with conflict and challenging behaviour by young people
 - ◆ Constructive supervision and monitoring of young people
 - ◆ Setting and maintaining boundaries and ground rules for young people
 - ◆ Communication and negotiation skills
 - ◆ Family conflict in general
- Most projects found that existing 'off the shelf' courses for working with parents needed adapting for the special challenges presented by parents of young offenders. Consequently, a great deal of time in the early stages of the Parenting Programme was devoted to developing and refining models of working. A

mix-and-match approach was common, using elements of existing courses with modifications introduced by individual projects.

- Many projects offered a mix of group-work interventions and one-to-one tailored work. This represented a pragmatic development – most intended to offer mainly group programmes at the outset but families' needs often meant one-to-one crisis-intervention was needed before group work could start.

Throughput, referrals, assessment, and take-up

- Many projects took a long time to get up and running to capacity. However, this is probably part of a normal 'maturation process' for new initiatives. In some areas there were few referrals to start with, often corresponding to low numbers of Parenting Orders being given by some courts. Some reluctance to use the Parenting Order disposal was apparent, with some courts and Yots preferring to avoid compulsory referral except as a last resort.
- By the end of the evaluation period, over 4,000 parents and carers had been referred to the Programme, and of these, nearly 3,000 actually started a Parenting Programme project. 66% of initial referrals were via a voluntary route, and one in six (16%) were referred by Parenting Order. Information was missing for the other 18%. Route of referral appears to have varied more by geography (YOT area, attitudes of courts) than by case attributes, however.
- There was wide variety in the systems for referral and assessment, with no single standardised model in use.

Impact of the Parenting Programme on parents

- Most of the parents who attended the services were white British (96%) and most were female (81%). Half were lone parents (49%). Parents reported very high levels of need – ranging from problems with debt and housing to problems with health and personal relationships. More than eight in ten said they particularly wanted help in managing difficult behaviour by their child.
- Parents showed high attendance rates at the projects: as group, they went to three quarters of all the sessions that were provided for them by the projects, and each parent attended an average of 6.4 sessions.
- By the time parents left their projects, they reported statistically significant positive changes in parenting skills and competencies, including:
 - ◆ Improved communication with their child
 - ◆ Improved supervision and monitoring of young people's activities
 - ◆ Reduction in the frequency of conflict with young people, and better approaches to handling conflict when it arose
 - ◆ Better relationships, including more praise and approval of their child, and less criticism and loss of temper
 - ◆ Feeling better able to influence young people's behaviour
 - ◆ Feeling better able to cope with parenting in general
- Though some parents had mixed expectations at the outset of what the Programme would be like (and parents on Parenting Orders were especially likely to feel negative), 'exit' ratings at the end of the Programme were very positive. Only 6% were negative or indifferent about whether the Programme had been helpful, and over nine in ten would recommend it to other parents in their situation. Parents were especially positive about the qualities and skills of the project staff.
- There was no difference in the level of benefit reported by parents who were referred voluntarily as opposed to being referred via a Parenting Order.

- Project workers were, on the whole, less optimistic than parents themselves about the benefits of the Programme. In spite of this, when asked to provide a retrospective, overall judgement on how much each parent they had worked with had benefited from the service, staff reported that nearly half (49%) of the parents they worked with had benefited substantially, and that only one in eight (12%) of parents had derived no benefit at all.

Impact on young people

- Most of the young people who had been the cause of their parent's referral to the Parenting Programme were male (77%). Ten percent were aged under twelve, and 50% were aged between twelve and fourteen. Most of the young people were also taking part in interventions (or 'change programmes') provided by Yots.
- The young people were a very high need, difficult group. Three quarters (72%) had behavioural and emotional difficulties that would probably be rated as 'abnormal' by a clinician.
- They were also prolific offenders: in the sub-sample for whom we explored official reconviction rates before and after the Programme, 95% had committed an offence in the year before their parents took part in the Parenting Programme, and 89% had been convicted of an offence. Each young person had an average of 4.4 recorded offences in the same period.
- There was some mild (but mostly statistically non-significant) evidence of positive change for young people in various aspects of their relationship with their parent during the time their parent participated in the Programme. For example, young people reported perceptions of slightly improved:
 - ◆ Communication and mutual understanding with parents
 - ◆ Supervision and monitoring by parents
 - ◆ Reduction in the frequency of conflict with parents
 - ◆ Relationships with parents, including more praise from their parent, and less criticism and loss of temper
- And, in the year after their parents left the Parenting Programme, it was also the case that reconviction rates of young people had reduced to 61.5% (a reduction of nearly one third¹), offending² had dropped to 56%, and the average number of offences per young person had dropped to 2.1 (a 50% reduction).
- These are encouraging results. However, though the Parenting Programme may have been a contributor to these positive changes, it is unlikely that the Programme alone was responsible for them, because parenting projects aimed their work at parents, not young people. Also, the projects were of relatively short duration and came at a comparatively late stage in young people's lives, when problems were already quite established. Parenting Programmes are unlikely to offer a 'quick fix' for entrenched antisocial behaviour by young people.
- Still, there were hopeful signs that the projects might have a preventive effect, as many parents and staff commented that the parenting of younger siblings might also change as a result of things parents had learned. At the very least, the Parenting Programme might have helped to 'apply the brakes' on a sharp downward course for young people.

Key messages for practice and policy

A number of key learning points emerged from an analysis of the process of setting up and delivering the projects.

¹ 'Unadjusted' figure, which could include 'delayed' convictions for offences committed more than a year ago.

² Not all offending - includes only offences that subsequently resulted in conviction.

Interagency working

- Achieving a good fit between two previously distinct areas of service provision (criminal justice and family support) took time in some areas. Differences in ethos between sectors and agencies emerged as a barrier to smooth service development in some cases, and needed to be acknowledged and worked through at the highest level to achieve genuine 'shared ownership'. Pro-active steering groups that met regularly were vital to this process. It was also important that individuals with key set up, management or frontline responsibilities felt committed to the partnership's overall mission, in particular, in terms of the siting of parenting support services within the framework of the youth justice system.
- Large partnerships with many members worked best with strong strategic oversight, and services often seemed to develop faster and achieve sustainability quicker when not split between sites and/or managers. Physical location of the service within the YOT itself may have facilitated an easier 'mesh' between youth justice system needs and expectations, and other agencies' cultures.
- Some partner agencies had pre-existing resource difficulties. This sometimes resulted in an inability to 'pull their weight' in terms of the partnership, and could jeopardise the development of the project overall if critical elements of support were withdrawn or did not materialise.
- Some projects did not specify and document goals and concrete (measurable) objectives clearly at the outset, making steering, management and response to issues arising more difficult.
- However, by the end of the evaluation, most projects were established and many were actively thriving. Some have become important resources for the local community. Many have developed good practice models for working across the statutory-voluntary divide.

Human resources and staffing

- Many projects found it hard to recruit and retain sufficiently skilled and experienced staff to do direct work with parents of troubled and troublesome adolescents. There is increasing demand for staff to work in the parenting support field, and a national strategy to address the current shortage may be required.
- Designated parenting workers had most success in driving forward a project when they were freed up from other responsibilities (e.g within the wider YOT), and when they were strongly supported by YOT managers.
- Apart from training in direct work with parents, evaluators noted that staff might also benefit from training in IT and data management to improve record-keeping and monitoring, which was poor in some projects. Other areas that staff themselves highlighted as areas for further training included child protection, family violence and substance misuse, to improve their skills and confidence in risk assessment and management. Staff also noted that they needed strong advocacy skills, as they often got drawn in to helping families resolve problems with other agencies.

Reaching and engaging parents

- In order to ensure maximum awareness of the service amongst referring agencies, and hence maximum numbers of referrals, projects needed to be very proactive in advertising (and regularly re-advertising) their existence. Some successful strategies included parenting staff talking directly with court and YOT staff, leafleting other agencies, and getting the project featured in local newspapers.
- Clear and standardised referral criteria and assessment procedures were important for ensuring that parents referred to the project were suitable and able to benefit. It was also important that all who dealt directly with parents were able to clearly explain the service on offer, and clarify the project's expectations of parents - especially when parents were referred by Parenting Order. A home visit prior to starting

work with a parent was felt to be a vital tool in helping to dispel hostility and anxiety on the part of parents.

- There was some evidence that voluntarily referred parents attended less frequently than those on Orders. These parents may need pro-active and persistent follow-up contact to encourage them to commit to regular attendance.
- The procedures for breaching non-compliant parents on Orders were reported to be in need of some re-thinking. They were described as over-lengthy, and difficult for projects to track once handed over to the police. Some Yots felt that when penalties were finally handed down, these were sometimes disproportionately light and undermined the 'seriousness' of the Parenting Order as a disposal.

Parents' learning styles, and practical and logistical issues

- Because of the wide range of needs that parents presented, ideally projects needed to be able to provide a flexible 'menu' of support. This flexibility needed to stretch to the mode of delivery (e.g. whether group work or one-to-one work), as well as the medium of delivery (e.g. written materials vs interactive styles of learning) and the content of the support (topics covered). Some parents with very high needs were not suited to group work but urgently needed one-to-one support, and some parents wanted more information about some topics than the courses were able to cover (e.g. substance misuse, tackling non-school attendance). Some had literacy problems or did not speak English well, and therefore could not use written materials. Cultural diversity and sex differences also needed to be accommodated. In general, parents' preferred learning styles included:
 - ♦ Avoiding formal, classroom-style delivery;
 - ♦ Avoiding over-reliance on written materials;
 - ♦ Using interactive methods e.g. video-clips, brainstorming, role playing, and informal discussion and debate
- Parents reported that messages should be as concrete and practical as possible. Parents found 'tips to take home and try' especially helpful.
- Parenting services should be delivered in places that are easy to get to (or else transport is provided), have convenient opening times, and where necessary childcare is provided. Rural services faced particular challenges in maintaining high attendance, and some had to move away from group work because of this.
- There was general feeling that an eight-week course (the typical length of an intervention under the Parenting Programme) was too short. Many parents wanted more than this, but few projects had the resources to establish follow-up services. Some projects facilitated peer-led follow-on support groups, but in general, some sustained professional involvement was required to ensure the continuation of these over time.

Monitoring and evaluation

- Evaluation and monitoring of projects is vital, but it may be pragmatic to distinguish between process and outcome aspects of evaluation. It should be recognised that not all 'infant' projects can support the burden of participating in onerous outcome evaluations. Process information, however, should be collected routinely and from the outset.
- However, once services have bedded down and developed a consistent model of delivery, systems for monitoring and evaluation should be developed and implemented, wherever possible. These should include consistent and systematic gathering, analysis and feedback of throughput, output and outcome data, with guidance from a qualified researcher.

Overall conclusions

The successful establishment of many thriving parent support projects within the context of the youth justice system was a major achievement of the Programme. There is now a growing body of expertise in this field and the time is ripe to draw this together, consolidate the learning, and document models of successful practice.

Although short-term programmes aimed at parents may be thought unlikely to have much immediate impact on young people's behaviour, there were some encouraging signs for young people associated with the Parenting Programme. These included mild improvements in young people's perceptions of the parent-child relationship, and drops in official reconviction rates. There were also some reasons to think the Programme might have a 'preventive' effect for later generations of children.

The Parenting Programme was clearly successful in having an impact on parents, according to both parents and staff. In the short term at least, participation in the Parenting Programme was associated with positive improvements in parenting skills and parent-child relationships, and with high satisfaction levels. Parents referred by Order and those attending voluntarily showed similar levels of benefit. Further research would, however, be needed to see if the benefits persisted in the longer term. Moreover, even though many parents felt 'reprimanded' when referred to a parenting support project – especially if they had also received a Parenting Order – the supportive (rather than punitive) reality of the projects was successful at dissolving initial reservations.

There does seem to be a place, in both policy and practice terms, for Parenting Orders. These may be a powerful way of reaching some parents who might otherwise never manage to set foot over the threshold of a parenting support service. However, a system which privileged a genuinely voluntary route, but with Parenting Orders held in reserve where voluntary engagement had failed might prove more acceptable to family support providers, opinion formers and parents themselves. This would help to reduce the initial barriers to engagement with a service arising out of parents' distress at receiving a Court Order, and help minimise the number of parents being drawn into the criminal justice system.

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