

Supporting families

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Every Child Matters
Change For Children

Supporting families is at the heart of the Children Acts 1989 and 2004, and is a key aspect of the *Every Child Matters Change for Children* agenda. However, research and inspections have consistently shown that children and parents are often unable to access support services until their difficulties reach crisis point.

There is a strong emphasis in current government policy on early prevention of problems and the provision of multi-agency support for children and families, for example through Sure Start, children's centres and an extended role for schools. Most of the activity has focused on younger children, perhaps on the assumption that initiatives aimed at younger children will prevent problems later in children's lives, although there is little robust evidence to date that this is the case. Relatively few family support initiatives target adolescents, and work with this group is afforded only low priority by social work teams despite the fact that the needs of young people seem to have increased. Over the past 50 years or so there has been a rise in the proportion of young people identified as having 'psychosocial disorders', including conduct disorders, depression, eating disorders, suicidal behaviour and drug or alcohol problems. The age group 7 to 11 has also missed out on support services although this is being addressed to some extent by programmes such as The Children's Fund and On Track, and Connexions for older children.

WHAT IS FAMILY SUPPORT?

Despite the current emphasis on the importance of family support, it is often not clear what the term actually means and which services it covers. A helpful framework for thinking about different types of support is outlined by Hardiker and colleagues, who identify a 'base' level of universal services (health, education, leisure and so on) needed by all families, followed by four levels at which additional support can be offered. The first level addresses vulnerable groups or communities, the second those families at early risk of problems, the third offers support to those experiencing severe stress or difficulties which may lead their children to be accommodated, and the final level covers rehabilitative services to support children who have already entered the care system.

In this briefing paper, we focus on support for vulnerable children within their families (levels 1 to 3), and cover research evidence about support services for families with teenagers as well as younger children. Much of this evidence is relevant to the needs of specific groups that have been addressed in earlier briefing papers in this series, such as disabled children (Briefing Paper 6) and young offenders (Briefing Paper 8).

THE NATURE OF THE RESEARCH EVIDENCE

There is an extensive research literature on family support services, especially for younger children, but most of it is descriptive rather than assessing effectiveness. The few UK studies that have attempted to assess quantifiable outcomes for children using standardized measures have generally been unable to find clear evidence to demonstrate the effectiveness of such services, despite the fact that parents often perceive them as supportive and feel that they have been helped. This may reflect the difficulty of evaluating family support services as much as the failings of the services themselves.

Few studies have focused on family support services for teenagers. There has been just a handful of small descriptive studies in the UK on the work of specialist community support teams plus one quasi-experimental study that compared specialist support services to mainstream social work services. However, research on teenagers in and out of the care system in the UK and on interventions with young people with anti-social behaviour in the USA also provides useful evidence. To identify relevant research, the authors reviewed a wide range of journals, books and abstracts for studies of family support and followed up references cited by these studies. They also undertook some searches of electronic databases (e.g. Web of Science, BIDS, ChildData Abstracts and Psychlit) using various combinations of search terms, for example family support+effectiveness/evaluation, and family preservation+adolescen*.

SERVICES TO SUPPORT YOUNG CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES

Although not all families who need additional support services are poor, many do live in very disadvantaged circumstances. Family support services thus need to be provided within the context of broader measures to address poverty. The balance of evidence from research on the most common types of support for younger children and their families suggests that:

- High quality **early education and day care** services enhance children's development, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds.
- **Parenting programmes**, especially those that are group-based and help parents to develop effective praise and reinforcement techniques, help to improve children's behaviour.
- **Befriending and support** provided by trained home visitors can improve mothers' well-being and have positive effects on mother-child interaction.
- There is much anecdotal evidence for the effectiveness of **family centres** but little hard evidence of their ability to improve outcomes for families. However, they are popular with parents and appear able to deliver support services in a non-stigmatising way. They can also have an important signposting function, directing families to other sources of support.
- **Short breaks** are very important to parents and carers under pressure, but supply is insufficient to meet demand. They may help to prevent children needing to be accommodated on a longer term basis, although this has yet to be conclusively demonstrated.

A review of school-based interventions in the UK to enhance children's well-being suggests that schools can play a valuable role in providing a base for multi-agency support for children and families within local

communities. The evidence, like that for family centres, is 'promising' rather than robust, since most evaluations have been small-scale, lack comparison groups and have weak outcome measures. But it appears that the school base of such projects can enable them to meet the needs of troubled and vulnerable children and families in a non-stigmatising environment. These interventions work with parents to strengthen their aspirations for their children and their own sense of worth, and contribute to the ethos of schools as supportive and caring environments. Evaluation of the On Track initiative to develop preventive services for children aged 4 to 12 highlighted the pivotal role of the school, with 95% of On Track services based in or managed by schools, although this was not without problems.

It is possible to identify, from the key studies and overviews of evidence in this area, some common characteristics that underpin effective family support services. These include:

- intervening early before problems become entrenched
- targeted support within a framework of universal services
- a clear rationale for how the service will help
- building on strengths as well as tackling weaknesses
- an integrated, whole-family approach that looks at the range of services a family might need rather than addressing one problem or difficulty in isolation.

These fit well with the government policy emphasis expressed in Every Child Matters.

SERVICES TO SUPPORT ADOLESCENTS

The most frequent reasons for referral of older children are the troublesome behaviour of the young people and conflicts between them and their parents, although concerns about behaviour at school and in the community, violence to parents and others, truancy, running away, involvement with anti-social peer groups and offending are also common. Emotional problems and self-harm may also be of concern, as well as abuse and neglect. These troubled and troublesome young people usually have multiple difficulties, and for a substantial minority these difficulties may be long term.

The research evidence suggests that short-term, task-centred support services offered to families with older children and adolescents may be effective in reducing both the number and severity of reported difficulties and in improving both child and family functioning. However, one English study found, as did many studies of intensive family preservation services (IFPS) in the USA, that short-term specialist services to support children and families were no more likely to produce positive outcomes of this kind than mainstream services.

Good or bad outcomes for young people arise from the interaction of multiple risk and protective factors in different domains of their lives. When problems occur it is important to intervene not only with the individual child and parent but in the child's peer relationships, the school and the neighbourhood. Research on social work support in the UK and on multi-systemic therapy in the USA suggests that multi-faceted interventions which intervene in different areas of young people's lives are likely to be particularly helpful.

Parents of teenagers may lack confidence in their parenting skills. If they feel they have little control over their children they may give up and let them go their own way. Many parents of teenagers referred to social services suffer from depression or report a high degree of conflict with their partners, and a substantial minority may be socially isolated. For young people receiving family support services, behaviour within the home is more likely to show improvement than behaviour outside it. Work by social services needs to be co-ordinated with that of other agencies tackling behaviour outside the home (at school and in the community).

In work with teenagers, the prevention of placement is often the principal focus of the work, with accommodation used only as a last resort. However, an obsession with avoiding placement at all costs may lead, on occasions, to a failure to recognise that for some young people, a short or respite placement may be the best way of meeting their needs.

REACHING AND ENGAGING ALL FAMILIES

Family support services are unevenly distributed across the UK. They are also less used by certain groups, such as minority ethnic families and fathers. Other families may be particularly hard to engage in family support work, including asylum seekers, travelling families and parents who have mental health problems or misuse drugs. The evidence on effective strategies for involving 'hard-to-reach' groups suggests, not surprisingly, that family support services work best when the child, young person and parents want to be involved and want the intervention to work, highlighting the importance of reaching out to families and taking time to understand their perspective on their needs. Parents will use services they find acceptable (especially practical help) and avoid those they do not. Vulnerable families are most likely to maintain attendance if the intervention allows them to discuss life concerns (job stress, health problems, personal worries) as well as child management difficulties, suggesting the need for an approach that is holistic and uses outreach to understand local issues and circumstances.

Locating family support services in community settings used by all families, such as schools and doctors' surgeries, can be successful, although there is as yet little hard evidence comparing delivery in different settings. One small-scale study in Scotland which compared two family centres and two New Community Schools (offering extended services) found that parents using the family centres were more satisfied with services and more likely to report positive impacts such as being helped into employment or training.

How support services are provided, especially the relationship between provider and user, may be as important as the nature of the service itself. An empowerment, strengths-based approach has been shown to be the most effective in studies of intensive family preservation services in the US, and families need to feel respected and not stigmatised by the provision of services. The key message from one large-scale survey of parenting in poor environments was that parents are unwilling to accept support if it makes them feel they are no longer in control.

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Despite the limited number of sound outcomes-based studies, there are many consistent messages in the research on family support for managers and front-line practitioners.

MESSAGES FOR MANAGERS

- A range of services is needed to support families with different levels of need, with clear referral routes between them. Less intensive services offering advice and support at an early stage, before problems become severe, are not an optional extra but need to be part of a strategic approach. Mapping existing services provided by all agencies, using a framework such as the one outlined by Hardiker or the four-tier framework developed by the Health Advisory Service for child and adolescent mental health services can help to identify gaps in provision.
- Both early preventive services and follow-up services should be multi-faceted and mobilise a range of services from a variety of agencies to support children, young people and their families.
- Both parents and children value continuity in their relationships with the people and services that support them. This relationship in itself can be a significant source of support, highlighting the importance of providing good support to staff in order to reduce turnover and vacancy rates, and of ensuring that staff have access to appropriate training.
- Although short-term interventions may help to defuse tension and resolve crises, for families with multiple, long-term problems, it may be unreasonable to expect short-term interventions to bring lasting change. If unnecessary placement is to be avoided, some families are likely to need longer-term support.
- Services for adolescents may need to be ring-fenced, since the competing demands of other work often allow social workers few opportunities to focus on providing family support services to this group. In any case, teenagers have specific needs, so work with them may benefit from specialization - provided this does not lead to the marginalisation of family support work with teenagers within agencies.

MESSAGES FOR FRONT-LINE STAFF

- The research emphasizes the importance of asking families what kind of support they want. Good assessment of needs is vital, and the views of parents and children about what would help should be the starting point.
- A focus on children's and parents' strengths is needed as well as addressing their difficulties, and services should be presented in as non-stigmatising a way as possible. A recurrent message from research is the importance to parents of feeling in control, rather than 'taken over' by professionals.

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- Young people likewise need skilful direct work to engage them and obtain their active involvement in decisions, as otherwise they are likely to vote with their feet. Structured methods such as anger management may be helpful with teenagers, but the time-honoured social work skill of building a working relationship with young people is essential.
- Interventions that strengthen protective factors in the lives of children, young people and their parents are likely to be of particular benefit. For children and young people, factors that promote resilience include encouraging active involvement in school life and the development of a strong relationship with at least one supportive adult. For carers, especially mothers, strengthening social networks or interventions to improve couple relationships can improve outcomes for children.
- The best results are likely to be achieved by a multi-faceted approach that addresses difficulties in different domains – the child, the family, the school, the local community. In work with teenagers, for example, young people might be helped to work on their behaviour; parents might be helped to develop more effective parenting strategies and social support networks; and mediation may help both to develop alternative methods of communication and conflict resolution. Equally, schools might be engaged in offering appropriate support and attempts might be made to distance young people from anti-social peer groups.
- This kind of integrated approach requires finding out what support and services are available in the community and from other agencies, and helping families to use them. Good working links with other agencies are essential. Cross-agency initiatives such as Sure Start and Children's Fund should foster this kind of approach.
- Family support services need to be flexible. Some families need relatively time-limited and task-centred support, but others will need longer-term input. It is helpful if they can decide to opt out and then re-access a service again later should it be needed. Knowing they can do this is itself seen by parents as a form of support.
- The view that out-of-home placement should be avoided at all costs may not always be in the best interests of young people. A focus on assessing and meeting needs is likely to be more helpful than an approach that centres exclusively on placement prevention.
- Community supports are probably least used by those who may need them most. This means that parents may need encouragement and help to join community groups or engage in services, such as being accompanied on their first visit to a family centre or toddler group. Some adolescent support teams have found the employment of

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sessional staff to be a useful way of offering a befriending service, with the further advantage that such staff can help to get young people involved in local leisure activities and more pro-social peer groups.

- It is important to find ways of involving and supporting fathers as well as mothers. Experience from Sure Start local programmes and other sources suggests that effective approaches include developing a clear strategy for involving fathers, provision of specific services and activities, and the presence of a dedicated staff member (often a 'dads' worker) to encourage father involvement.
- The importance of good listening skills should not be underestimated. Research has shown that what parents and children in need of support often appreciate the most is someone who has time to sit down, listen, treat them with respect and help them to find solutions to their own problems.
- Keeping good records of the support services offered to and used by families, and outcomes for children, is vital. One of the reasons we know so little about the effectiveness of different types of family support service is lack of information about who is offered what, for how long and with what result. The Integrated Children's System that has been developed for child and family services in England and Wales should help front-line workers to record such information in a more structured and consistent manner.

KEY TEXTS

RESEARCH

Biehal N (forthcoming 2005) *Working with Adolescents: Supporting families, preventing breakdown*. London: BAAF

Buchanan A (2002) 'Family support' in McNeish et al (eds) *What Works for Children?* Buckingham: Open University Press

Cleaver H (1996) *Focus on Teenagers: Research into practice*. London: HMSO

Gardner R (2002) *Supporting Families: Child protection in the community*. Chichester: Wiley

Henricson C, Katz I, Mesie J, Sandison M and Tunstill J (2000) *National Mapping of Family Services in England and Wales: A consultation document*. London: National Family and Parenting Institute. A summary can be found on the NFPI website (see Resources)

McKeown K (2000) *A Guide to What Works in Family Support Services for Vulnerable Families*. Dublin: Department of Health. Prepared for the Irish government, can be downloaded from www.doh.ie/publications

Moran P, Gbate D and van der Merwe A (2004) *What Works in Parenting Support? A review of the international evidence*. DfES Research Report 574. London: DfES

Quinton D (2004) *Supporting Parents: Messages from research*. London: Jessica Kingsley

Statham J (2000) *Outcomes and Effectiveness of Family Support Services: A research review*. London: Institute of Education

Tunstill J and Aldgate J (2000) *Services for Children in Need: From policy to practice*. London: The Stationery Office

USEFUL WEB RESOURCES (all on this page checked July 2005)

Sure Start (www.surestart.gov.uk)

National Family and Parenting Institute (www.nfpi.org.uk)

Parenting Education Support Forum (www.parenting-forum.org.uk)

One Plus One (www.oneplusone.org.uk). Source of information and resources on marriage and relationship support.

Children's Fund (www.ne-cf.org)

National Evaluation of Sure Start (www.ness.bbk.ac.uk). Includes local evaluation reports.

Every Child Matters (www.everychildmatters.gov.uk)

Trust for the Study of Adolescence (www.tsa.uk.com)

Department for Education and Skills (www.dfes.gov.uk/research). Click on 'Publications' for 4-page Research Briefs summarizing findings from a wide range of research impacting on children and young people.

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This Briefing has been independently and anonymously reviewed by an academic and a practitioner with special interest in services in child and adolescent mental health problems. For a fully referenced version, visit the **research in practice** website: www.rip.org.uk/publications/researchbriefings.asp

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