

HOW

ACTION FOR CHILDREN

WORKS

What role does parenting style play in supporting child development?

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Parents matter

In recent years, the power of the environment to transform the course of life for children and young people has received unprecedented attention. As much as we are shaped by our genetic blueprint, the environment in which we live can influence whether we will be able to achieve our potential. This is especially relevant in the early years, when the brain and body are still susceptible to external influences;

environmental experiences can leave a lasting signature on a child's future. Up until compulsory school age (five years), parents largely 'run the show' in children's lives. If they are not well equipped to do so, children may miss out with long term consequences. A society which values and invests in its people, should recognise the benefits of assisting parents to support their children to realise their potential.

Parenting style and children's outcomes

Parenting style refers to the practices parents use to bring up their children. A parenting style that is nurturing, sensitive, and highly involved in children's education is related to positive developmental outcomes, including good behaviour and academic success. Infants who develop a strong attachment to their parents because of warm and consistent care, are more likely to develop feelings of empathy and trust and to have a positive sense about themselves and others.¹ We also know that children whose parents have high aspirations about their education and who engage in activities which promote the home learning environment are more likely to do well academically. The Effective Provision of Preschool Education (EPPE) project, a landmark UK-based longitudinal study of the effectiveness of pre-school provision, showed that parental involvement in activities such as teaching songs, reading, teaching the alphabet, playing with letters and numbers, and drawing and painting, is highly predictive of children's cognitive attainment and socioemotional adjustment.² In contrast, a poor parenting style, typically characterised by low levels of parental supervision and involvement, and punitive

and inconsistent discipline often leads to poor child outcomes.³ Findings from the Adverse Childhood Experiences study show that exposure to parental verbal abuse at 5-6 years is the most important predictor of suicidal ideation in men.⁴ Additionally, New Zealand-based studies on the trajectories of childhood antisocial behaviour have provided consistent evidence that children exposed to poor parenting are at greater risk of developing conduct problems.⁵ 'Conduct problems' refer to a group of emotional and behavioural difficulties in children and young people characterised by a repetitive and persistent pattern of antisocial, aggressive or defiant behaviour and violation of age-appropriate rules.⁶ Children with conduct problems often have difficulty in behaving in a socially acceptable manner, in maintaining good friendships, and in getting along with significant adults, such as parents and teachers. As adults, they often have a difficult life characterised by mental health issues, poor interpersonal relationships, financial hardship and, potentially, drug abuse and problems with the law.⁷

Impact of poverty on parenting style

In 2010, the Government commissioned Frank Field MP to conduct an independent review on poverty and life chances.⁸ The review revealed that poor parenting exists across the income distribution, but children growing up in social disadvantage are more vulnerable and more likely to be exposed to poor parenting. Financial hardship can significantly compromise the quality of caregiving and parenting. Research shows that economic pressures lead to poor parental psychological wellbeing, which in

turn leads to a significant reduction in parenting capacity.⁹ Parents who are on low income or in debt are often stressed about money, hold insecure jobs and work unsocial hours.¹⁰ These pressures can lead to depression which can influence their parenting skills and capacity to spend quality time with their children. Children from low income families often miss out on activities and experiences that are important for development and learning.¹¹

Child poverty vs poor parenting style: what needs to be tackled first?

In line with a contemporary view of human development, inspired by the ecological systems theory,¹² the developing child is viewed as the product of interactions amongst individual and contextual factors operating at multiple levels. Poor quality parenting is just one of several complex factors influencing poor child outcomes. Family poverty is another factor with a profound and lasting effect on children's life chances. However, income alone is not enough to explain poor child outcomes. The EPPE study concluded that 'what parents do is more important than who they are.' The findings suggest that the quality of a child's relationships and learning experiences in the family has more influence on future academic achievement and social development than parental occupation, education or income.¹³ Additionally, a study on ethnic minority populations, commissioned by the Department for Education (DfE), showed that despite economic pressures, the academic performance of ethnic minority pupils is good relative to the performance of White British pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds. A family culture of high academic aspirations explains the resiliency of some ethnic minority children to the effects of social deprivation.



Parent training programmes as an effective evidence-based method to improve parenting skills

Because parenting is so important in bringing up happy and healthy children, there has been a growing interest in the development of parent training intervention (PTI) programmes. These programmes aim to train parents to enhance their parenting skills with a view to a) improving the parent-child relationship and/or b) increasing parental involvement in the child's education as a means of preventing poor child outcomes.

The results of the effectiveness of parental involvement programmes have been mixed¹⁴ so the focus here is on programmes aimed at improving the parent-child relationship. PTI programmes aim to support child development by bringing about changes in parenting skills, rather than through direct work with the child. As well as reversing negative styles of parenting, PTI programmes also aim to increase the use of positive strategies, such as appropriate and timely praise and rewards and sensitive attention to the child's prosocial activities.

PTI programmes usually involve weekly sessions for a small group of six to 12 parents. Sessions last up to two hours and run for an eight to twenty-four-week period. There is considerable evidence to show that improvement in parenting skills can lead to positive child outcomes and better parental mental health, regardless of social disadvantage and poverty. For instance, a meta-analysis by Cochrane Collaboration showed that behavioural and cognitive-behavioural group-based parenting interventions for children between three to 12 years old are effective in reducing child conduct problems and in improving parental mental health and parenting skills in the short term (three months post intervention).¹⁵ A previous US study also found that the positive effects of parent training persisted for up to 12 years.¹⁶ Findings from a large UK-based randomised controlled trial showed that the effects of good quality evidence-based programmes on parenting skills and child behaviour were still evident two years after the intervention.¹⁷ The quality of the evidence for the effectiveness of cognitive-behavioural parent training for infants and toddlers is not as strong as it is for older children. However, the results of another meta-analysis by Cochrane Collaboration are promising vis-a-vis the potential of cognitive-behavioural parent training to improve behaviour and emotional adjustment in young children (0-5 years).¹⁸ There is also evidence to show that parenting interventions drawing on attachment theory improve parenting and infant attachment security.¹⁹



A glance at the policy context of parenting support

Over the last twenty years, we have witnessed a strong focus on early intervention and parenting support in the form of parenting programmes. The recognition of the importance of good parenting and the success of PTI programmes in improving parenting and children's outcomes led the 1997-2010 Labour and subsequent Conservative/ Liberal Democrat coalition governments to make the provision of PTI programmes the focus of their parenting support policies.²⁰

Despite sharing the same conviction about the importance of good parenting and common policy aims, the two governments adopted different approaches to the delivery of parent training programmes.²¹ Under the Labour administration, parenting support was universal but targeted 'hard-to-reach' and disadvantaged families.²² As the post-recession period imposed a strong focus on public spending cuts, a market approach to programme delivery was trialled under the Coalition Government, as part of the CANparent initiative. This aimed at a) stimulating the market for parenting classes in England with a view to limiting costs b) promoting a universal approach to parenting by making parenting programmes open and available to all parents and carers with children aged 0-5 years.²³ Instead of providing programmes targeted at families 'at-risk', a universal offer was made to all parents who wished to attend a programme in the form of vouchers for approved parenting classes.

The idea of making parenting classes open to all parents and 'normalising' them while, at the same time, reducing costs sounds like the right way

forward. The evaluation of the CANparent initiative shows that it was very positive for the families who took up the programmes, but not everyone chose to do so. Levels of interest were low with only 10% of eligible parents reporting that they were very likely to sign-up to a parenting class.²⁴ Additionally, the evaluation findings suggest that the initiative may not have been very successful in reaching the most vulnerable families. The parents on CANparent programmes had lower overall levels of need compared to parents on targeted initiatives.²⁵ We know that it is typically the vulnerable families who, despite benefiting the most from parenting programmes, do not normally receive the support they need.²⁶

Engaging parents in parenting programmes is a complex process; many parents, often those living in social disadvantage, don't know what support is available or have little interest in joining a parenting group.²⁷ Typically, vulnerable families require a targeted package of support which includes raising awareness, outreach work, home visits, and links with trusted professionals who can explain the process and the benefits of attendance.²⁸ Socioeconomic disadvantage can make implementation harder;²⁹ economic hardship and its consequences can prevent parents from implementing the skills they developed during the training.

There would be more long-term benefits of parenting programmes if initiatives for vulnerable families included booster-sessions follow-ups.³¹ To facilitate this type of provision, a targeted approach to parenting support is required.

Future directions

Early years parenting that is nurturing, sensitive and caring is key to raising happy and healthy children. Parenting programmes are one of the most effective ways to help parents build a good relationship with their children and support their outcomes. A universal approach where parenting programmes are widely available, building on the antenatal class model, is important to help parents with child upbringing. However, universal services alone cannot support the outcomes of children who live in social disadvantage.³² For policies to reach children across society, public investment in targeted parenting initiatives is needed. In a climate of fiscal austerity, access to parenting support services is even more crucial for vulnerable families.³⁴ It is time for parenting policies to focus on supporting the most vulnerable children and families by providing high-quality targeted support, including timely access to parenting programmes.

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