

Parenting programmes: some unintended consequences

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This paper describes a number of themes that emerged from a qualitative research study into the effects of a parenting programme on family life (Mockford, 2000). Existing research points to many valuable outcomes of parenting programmes including improved maternal psychosocial health (Barlow and Coren, 2000), improved relationships (Grimshaw and McGuire, 1998; Smith, 1997) and reduced child behaviour problems (Barlow, 1999; Patterson *et al.*, 1993; 2002b). There has, however, been little qualitative work undertaken with parents who have attended a parenting programme. The findings from this study show that in addition to many positive consequences, there were a number of unintended consequences of attending a parenting programme. In particular, women spoke of the difficulties that they faced at home when trying to apply the techniques that they had learned on the parenting programme. These difficulties included gaining the support of partners in implementing the techniques learned, changing their established habits and those of their partners, finding the time to parent together, and incorporating the techniques into their already busy lives. These findings also suggest that a change in one parent's approach to parenting may result in increased discrepancies in parenting techniques between the parent who attended the programme and the parent who did not, and that this may result in parental conflict.

Key words: fathers; parenting programmes; qualitative study

Introduction

Much research has concentrated on the effect that poor parenting can have on the physical and emotional health of children. There is evidence to show that as many as 12% of children are affected by behaviour problems, and that they are now the most prevalent cause of disability amongst children (Meltzer *et al.*, 2000). In addition, over the past few decades, there have been a number of important structural changes to the family. In particular, marriage is at its lowest annually recorded rate for the twentieth century, and there has been a considerable decline in the number of 'traditional' households, i.e., a couple with dependent children, from 31% in 1979 to just 23% in 1998, of house-

holds and an increase in lone parent headed households with dependant children to 7% from 4% in 1979 (Office for National Statistics, 2000). Furthermore, while two-parent households are still the most prevalent, there have been a number of significant changes within such households, in particular as regards the employment of women. Level of income has become central to achieving a satisfactory standard of living and many women now combine childcare activities with employment outside the home. A survey of the National Child Development Study of married couples showed that as many as 59% of mothers and 53% of fathers are living in dual earner households, although mothers are twice as likely to be in part-time work (Ferri and Smith, 1996). Parents in dual earner households commonly report that childcare is shared equally between parents although the main share of household and childcare responsibilities still fall to the woman, and men report feeling under pressure to both earn the major part of the

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income, and share in the care of their children (Lewis, 2000). One of the consequences of the changes to maternal employment patterns is that larger numbers of children are now spending a greater proportion of their time, from an earlier age, in a range of forms of childcare provision (Hennessy *et al.*, 1992).

While there is currently very little evidence concerning the impact of these changes to the family as regards parenting, it seems likely that the overall effect has been to make the task of parenting more difficult.

Both researchers and clinicians have pointed to the need for early interventions to avoid or lessen the negative effects of poor parenting practices (Barlow, 1999; Barlow and Coren, 2000; Patterson *et al.*, 1993), and the government has recently published a number of documents highlighting the need for interventions to support both parents and families, e.g., *Supporting families* (Department of Health, 1998); *Protecting children, supporting parents* (Department of Health, 2000); *Making a difference for children and families: sure start* (Department for Education and Employment, 1999). The green paper (*Supporting families*) (Department of Health, 1998) suggests that support should be given to parents before small problems with their children grow into major difficulties, and there is a wealth of evidence supporting the use of early interventions with families (e.g. Marshall and Watt, 1999). Furthermore, recent evidence indicating an increased demand for parenting programmes on the part of parents themselves, suggests that parents may be feeling the need for more information about parenting (Patterson *et al.* 2002b; Smith, 1997).

Much of the research that has been undertaken to date on parenting programmes has highlighted the benefits of such interventions. However, it has also been noted that:

our ignorance regarding what happens when parent's attitudes and practices are challenged is profound, particularly with regard to the consequences when the intervention raises cultural, family or personal lifestyle issues. (Webster-Stratton, 1996: 12)

The aim of this research was to look at the effect of a parenting programme on everyday family lives (Mockford, 2000). This paper focuses in particular on one part of the findings – the effects that a

parenting programme may have on both parents when only one parent, mostly the mother, attends the programme.

Intervention

The intervention comprised a group-based parenting programme based on the Webster-Stratton Parent and Child Series. This programme is aimed at parents of children aged 3–12 years and has been extensively evaluated (e.g., Webster-Stratton, 1989). It has been used successfully in both clinical and nonclinical settings, and is based on videotape modelling and group discussions. It is aimed at a wide audience, and is inclusive of parents with a wide range of educational levels (Webster-Stratton, 1997).

Six parenting groups were run comprising a maximum of 10 parents in each group. The groups met for a 2-hour period each week over the course of 10 weeks. Four groups were held in a local general practice surgery and two groups were held in a local community centre due to lack of available rooms at the surgery. Two health care professionals trained in the delivery of the programme (i.e. health visitors and nursery nurses) facilitated each group. A range of techniques were used to deliver the programme including role play, video vignettes and group discussion on a range of topics such as play, praise, rewards, limit-setting and positive methods of discipline, i.e. time-out. The parents undertook weekly homework exercises that involved some reading and implementation of the techniques at home with an index child. All parents maintained a written record of their home practice.

Method

A qualitative study was carried out with a sample of parents who had participated in a randomized controlled trial (RCT) of the effectiveness of a group-based parenting programme in a primary care setting. 116 parents were recruited to the RCT following a survey of parents of children aged between two and eight years of age, registered with one of three urban GP practices. Only parents with a child who met the following criteria were invited to participate in the RCT: the child had behaviour in the upper 50% of the distribution as defined by

a standardized parent-report child behaviour inventory; was between two and eight years of age and was not receiving treatment for behaviour problems; the child had no autistic tendencies. Parents were allocated to the intervention or control arm of the trial by block randomization (Patterson *et al.*, 2002b). Sixty parents were allocated to the intervention arm and 56 parents were allocated to the control arm.

A random group of parents in the intervention arm were invited to take part in an indepth interview about the value of the parenting programme to their family lives. The first 24 parents who completed the intervention were invited by letter to take part in an interview. Reminder letters were sent after two weeks and in total 14 mothers responded positively. The participants were asked to complete a consent form and were interviewed in their homes using a semi-structured schedule of 24 open-ended questions. All of the interviews were audiotaped and each interview lasted approximately one hour. All of the interviews were transcribed verbatim. Interviewees' names and any other identifying features were changed in order to maintain anonymity. Data analysis was undertaken using a thematic approach and the constant comparative method (Glaser and Strauss, 1967).

Results

Thirteen of the women were Caucasian, and one was of mixed race. Twelve of the women who were interviewed were married and living with the father of their children. Two of the participants were single parents.

Fourteen women were interviewed and data saturation was not reached due to the small number of women who were interviewed. These interviews do, however, provide some indication of the possible problems that can be encountered as a result of parents taking part in a parenting programme.

Overall, the findings were very positive and women reported an increase in feelings of confidence, reassurance that their child's behaviour was not unusual and feelings of being more in control of challenging behaviour. Many women stated that they felt less stressed, that they shouted less, and gained more co-operation from their children (Mockford, 2000).

The interview data also indicated, however, that

the mothers experienced a number of 'unintended consequences' as a result of their participation in a parenting programme. In particular, the data provided evidence to suggest that the attendance of only one member (in this case, the mother) of a two-parent family resulted in a number of difficulties in implementing the new techniques including problems in (i) engaging partners; (ii) changing the established habits of their partner; and (iii) finding the time to 'parent' together. Perhaps most importantly, the data indicated that the use of new parenting methods by one parent, i.e., the mother, could result in discrepancies with the parenting practices of the parent who had not attended the programme, i.e., the father, and that this could result in conflict.

Difficulties in 'engaging the partner' and reluctance to attend the programme

Some women would have preferred their partner to have attended the programme with them and spoke of difficulties in passing on information. In particular, women wanted to involve their partners in trying out the techniques at home so that they could provide more consistency for the children. The following respondent stated that while she was pleased to attend the parenting programme, there were difficulties in passing on second-hand information to her partner, who consequently found it hard to empathize with the aims of the programme:

Probably one of the big criticisms of the course, and we said this at the time, was the fact that there were seven women there all sat nicely, waiting to learn how to be better parents, who go home and tell their partners all the wonderful information they'd learnt and their partners will turn round and say 'What? That's a load of rubbish, you don't want to be doing that' and as it was a very American, Americanized theme, um [. . .], it almost pushed my husband to the other extreme, my husband who would have never contemplated smacking his children, after all that I was bringing home he suddenly thought 'Oh I think we'll just smack them!!'

This respondent reported that her partner also played 'devil's advocate' over the parenting programme so that she found it hard to include him despite the fact that she had taken the techniques on board herself:

Trying to get him to do it as well, that was hard at first, the rest I've done on my own really, I've just carried on nicely.

Some of the other respondents also felt quite strongly that partners should be invited to attend the programme. One respondent, Elaine, said:

Um, it crossed my mind whether it would be worth having both parents going to the course, um, [. . .] . . . just for sort of consistency [. . .] cos we went on like the antenatal one together . . .

Another, Kate, was asked during the interview if she would have preferred it if both herself and partner had attended the programme:

Er, that would have been useful yes. Cos I was finding it a little bit difficult um, in the middle of the course for instance, [daughter] was being a complete toad, completely disgusting and a few times [husband] would do time-out and I'd think that's not the way we're doing it, that's not what we do now, I couldn't say that in front of her and I had to say afterwards.

One respondent was caring for a mentally ill relative as well as three sons, one aged five and twins aged three years. This respondent told us that her husband disciplines the children by shouting at them as his father did with him, but that he will use some of the techniques that she has discussed with him from the parenting programme if he's not tired. This participant said that her husband would not attend a parenting programme although she thought that he ought to:

Wendy: . . . I said to my husband, you need to go on one [deep voice] I'm not going uh, uh, uh', you know.

Interviewer: Wouldn't he consider going on one?

Wendy: Noooooo

While mothers wanted their partners to attend a parenting programme with them many, nevertheless, identified problems which might prevent them from doing this, such as other commitments, long working hours and a negative attitude (see 'Finding the time to parent together' for a further discussion of this issue). Only one of the women interviewed wanted to go on her own although she did not give the reasons for this.

Difficulties in changing the established habits of their partners

Many women had modified their parenting style as a result of what they had learnt on the parenting programme. Some felt that they had become more knowledgeable than their partners as a result of attending the programme, and in a number of cases, this had resulted in a marked division in their parenting styles. One woman, Mel, explained:

I mean you see your husband do all the wrong things all the time and I think it just highlights it more, but it's because he doesn't know any different, [. . .] but yeah, I'd say our aims at the end of the day were exactly the same. But it's just that differences had been highlighted since.

Some women spoke of how they had tried to change their approach to parenting but said that their partner hadn't changed at all. Tracy stated:

I just think the men just don't understand, they just, they don't go, they don't seem to want to know, he was like, well I've got my way and that's my way, whereas I'm willing to if I can improve my way, I do have a go, you know, I'll change it and I'll do it, I'll try.

In a number of cases, the division in parenting styles was the cause of conflict between parents. Tracy said that her husband's lack of interest would upset her and cause some tension between them:

I said 'you're using one technique, your method' I said, 'I'm using this one to try and help' I said, 'and you're making it go the other way because you're not helping me' and it used to make it really hard for me because I was doing it really good in the day and then when it came to him having them at night, it all went to pot.

Kate felt that with her newly gained knowledge, she had begun to criticize what her partner was doing:

I could see [. . .] the way my husband was doing it was, he'd be inventing reasons for her to go to time-out whereas I had to think no, we've explained that she gets time-out for such and such, so at the moment I don't think we can use it for anything else, we need to

check the rules first, we can't just throw her in a room and say that's that.

She later went on to add:

I felt there was a little bit of. . . I didn't want to be 'I know best' but I did feel as though I was almost doing that

Some women found themselves acting as gatekeeper to the information they had gained and this seemed to deepen the division in parenting style with their partner. For example, Karen had been trying to involve her husband more with their two children aged six and three years, and found it difficult not to preach to him about how she felt things should be done now that she had attended a parenting programme:

I could always see what he was doing wasn't ideal anyway, it's just trying to sort of gradually change him [. . .] I mean he doesn't spend much time with the kids anyway, I don't really want to say 'why don't you do this?' 'Why don't you try that?' just to let him explore it in the same way, but he's getting . . . he's still very much he's the parent, they're the children . . .

Alison found that her husband learned the techniques through her example: She said: 'as I've been doing it more my husband sort of caught on'. Some of the fathers, however, seemed to be more disciplinarian than the mothers and were reluctant to change this.

Some fathers were also reticent about trying the techniques being advocated by the parenting programme, Tracy explained:

Cos he just wasn't . . . he couldn't . . . he said he just couldn't do it, he didn't understand. That's why I got the book, was part of the reason I got the book but he hasn't read it yet.

Communicating some of their newly acquired parenting skills was problematic for many of the women who had attended the parenting programme and some were aware that their changing attitude towards their partner's parenting techniques would have to be carefully managed.

Finding the time to parent together

Some of the women who were interviewed in this study referred to the difficulties they experi-

enced in incorporating what they had learned from the programme into their family lives. This reflected in part, difficulties in finding the time to parent together. Many women looked to their partner for support but were aware of the difficulties that men experience in their parental role as a result of their employment commitments. Many of the women commented on the length of time that their partner was away from home and told us that he was often very tired on his return. One example was provided by Pauline who stays at home with her two young daughters aged five and three years while her husband goes out to work:

Cause the time Larry comes home from work, he's only home for like an hour and then they go to bed, so he just spends that hour playing with them, then he gets them ready for bed and then they go, he's rarely here at weekends anyway cos he's always off doing stuff'.

Tracy explained the stresses that her husband experienced due to work, which left him tired when he took over the childcare in the evening in order to enable her to go out to work:

I think he's so tired from . . . I mean he's a labourer, [. . .] he's working really hard all day, he comes home and he has to have the kids as well, but I think he gets so stressed out

Alison took on the larger share of the childcare, looking after their son aged three months and daughter aged three years. She had initially found it difficult to attend the programme as a result of her husband's work:

My husband's work is all over the place so I couldn't commit myself and er, whereas this time it had a crèche.

She also experienced problems encouraging her husband to try the techniques learned at the parenting programme because of the long hours he worked:

I tried to sort of talk to him about it but . . . and share the information and he, I certainly sort of noticed like with the um, with the praising things, he was trying to do that and . . . and obviously with help, with the time-out. I think things fall to me more because

I'm here more, he's running his own business, um, and he's often away very early in the morning and back very late at night, so I think that's the same for a lot of people isn't it you know?

The data also showed that fathers were not the only ones to find difficulty in parenting as a result of the demands of employment. Some of the women who were interviewed were working on a part-time basis. Anne worked 30 hours a week; she had one four-year-old daughter and found it difficult to implement the principles learnt on the parenting programme:

Because people who work feel very tired um, time really is the big [...] that's the biggest obstacle I have really is this oh I've got to do the garden, I've got to cook supper and I must do this and um . . .

The parenting programme required parents to undertake a 10-minute daily session playing with one of their children. The programme materials (Webster-Stratton, 1989) describe the value of play in aiding emotional expression, creativity, social interaction and communication. One of the concepts discussed is 'child-directed play' in which the parent helps the child develop skills such as learning conflict resolution and problem solving through, for example, taking the lead in games and make-believe play. Of those interviewed, it appeared that few fathers tried to use child-directed play, and that in fact some women were pleased if their partners participated in any type of play. Mel explained that her partner Steve blames his parents who never played with him when he was a child:

My husband says he doesn't know how to play with my children, our children! Er, and I think he says he wasn't played [with], it's really interesting because he says 'I don't think I was ever played with as a child' and I say 'I think you were', I think he was to some extent but um, he finds it quite hard to just sit down and play.

She went on to explain:

He'll go out and play football with them or you know, take them to the swings or take them to the seaside but actually sitting and playing, he finds quite hard but I just encourage him just to do that, I haven't been very specific about [how] he should do that.

Caroline's husband also finds play difficult because he gets bored very easily:

He doesn't enjoy playing [. . .] he's not really into a 'set up and do it for five minutes' and then goes 'oh I'm bored with this' and um, so it doesn't really arise that much but he's quite good at playing when he does do those few minutes or whatever.

Jill was recovering from a major operation and was trying to cope with a four-year-old son displaying difficult behaviour and a 17-month-old daughter. She disclosed that she wanted to share what she'd learnt from the parenting programme with her husband and that she needed his support, but said that they found it difficult to find time because he is rarely available to talk due to his work commitments:

He's working, he works in the evenings as well, so you don't get the chance to sit and have a chat very often.

Without this support Jill found that she couldn't find time to put the techniques into practice, particularly finding time to play with her son. The programme's emphasis on 'play' sometimes resulted in her feeling guilty about not being able to introduce this into her daily routine:

In terms of play, he [son] does ask us to play with him quite a lot, quite often we aren't able to do it. I'm looking after the baby quite a lot. Er, I do feel quite guilty about that . . .

Two of the women who were interviewed worked on a shift system with their husbands. This involved the woman going out to an evening job when her partner returned from work. However, this didn't always work well with the requirements of the parenting programme.

Discussion

The aim of this study was to explore mothers' perceptions of the value of a parenting programme as regards their family life. The women who were interviewed reported many positive outcomes as a result of having attended a parenting programme, and this supports the quantitative findings that were obtained as part of the larger RCT (see Patterson *et al.*, 2002a), alongside the findings of many other

studies. However, the qualitative data also highlighted some of the problems that women can experience when they attend a parenting programme without their partner including difficulties in engaging their partner, in changing their partner's parenting practices, and in finding time to parent together. The findings of this study indicate some of the difficulties facing parents when they attempt to change or enhance practices that are entrenched in their daily lives. Furthermore, the issues that were highlighted by this study may be of particular significance to those families where relationships may not be harmonious to begin with. Perhaps most importantly, this study has indicated that parenting programmes have the potential to create discrepancies in parenting practices between mothers and fathers resulting in a number of unintended consequences, including parental tension. It is now recognized that the emotional and behavioural wellbeing of children can be affected by marital conflict and in particular by arguments that are about the children themselves (Golombok, 2000). This points to the need for the organizers of parenting programmes to be aware of the possible 'unintended consequences' which may result where only one parent attends the parenting programme.

The data provided in this study indicated that lack of time and in particular employment commitments are one of the major difficulties encountered by parents in finding the time to parent together. The women who were interviewed commented in particular on the long hours that their partners spent at work, with the resulting tiredness and limited time available for their children. British men have the longest working hours in Europe, and it has been argued that this will have an important impact on how families function (Ferri and Smith, 1996). It has also been suggested that men are experiencing problems in taking on board the extra responsibilities of domestic life resulting from the change in women's employment patterns (Brannen and Moss, in Ferri and Smith, 1996) possibly because they also have to work longer hours due to the fact that being a parent increases the financial needs of the family (White and Woollett, 1992).

Although many parenting programmes are open to both parents it is usually the mother who attends (Grimshaw and McGuire, 1998; Harman and Brim, 1980; Smith, 1997). While it has been suggested

that it is only necessary for one parent to attend a parenting programme to have an effect on the home environment (Firestone *et al.*, 1980), the results of the current study indicate that the presence of the second parent (where there is one) is preferable in order to provide support and encouragement in implementing the required changes. Indeed, most of the women who were interviewed in this study would have preferred their partner to attend the parenting programme with them. However, in the majority of cases this was not possible as a result of financial and time limitations, in addition to reluctance on the part of some fathers.

This study points to the need for further qualitative studies evaluating the experiences of parents who have attended a parenting programme and in particular, for studies that explore fathers' perspectives on both parenting and parenting programmes. It also points to the need for programme organizers to be aware of the difficulties that parents may experience when their partner does not attend the programme with them.

If the government wants fathers to be more involved in the raising of their children, further steps will have to be taken to enable them to have more time for family life and to feel equally confident and comfortable in the parenting role. Parenting programmes may be one of the forums in which some male attitudes to parenting can be altered and in which a more cohesive approach to parenting can be achieved with both parents working together. Further effort to involve fathers in parenting programmes is required if there is to be a shift in family ideology, and if the government's vision of increased paternal involvement in the raising of their children, is to be realized. There are a number of possible methods of promoting the attendance of fathers at parenting programmes including the training of more male group leaders (including male health visitors) and indeed, the use of 'fathers' groups' that run in tandem with the programmes attended by mothers. Fathers' groups are a small but growing entity and their use may help to break down the barriers into what currently appears to be an established female environment.

The limitations of this study are that it was only possible to interview a small number of women with the consequence that data saturation was not reached. There may as such be other unintended consequences of participating in a parenting programme that were not identified by the current

study. While the respondents who were interviewed in this study were drawn from a population sample of parents who were invited to take part in a parenting programme, it is not clear whether there were any differences between the parents who agreed to be interviewed and those who declined. In addition, none of the parents who were interviewed were from a minority ethnic group, and none of the respondents were fathers. Further research is needed to establish whether these findings are transferable to other parents who have participated in a parenting programme. Finally, no formal assessment by an independent reviewer was undertaken of the dependability and confirmability of the data obtained in this study, but the data are consistent with the findings of other studies (e.g. Barlow and Stewart-Brown, 2001).

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