RISKY BEHAVIOUR AND SETTING BOUNDARIES
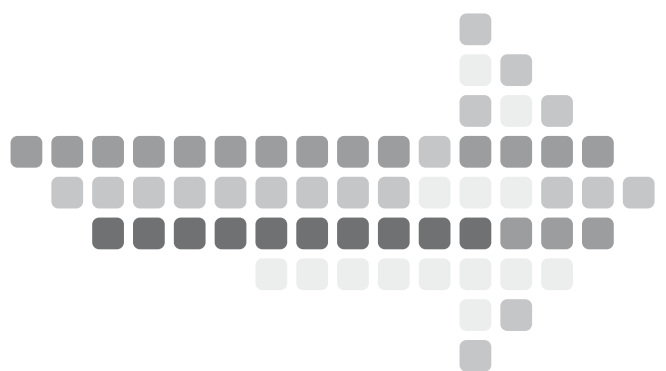
PARENTLINE PLUS BRIEFING 2008

"We talk, well I talk. He just looks at me like I've grown another head and says all I ever do is moan!"
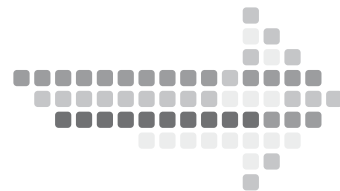
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1. Introduction

Parents have to deal with a multitude of challenges when their children become teenagers. This report looks at the particular problems parents face when they try to ensure that their teenagers and pre-teens stay safe. Some parents say that they have no control over their child's risk-taking because they feel that their teens are under the influence of peer pressure. Other parents have told us that looking after teenagers is a matter of very careful give and take. But what exactly are the issues facing parents and their teenagers and how are their concerns being tackled?

2. Key findings

- Parents are looking for support during their children's teenage and pre-teen years.

- Parents would welcome greater cooperation between homes and schools with schools taking the lead in helping parents within their community to set consistent boundaries.

- Most parents are already using similar strategies to exert control over their children, such as withdrawing privileges, reducing independence or withholding money. However, parents felt some confusion about when and how to utilise their chosen strategies and this is when they are likely to seek support. None of the parents who contributed to our web survey or our focus groups used any form of corporal punishment with their teenagers.

- Supporting parents requires long-term commitment on the part of those who are doing the supporting. In turn this requires long-term funding and support for the practitioners to ensure sustainability within a given community.

- Many parents feel embarrassed about raising the subject of sex and relationships with their children but want to ensure that their children have enough knowledge to make informed choices.

- Lone parents and parents who are separated may need extra support to negotiate their way through their children's teenage years.

- Parents would like to see more organised activities for teenagers. Within any given area, families would like to be able to access a range of regular activities for teenagers such as sports, performing arts or general youth provision.

3. Policy context

Governmental policy and the institutions that regulate the provision of services for families, including schools and the medical profession, undoubtedly play a role in determining the behaviour of parents and their children. Policy over recent years has emphasised that a range of universal and targeted services should be available to children and families and that children are a community responsibility. This said, it has been noted that there is a marked tendency towards punishment and control in modern society as well as a widely held belief that adults have somehow lost the ability to 'control' children and young people (Hayden 2007). The pace of social change adds a further difficulty in how we respond rationally, appropriately and effectively. Thus the competing priorities of care and control, welfare and punishment are present in any debate about what to do about young people and risky behaviour, with varying degrees of blame apportioned to families or schools or society at large.[1]

We recognise and support the laudable aims and objectives within The Children's Plan and urge central and local government to ensure its full and effective implementation on the ground. Our experience of local work suggests that bringing all partners together is hugely difficult. We have noticed that different sectors and different organisations hold onto their own priorities and cultures. This is particularly apparent when trying to work with local authority services alongside the health sector. More effort must be put in to enable pooled budgets, shared priorities and a sensible, realistic division of effort if joined-up working is really to have a positive impact on families. However for the aims of the plan to be achieved much greater efforts need to be made to ensure an integrated approach between services and organisations who work with children, young people and their parents. The Children's Trusts which are being established across England are intended to promote and enable joint working but a 2007 evaluation noted difficulties in achieving changes of attitude and accountability (UEA/ NCB 2007).

Moreover, the development of local commissioning is very patchy, and causing a reduction in services just at the time they ought to be expanding. (www.parentlineplus.org.uk/development)

It is within this context of rapid change in policies, procedures and expectations that we conducted our review of the literature and our research with parents.

4. What research tells us

Young people's behaviour is affected by a myriad of different factors such as ethnicity, household composition, parents' employment, children and parents' ages, parents' education and specific characteristics related to specific homes, to specific parents and to specific children. Moreover parents' own family experiences before they created their own family also inform their views about appropriate ways of raising children (Keith et al 2001). Lewis's 2007 findings also show that parents can shape perceptions of risky behaviours and successfully steer their kids from future risky behaviours. Prevention has to convince teenagers to think about the consequences of risky behaviours as well as change potential images of 'cool' and desirability when a risky behaviour comes to the attention of a young person. Lewis says,

"Teenagers need reinforcement and parents need to change how their teen children think about people who exhibit risky behaviours. Altering teenagers' way of thinking about risky behaviours may also deter them from belonging to a peer group that favours such activities."
Lewis 2007

Health and education professionals also have a role to play in influencing the behaviour of young people. Lescano et al, 2007, devised a questionnaire, Adolescent Risk Inventory (ARI), for use by GPs to assess sexual as well as other risky behaviours. Nurses could also give adolescents positive reinforcement for responsible sexual behaviour and nurses may need more support and training to do this (Jolley 2001). A study from the USA has shown that participation in two or more forms of extra-curricular activity reduced the likelihood of participation in risky behaviours. In particular students who participated in bands, orchestras and school plays were significantly less likely to indulge in any risky behaviour at all (Zill et al 1995).

Many psychologists, educators, health professionals and others have included guidance, setting boundaries and discipline among the basic needs of children (Pugh et al 1994). Setting boundaries in order to amend a child's behaviour is widely believed to be based on the idea of parental authority and can encompass monitoring, supervision, control, rewards, communication and punishment. Needless to say, communication is a crucial aspect of family life, affecting the quality of the relationships within the family and the healthy functioning of individual family members, parents and children. For the purposes of this report communication includes, reasoning calmly, listening, shouting, negotiation and compromise. Whereas punishment as a discipline strategy includes withholding privileges, ignoring the child, corporal punishment, time out, and grounding (Neville at al 1998). The following review of the literature looks at research on parenting and setting boundaries from the angles of ethnicity, gender, age of child and the views of young people themselves.

4.1 Ethnicity

When looking at ethnic groups in the UK, Barn et al found that adopting a particular tone of voice is a preferred way of disciplining children for some parents whereas other parents in their sample revealed that reverting to their mother tongue was a way of expressing their annoyance with the child and also an effective discipline strategy (Barn et al 2006). Research evidence has also documented cases where ethnic minority parents in the UK exhibit an overindulgent attitude towards their children until a certain age. Thereafter they are regarded as 'strict parents'; this was the situation for male children especially. As Kakar (1979) describes it:

"The most striking feature (of Punjabi parents) is the contrast between an earlier, more or less unchecked benevolent indulgence, and the new inflexible standards of absolute obedience and conformity to familial and social standards".

When comparing the white British parents to Indian parents some differences emerge. In the words of Dosangh and Ghuman (1996):

"In our judgement, there is no conscious attempt made (by Punjabi parents) to train the children to be independent as is understood in Britain and America. If anything, children from the age of four or five years onwards are encouraged to be obedient and to honour their elders. The popular notion of a good child is, and was, firmly tied to the notion of being a Kahne Kar (do as you are told) child".

Among the white group, younger children are more likely to be smacked and parents in their sample who were young or had themselves had unsupportive parents were most likely to smack their children (Ghate et al 2003). As children grow older, research has revealed that white UK parents tend to resort to other forms of behaviour control regarded as less strict, such as grounding (Cawson 2006).

Previous research into UK clinical samples shows that minority ethnic children are over-represented amongst those found to be at risk of child abuse (Gibbons et al 1995). National statistics collated by the Department of Health also show that minority groups (particularly African/Caribbean, and children of mixed parentage), are over represented amongst those receiving a formal child protection service, and white and Asian children are under-represented (Department of Health 2002). When looking at ordinary families both white and non-white, evidence has shown no ethnic variations in terms of the use of physical punishment (Hackett and Hackett 1994). However, the influence of migration, new environment, and cultural interaction are seen as important influences in shaping parental views and beliefs about discipline strategies.

4.2 Gender

Studies on both sides of the Atlantic have found that parents are more likely to use corporal punishment or show aggression towards their sons than their daughters. Park's (2001) study with Korean immigrants in the USA, showed that mothers who had a son were more likely to use corporal punishment than mothers with daughters. Also, UK mothers have been found to be more likely to smack their sons than their daughters and more likely than fathers to use physical punishment with any child. However mothers are, more often than not, left to discipline the children most of the time (Humphries and Gordon 1993, Valentine 1997). A UK study also found that white boys were twice as likely as girls to say their parents were very strict (Madge 2006).

4.3 Age variations

Parenting styles are constantly in a state of flux throughout the parenting cycle; studies reveal that many parents may have hit their child when the child is young, but as children grow up it no longer becomes an effective or desirable way to discipline (Barn et al 2006).

The age of the parent also affects the type of discipline strategy used. Park's 2001 study found that white and Korean older mothers in her sample were less likely to use corporal punishment than the Korean immigrant mothers in her USA sample.

The concept of respect for the elders and other people in authority is also evident in studies conducted with minority ethnic and some white parents (Hylton 1997, Beishon, Modood and Virdee 1998). Conflicts such as family conflict between immigrant parents and their Westernised children in an immigrant family, or discrimination because of their immigrant status may also affect child discipline (Negroni-Rodriguenz 1999, cited in Park 2001).

4.4 Young people in research

Cawson's UK-based research on young people's views on discipline reports that almost 9 in 10 young people say that any discipline they had received was usually based on reasoning, explanation and other forms of non-physical punishment (see also Barn et al 2006). Overall, in her sample, three quarters said they had been grounded or sent to their room. When they had been physically punished, this was described in three out of four cases as mild and infrequent (Cawson 2002). This said, on this last point of corporal punishment, there is disagreement since other studies have reported its common occurrence among UK parents. Mahoney et al (2000) have documented the use of physical punishment among white UK parents. Nonetheless, her research also suggests that its use tends to decline with the child's age. Another important factor to consider is that there appears to be a distinction between belief and practice. In a study of discipline amongst parents of white UK pre-school children, Thompson and Pearce (2001) found that only a quarter of the respondents believe that smacking is the appropriate way to discipline young children, yet almost two-thirds had smacked their child in the past week.

5. What parents have told us

We have gathered parental feedback from a survey on our website, focus groups with parents of teenagers (and with teenagers themselves), and through qualitative and quantitative data from our services Parentline, email support and online support through Question and Answers and message boards.

5.1 Data from Parentline

We analysed data from calls to Parentline between October 2007 and February 2008 which show that:

- Calls about children's behaviour are the main reason for parents ringing (28% of long calls).

- Within these calls, the types of behaviours can be broken down thus: high levels of verbal aggression (60% of calls about behaviour), physical aggression (30% of calls about behaviour) and a range of serious difficulties including lying (16%), 'bad crowd' (14%), stealing (13%), alcohol and drug use (9%).

- Half of all calls are from the parents of teens and pre-teens (age 10 and above).

- Callers are struggling with their own mental health (25% of all calls) and are concerned about their children's mental health (15% of all calls).

- Callers feel that their children are affected by conflict in the family (13% of all calls) and the impact of divorce and separation (11% of all calls).

- Callers who contacted us about their children's sexual behaviour were almost twice as likely to be concerned about their daughters than their sons (64% girls and 36% boys).

- 44% of callers who contacted us because of their children's sexual behaviour came from nuclear, married families, 28% were lone mothers and 6% were lone fathers.

- Calls about children's sexual behaviour over this period represented 3% of calls; they included calls about underage sex, calls about pregnancy and abortion and calls about unsafe sex.

- When parents had cited sexual behaviour as their main reason for calling, there were noticeable increases in some of the secondary reasons given for contacting us such as lying (up 2%), staying away from home (up 2%) and alcohol use (up 1%).

This data reveals the real depth of parents' concerns for their children.

5.2 Data from the web survey

The survey 'Boundary setting – How do we make sure our teenagers stay safe?' was posted on our website for four weeks in December 2007 and during that time we received 105 responses. Just over half the respondents (53) volunteered some personal information: all of these were female and mothers, except for one stepmother; 62% of the 53 respondents were married or in a relationship.

It is not realistic to extrapolate any social trends from such a small survey except to say that all these respondents held concerns about their children's behaviour with 64% of all respondents concerned about the behaviour of their teenagers although perhaps it is of greater interest that over a third (36% of all respondents) were concerned about the behaviour of younger children, aged nine to twelve years and almost two thirds of the 105 respondents felt that their children had started taking risks or behaving in a way that worried their parents before they became adolescents.

**"It takes a long time for this message to get through and needs pretty constant repetition adapting to new circumstances as they get older. It gets easier, unfortunately once they or their friends have experienced some scary situations."
Respondent 101**

The top three concerns of the parents who responded to our survey are drinking, drug taking and the influence of friends including fears about social networking on the internet. Almost all the respondents, 89%, said that they found it difficult to negotiate boundaries with their children and offered a variety of reasons as to why this is the case.

**"As a single parent, I find I am being played off against their father. Having a split family with different boundaries makes it difficult for a child to know where they are at."
Respondent 52**

**"It's kind of a constant ongoing situation. However, although he challenges constantly, I know he is glad to have some boundaries."
Respondent 101**

In contrast to the findings within the literature review, none of these parents mentioned any form of corporal punishment as a method they would choose to discipline their children. Instead they preferred to withdraw privileges, reduce independence or withhold money. Commonly, 'grounding', limiting access to computers, mobile telephones and MP3 players were cited as being effective methods of punishment and many parents said that 'the talk' was enough to help the children change their behaviour.

**"Talk through the possible consequences of that risk, the implications to themselves and others. This is often enough in terms of discipline. We discuss second chances and I like to know that they have learnt from their mistake/risk."
Respondent 35**

We received a mixed response about the effectiveness of disciplinary strategies that these parents are using. Some parents had found that their methods (such as withdrawing privileges and reducing independence) worked whereas others still felt confused about what would be most effective in their own families.

**"I am having to talk to him about issues before they are a problem rather than when there is an issue because a straight challenge is counterproductive."
Respondent 102**

**"I have yet to find a method that will receive the right response. I am willing to try anything within reason, without alienating the situation into all-out war."
Respondent 48**

When it came to talking about sex and relationships, there appeared to be confusion over what to do. Some parents seemed not to want to talk about such matters.

"It is not something that is discussed, although I have informed my son that I am always there to talk to and willing to listen."
Respondent 62

"If they were thinking about it I would like to think that they know where to go to take adequate precautions."
Respondent 84

Others have interpreted the embarrassment of their offspring as a 'get out clause' which lets them off talking about sex and relationships at home.

"He will not talk freely about his friendships."
Respondent 32

"Male. Shy."
Respondent 71

Overall many parents displayed a certain embarrassment. Words like 'assume', 'presume' and 'suspect' featured in their descriptions of their teenagers' sexual behaviour but very few disclosed emphatic knowledge of what their teens were up to. Few appeared to be able to discuss sex and relationships as frankly as these two parents.

"She regularly speaks to me about sex and relationships, although she is not involved with anybody at the moment. She knows that she will be listened to and advised and, hopefully, that she will not be shouted at if she speaks up."
Respondent 87

"We have always had a very open relationship and have spoken about STDs and pregnancy, the effects on both him and me and on his girlfriend and her family! He has always said he would tell me when he was [sexually active] so that I could supply condoms!"
Respondent 41

These parents were also asked if they knew if their children were sexually active and if so at what age their children were when they first had sex. Only fifteen parents of the 105 answered yes to this question and the ages that they gave for their child's first sexual experience ranged from 12 to 19. Of these fifteen parents, nine suggested that their children had started having sex before their sixteenth birthday.

One mother said,

"No she is not having sex but seems to think if you have a boyfriend – you have sex, so many of her friends are sexually active from 12-13 years."
Respondent 37

Another mother told us,

"I was told that sex is not a big issue, she will do it 'if she feels like it'."
Respondent 94

When these parents were asked what would help them to support their teenagers they referred to the influences that friends, school and the media have on their children. The overriding message was that parents want more support for what they are doing and greater understanding and consistency between homes and schools. Some of the parents wanted remote support such as that provided by our website (www.parentlineplus.org.uk).

"Some advice would be good – that's why I'm on this [Parentline Plus] site!"
Respondent 58

Others wanted schools to place a greater emphasis on soft skills (such as self-esteem, resilience and consistency) in their curriculum time with young people but also to be more proactive in their liaison with parents.

"Schools taking a more active role in helping to set boundaries, for example some boundaries need to be set by both parents and schools in order for them to be consistent."
Respondent 59

"More small-group work [with teens] in school on building self-esteem and strategies for coping with standing up for what they think is right. Also more help for parents in schools about what to say to their children."
Respondent 72

Many parents recognised that parents themselves can work together to agree boundaries, especially across the young people's friendship groups and between parents who are separated.

"[I'd like] some clear ways on how to manage behaviour and what boundaries are other parents setting. Boundaries so all children have the same discipline."
Respondent 50

"[I'd like] info on how other parents cope and negotiate boundaries."
Respondent 31

"Congruency of values between both parents so that boundaries are consistent. Also congruency of values and boundaries between separate homes – mum and dad separated."
Respondent 6

But this also reflected the ongoing isolation that parents can feel which has been examined in greater detail in earlier reports from Parentline Plus (Parentline Plus 2005, 2005, 2006).

Our respondents were consistent in their wish list for activities for teenagers with 40% wanting organised youth clubs and a further 28.5% wanting sport/music/performing arts clubs. 19% of the respondents mentioned specifically that they wanted places where their children would be safe, warm and dry (bear in mind that this survey was conducted in the winter months). Affordability and accessibility were both mentioned as an issue for 9% of parents.

5.3 Results from the focus groups

Three focus groups with parents were held in October 2007 in Leeds and in two areas of outer London. All three groups were composed of mothers and fathers from a variety of ethnic groups with an annual household income of below £20,000 per annum. One group was for the parents of boys aged 14-18, another was for the parents of girls aged 14-18 and the third was for parents of boys and girls aged 14-18. The majority of the parents in these focus groups felt that they were dealing with 'normal' teenage issues such as changing moods, peer pressure and attitude but a few had had to deal with greater challenges such as teenage pregnancy and drug taking. As in previous research, parents felt the setting of boundaries was a very inexact science, although there was agreement that children did need boundaries. Boundary setting was influenced by a variety of factors:

- Nature of individual children.
- Changes as they grew up.
- Parents' own experiences and the boundaries they were set, which are often modified to fit today's society.
- What is thought to be safe in today's environment.
- The law.

Many tried to find a happy medium with their children, through a process of negotiation because they wanted to be seen as reasonable or to have created a 'contract' that children were more likely to keep to.

"I work it out with him. We meet somewhere in the middle and both feel we've got something."

Parents were well aware that their children pushed boundaries, and were economical with the truth or 'edited' things when it suited them such as exaggerating about what their friends were able to do. These parents often checked out these claims and other parents are generally thought to be useful sounding boards. Many thought they were more lenient than their own parents had been, which was seen as an inevitable progression, but at the same time they bemoaned the difficulties of

disciplining children today. They found it harder to punish their teenagers and found less support for parents at school and elsewhere. So with their hands tied in some respects, most parents 'punished' children by restricting their freedom, taking away the things that they liked or controlling their money. A few parents felt compromised by their personal circumstances which made boundaries harder to set.

"It's been harder since we divorced. He thinks he's in charge now, and I'm not strong enough for him. I get worn down. I know I could be storing up trouble for the future."

Those facing bigger problems with their teenagers could see where they may have gone wrong, but only with the benefit of hindsight. Generally they put this down to not talking enough at the time but also not necessarily recognising the problems that were coming. Unlike the respondents to the web survey, several parents commented that boundary setting was something that needed to start from an early age, in fact from when children were very young which they thought made keeping children on track easier when they got older. These parents recognised that they themselves set a strong example and hence their values and behaviour are fundamentally important and a key influence on their children.

These parents felt that although they were a significant influence on their teenagers, they also recognised the power of peers during teenage years but felt that peer pressure only operated up to a point.

"We're the biggest influence. We keep them on the right path."

While influencing meant 'educating' their children so that they would make the right choices, parents also believed they acted as a safety net, offering love and support where needed.

"You've got to be there to pick up the pieces."

Parents recognised that their children may have to learn some things from their own mistakes, but none wanted this to be a hard lesson. Most

took the view that the more they knew their children, their friends and their world, the better prepared and equipped they would be. That said, a few realised too late that they had been ignorant of what their children had been getting into. The biggest area of concern for these parents was drugs, regarded as a black and white subject and a real danger.

"My mistake was not talking more, earlier, and being ignorant about the subject [drugs]."

Most of these parents considered themselves to be friends with their children, and believed this was important to gaining their children's confidence and establishing good lines of communication. While having this friendship led to a calmer family atmosphere, the key thing that parents wanted was to be able to talk to their children. These parents felt that this was important for a number of reasons such as opening a line of communication that parents could use for guidance and these parents believed that it meant their children would be more likely to confide in them rather than hide things.

"I want my son to know that he's loved, whatever happens."

"Friendship helps you communicate and talking is the most important thing you can do. Otherwise you've got nothing to build on."

At the same time, parents recognised the danger in a friendship which didn't at the same time establish clear roles, and saw no conflict in this. So within the friendship, parents felt that ground rules still had to be clearly set.

"Kids push – you have to know when to say 'no'."

Within the friendship, they felt there had to be a strong element of trust. But they also believed that friendship set up a relationship that was less likely to be abused and so in itself offered a form of protection, and tied up in this was the hope that children would respect their parents and that this too would influence their behaviour.

"You hope they have enough love and respect for you…"

Parents in the focus groups claimed that the open lines of communication with their teenagers meant that issues could be discussed as day-to-day matters.

"We talk at dinner – something sparks it off. I keep it light-hearted."

"The soaps have most things covered off – you can take them up."

But many also used topical news events to give their children the messages they wanted to get across such as the dangers of drugs or early sex.

"I show my son articles… and tell him it'll kill his Nan."

The other thing that parents wanted their children to understand was the consequences of their actions, and this was also where concrete examples helped which was a tactic they felt was being taken by schools (e.g. the Leah Betts story).

"You want to make them realise the consequences – good examples help."

These parents shared the concerns of the respondents to the web survey regarding alcohol and drug use but they were more worried by the implications of sexually transmitted infections and teen pregnancy than peer pressure and friendships. In the focus groups the internet only came up as a concern for a few, but could be a problem in waiting as some parents knew that it enabled their children to see things they shouldn't and also get hold of, or sell things they shouldn't. Smoking was not necessarily something parents wanted their children to do, but was considered to be a lesser evil. Where parents themselves smoked, they felt they were in a weak position to advise their children.

Only a minority appeared to have tackled the issue of sex and relationships and several parents felt that teenagers had fewer steady relationships these days; that, 'it is different now'. Talking about sex was undoubtedly an area that parents in the focus groups found more difficult to discuss with their children. Some admitted to not wanting to know 'too much information' once their children had become sexually active and many felt it was a difficult area because teenagers believed they were more mature whereas parents felt they were emotionally vulnerable. Hence teenagers thought they were ready for things their parents thought they were not. There was a debate about what was a realistic age for children to have sex, with a clear gap between the likely reality (14 or 15) and parents' ideal age (17 or 18). Parents felt they couldn't say to their children 'don't have sex', but they could warn against having sex too young, particularly under the age of 16. Very often, parents encouraged their children to look at themselves in a more reflective or critical light:

"I tell my son to think of a girl as though she was his sister!"

For girls in particular, instilling a sense of self-respect was thought to be very important:

"I want her to know her own mind, and not feel pressured into things. Some of her friends don't have enough self-respect and they're going with boys they don't know."

Parents of boys thought their sons could be equally vulnerable, but the reasons they gave were different. They felt that boys are less level-headed, more unpredictable when drunk and more likely to be a target for attack.

The main messages these parents gave were about unwanted pregnancy and disease, generally advising their children to have safe sex.

"Be protected. I gave my son condoms – he didn't know what to say. His friends couldn't believe I'd done it."

For those with teenage girls, however, protection could be a double-edged sword. On the one hand the pill protected their children, on the other it condoned sex; for a few, the pill was thought to be the lesser of two evils. Many parents of girls did not want their daughters to feel pressurised into having sex, either by their peers or boyfriends.

"You don't have to do it because other people are."

None of the parents admitted to taking a position that sex was for fun, although the young adult groups indicated this was the case for some boys.

The discussion led onto where the parents would go to seek out further information, advice and support. These parents wanted to keep things private and said that they only actively sought information when they hit a problem, and even then, not all problems were thought to lend themselves to advice. Drugs were probably the main exception to this, where parents were often mobilised into learning as much as possible. The internet was generally the main place parents felt they would go, apart from seeking advice from family or friends, otherwise, leaflets or other forms of literature were thought to be helpful. These parents did not seek professional advice.

6. What young people have told us

We held two focus groups with young people who came from the same families as the parents in the corresponding focus groups. The young people in both groups were aged 18-20 and had finished their education: one group for young men and the other for young women.

They were two very different groups, with largely opposing views about the influence of their parents. They were distinguished by gender, but this isn't necessarily a general finding.

The girls:
• Felt their parents had been a significant and positive influence.
• Although they recognised they could not necessarily see it at the time.
• Had good, and seemingly close, relationships with their parents.
• Appeared as a group to have experimented little with drugs, early sex etc.

The boys:
• Felt their parents had a limited influence.
• Some held a feeling that they would have turned out like this, irrespective of parental guidance.
• Some had parents who had clearly left them to their own devices.
• Half the group took drugs regularly: one had been introduced to weed by his mother and several had parents who regularly smoked weed.

Most of all these young people felt their relationship with their parents was generally better now that they were older and treated more like adults. Going out to work was thought to be a factor in this, as were demonstrations of capability/independence, such as travel. Contributing to the household finances gave some of the boys a sense of power, particularly where parents were on low incomes. Several across both genders, believed they were friends with their parents, and a few felt a parent was their best friend. Some of the girls said they had always got on well with their parents, and that their relationship now was just a continuation of that theme. The boys were more likely to

think that their friendship had evolved over time. Even the girls who had consistently good relationships with their parents had arguments with their parents when they were teenagers. Some admitted that at that age, they were very selfish and blinkered and just thought about what they wanted to do. They could not see at the time that the boundaries set by their parents were for their own good, rather than to stop them having fun. It was only later that they had begun to understand the bigger picture, and why their parents had been concerned for them.

"It's all about 'me, me, me' – you're not aware of the broader issues."

Despite clashes, none of the girls felt that they had actually gone against their parents' wishes; they might not have agreed with their parents' decisions, but once set, they claimed to have abided by them. The girls believed their parents had been the bigger influence, and did not see peer pressure as real pressure.

"I might have argued, but I didn't overstep the mark."

The boys said that their parents had been 'annoying' at this age, but they understood why. However, they were far more likely to feel that they had to learn from experience, whatever that experience was, and that this to a large extent had happened.

"You're going to be what you're going to be – you've got to learn for yourself."

Many appeared to have ignored or circumvented the rules their parents imposed on them, which had led in some cases to stringent policies.

"My door got locked at a specific time, and if I wasn't back by then, I didn't have a key."

Several thought that their boundaries had been set from a young age, from well before they became a teenager. All the girls said that they respected their parents, as a result of what their parents had done for them. This and their relationship meant that they had not wanted to hurt their parents or let them down. Although the girls had friendships with their parents, they recognised this was not enough because apart from anything else, they believed that boundaries indicated their parents cared.

"You need to have some boundaries – otherwise you don't feel cared for."

"I still call my mum out of respect if I'm going to be late or stay out."

Even though many of the boys did not appear to have the same respect, they still didn't enjoy their parents' disappointment.

"When they say 'I'm disappointed' it's worse than ranting at you. It makes you feel bad."

Some of these young people reflected that their parents' responses during their teenage years had also influenced their behaviour to the point that where parents had been reasonable or thought not to over-react, the girls had responded by being more open.

"I can tell her things because of how she reacted to me smoking. She didn't like it, but she didn't try to stop me."

Most believed their parents had been neither too strict nor too relaxed, striking a good happy medium between the two which led to a sense of fairness.

"It's about give and take. If your parents are really strict, you rebel."

As parents believed, boundaries appeared to have been set not just by what they said, but also what they did. This had implications for smoking and drug taking.

"If your parents smoke, you're more exposed to it. It sends you a set of signals. I smoked my first joint with my mum…"

Both genders believed their parents instilled a set of general principles, although these differed. The girls talked about respect for other people and being treated the way you would like to be yourself. Whereas the boys talked of not causing trouble on home ground and being true to their mates, the girls believed that boundaries had been set through a process of discussion and negotiation, as well as example.

"It's the way you're brought up, the examples set."

Some remembered saying to their parents, 'you don't know what it's like (now)', but most denied that they didn't value their parents' own experiences. However, many of the boys felt that boundaries were actually set more by their group than by their parents. There appeared to be have been less negotiation and more a range of measures employed to keep their sons in check.

7. Conclusions

Our research has shown us that parents are still looking for support, especially during their children's teenage years. They would like more activities to engage young people and keep them from being tempted into risky behaviours. A common strand of thought was greater cooperation between home and school and schools showing greater understanding of the pressures that parents face with their children in their lives beyond school.

Parents understand their responsibilities and want to support their children even in challenging circumstances. However they are unsure of how to access support and how to negotiate and renegotiate boundaries on a daily basis. This is particularly the case when it comes to discussing sex and relationships, demonstrated by the parents who responded to our web survey and who participated in our focus groups.

This is set against a background of uncertainty and insecurity about professional services which parents feel may threaten their family life. So parents want support but also want to maintain control over their own families and feel threatened by those in power.

A respondent to the web survey summed up her frustration about being a parent of a teenager in 2007:

"Education. We are taught a lot at school but do we have our priorities right? What's the most important and responsible thing a human being can do? Bring up, nurture, protect and develop another human being (their children). What do we teach in school? Nothing about the above. Is it not important that people learn to communicate and resolve issues before getting divorced and then another family split joins the statistics? And who cares apart from those that have to endure the pain of seeing their children have a lesser existence than they would want? And all this ignorance has a hidden cost of social problems stored for the future. So we pay more taxes to fix more problems and so the cycle goes. It's not impossible to break the cycle if someone with power was determined enough."
Web survey Respondent 5
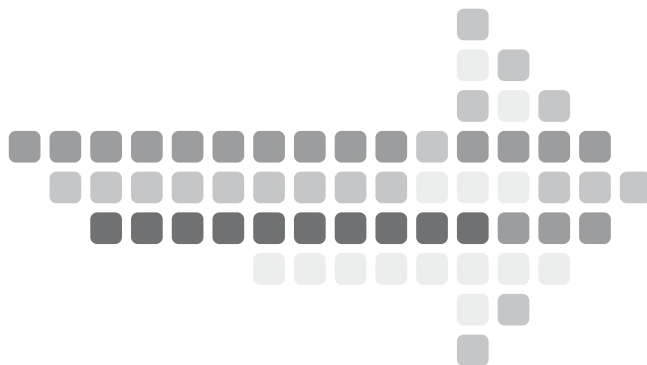
8. Recommendations

- Supporting parents is most effective when it is a long-term project. Parenting support requires long-term vision backed by commitment and long-term funding. Quick fixes which are packaged prettily to address specific short-term goals divert funding from other support that may have longer-lasting effects. It is important for commissioners to recognise the time and commitment invested by people working with parents and for commissioners to appreciate the effort that is required to prevent a family with complex issues from toppling.

- If parents are able to establish trusting, supportive, positive relationships with their children when they are younger it is easier to sustain those relationships during more challenging times as children grow up. So parenting support that offers parents tools to build these relationships with younger children is really important.

- Programmes that offer parents 'how to talk about sex' today and 'how to talk about drugs' tomorrow, can only ever have a piecemeal, short-term impact, even if parents attend them. Not only do parents need help earlier on to develop open communication with their younger children but, as the children get older and difficulties arise, parents need support about the ways they experience these difficulties, not simply about topics that concern the state.

- Parents require ongoing support to negotiate difficult boundaries with their children. As their sons and daughters grow up and mature those boundaries have to be renegotiated over and over again. This process can put enormous strain on couples when they are together and parents tell us that this strain is far worse when parents are separated. Parents hold deep-rooted values and aspirations for their families which can be forced off-course by parental separation or a particularly troubled adolescent. Particular effort needs to be made to offer support to separated parents of older and teenage children.

- Parents need particular support when it comes to talking about sex and relationships with their children. We know that young people want to learn about sex and relationships from their parents to complement the sex and relationships education that they receive in school. However, parents need to develop trust in the support they are being offered before moving into areas they perceive as embarrassing such as sex education. Engaging parents to discuss other issues first can facilitate their later willingness to tackle thorny issues with their offspring.

- The Children's Plan contains important aspirations for children and their families. If implemented and if properly resourced, the kind of support we are calling for should become more widely available. But in the current local funding environment, services and voluntary organisations are closing not expanding. We recommend that more is done to ensure that the gap between what government says it wants and what actually happens is closed as a matter of urgency.

9. Endnotes

[1] For example, in 2005 Beverley Hughes, Minister for Children said about the introduction of parenting contracts and parenting orders, "If parents do not set boundaries and address problematic behaviour then this can lead to difficulties for their child and for other people." (http://press.homeoffice.gov.uk/press-releases/Parents_Tasked_To_Take_More_Resp ?). A 2006 MORI survey for the Home office found that 52% of respondents believed that poor parenting was the "key cause" of bad behaviour (http://press.homeoffice.gov.uk/press-releases/420845?version=1). And on the current ParentsCentre page on behaviour (http://www.parentscentre.gov.uk/behaviouranddiscipline/ accessed 27.02.08) the onus is on parents to discuss positive behaviour strategies on the interactive forum; the governmental advice is about poor behaviour for example in flagging up further information parents may want about "Behaviour and Discipline at School", the highlights include "information on school policy, detention, pastoral support programmes, managing disruptive behaviour and use of force to restrain" (ibid). As a consequence of these heavy handed, punitive policies, aimed at encouraging parents to accept their responsibilities, parents feel confused and harangued.
The Children's Plan indicates that government has recognised that parental support and engagement are crucial to children and young people being successfully prepared for adult life. DCSF drew up five principles to underpin the Children's Plan in December 2007. The first of these principles is "government does not bring up children – parents do – so government needs to do more to back parents and families." (DCSF 2007 p5). And acknowledges that, "Too often we focus on the problems of a few young people rather than the successes of the many…" (DCSF 2007 p125).

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Parentline Plus is a national charity and a leading organisation in the development and delivery of support for parents and families. We work to recognise and to value the different types of families that exist and to shape and expand the services available to them. We understand that it is not possible to separate children's needs from the needs of their parents and carers and encourage people to see it as a sign of strength to seek help. We believe it is normal for all parents to have difficulties from time to time.

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