



Information, advice and support – a wish list from parents

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A Report by Parentline Plus
April 2007

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*“a hand to hold and a shoulder to cry on
an accountant
a meditation teacher
cookery lessons
self esteem
ability to withstand material pressures
support from the government and employees on work/life balance”*

“All I want is a fairy godmother who can step in with advice but one the children can’t see.”

Parentline Plus is concerned that parents feel unjustified in asking for help and support, whatever level that may be, and seem only to ask for it when situations have reached crisis point, or are very deeply entrenched and parents feel helpless and hopeless. It was this overriding concern that led us to launch Just Ask 18 months ago. The campaign aims to persuade and encourage parents to use services when they need an extra helping hand. Above all, the campaign message is that there is no stigma in talking about your family problems – rather it is a sign of strength – and that accessing information, advice and support designed and delivered in partnerships and, where possible, parent for parent, really works.

To ensure that such services are available to parents, the campaign targets providers and professionals, highlighting what parents are saying and the subsequent need for flexible, appropriate and high quality services, both generalist and specialist, for all families.

One message is clear – parenting support needs to be freely available and not just when things go wrong or when government deems that a child has behaved in such a negative way that parents must be punished as a result.

Background

Parentline Plus evidence

There is a real contradiction between what surveys and research show about parents seeking support, suggesting that they mainly want to turn to family and friends, and our experience of parents we work with who so value and appreciate our help.

In our role as the voice for parents, we consult parents who have used our services and those who have not, about what support they need and what concerns they have about asking for such support. These consultations have demonstrated the following concerns which are consistently voiced by parents in every consultation:

- Parenting is something you do, and how you do it is private. Seeking help or even just advice or information is seen as failure by the parents themselves
- Most parents prefer to talk to other parents. Their first port of call to talk about their family life is usually family and friends (but of course some are very isolated from family and friends, especially if things have reached crisis point e.g lone parents who have fled domestic violence).

- Parents want to stay in control of their family life and any problems that arise. How they tackle them is seen as private – asking for help means the risk of putting their problems into the public arena and that could mean a threat to their family.
- Indirect services such as a website or a leaflet can be valuable because their use is perceived as private and ‘behind doors’.
- Words matter. Parents want information but find it difficult to source material that adopts a non-directive, more informal approach.
- Where information and support is accessed from matters. Parents are adamant that they feel uncomfortable receiving support in schools – particularly secondary schools. Reasons given include their child not wanting to see them in school, and very strong feelings that they do not want other parents or the teachers to know they might have problems.
- Parents perceive helplines, whether generalist or specialist, as there for those in crisis. Some parents even feel they should not access such valued support because they would be taking time from other families - who they perceive as needing it more than them.
- However, parents who have accessed Parentline Plus services value them hugely. They welcome the opportunity to talk through their problems and to discuss possible solutions and would not hesitate to recommend the services to others.

We analysed the reasons why parents ring us. Parents ringing Parentline often present with multiple problems, talking about highly stressful and very entrenched situations, and often in crisis.ⁱ

It is quite clear from our extensive call data that parents need a chance to offload, and need emotional support, as well as needing ideas and strategies about how to find solutions to their problems. The depth of concerns clearly demonstrates that when parents are desperate enough to seek out help, their problems are so complex that there is often much more than one call needed to help parents see their way out of their crises.

An analysis of who rings also points to key groups needing support, especially lone parents – 46% of callers last year were lone parents – and parents of teenagers, who make up about 48% of callers. This data also suggests a broad range of services that are required locally and nationally to support parents and children.ⁱⁱ



How easy is it to ask for information?

What parents tell us

As part of our Just Ask campaign we undertook a survey at the end of 2006, asking parents what they thought about asking for help and, if they have looked for information or advice, where did they go and how did it feel talking to someone outside the family? (Appendix 1)

Talking to professionals

The overall impression from this survey is that parents continue to find it very difficult to talk to professionals or frontline workers honestly and openly. They feel judged as failing and talk about how practical information can be asked for but help and support is just not possible:

“Ok asking for help but getting it is a completely different matter. There is also the fear that you will get labelled as a bad parent but when you need the help you get past that stage.”

"Not emotional support - I would feel they are judging me as an incapable parent. But I'm more than happy to enlist their help in relation to school-related topics (homework, bullying etc) and asking my GP for support with housing problems etc."

"Yes but they all seem to be on the children's side - parents are always the villains!"

"Yes there is no one to talk to as I felt I am only one got problems cos I am deaf and I have no ideas of how to find those people to talk to...social worker? I don't know if social worker would help? I don't felt very comfortable to talk on typetalk as it is not the same as talking to face to face...as I find it more easy to talk to someone so I can able to get more information."

"It's enough to help with practical problems, if all you need is information in terms of contact details, or info on immunisation jabs, etc, but not for emotive, personal support, I find 'tips' and such so patronising and hardly ever relevant to me."

Parents also raise concerns about the quality and appropriateness of the help offered when they eventually are offered it:

"I often turn to professionals for help and feel confident to do this however, often I do not feel that I am getting the response I should and this is very frustrating as is it leaves you feeling you have nowhere to turn."

"Practical advice, yes, emotional no. Sometimes, but I don't want to feel inadequate."

"Sometimes, my health visitor isn't that friendly. There isn't really anyone I can talk to properly."

Talking to friends and families

As is so often the case when we talk to parents, it is family and friends who parents like to talk to but even then, parents are wary of elaborating on their problems because they are protective of their child and do not want her or him to be seen as a problem:

"We all have children/are involved in a child's life, so share experiences and swap stories, both the good and the bad! It helps to know that my child is 'normal' when he acts up in supermarkets or constantly demands attention at home - they all do this to varying degrees, and at different stages of their lives."

"Yes I do have some friends and relatives I can talk to but sometimes I need someone more independent. My husband tries to be supportive but it is difficult for him to understand and he has 'father issues' of his own from his own childhood...general day to day worries and some times more emotional issues. It usually helps but sometimes you need some one anonymous and distant who is not involved and independent."

"Yes but I feel I cannot tell them everything because I do not want them to think badly of my son because I believe he cannot help all the things he is doing, because he can also be a very loving child."

When there is no where to turn to

The level of isolation and feelings of inadequacy never fail to concern us. Reading some of these heartrending stories must influence all those who work with parents to ensure that parents are reached and the care they are offered is non judgmental, responsive, meets the individual need and wherever possible is parent to parent.

"No one who really understands, his dad says its just his age but he's not here when he's making me feel worthless."

"I cannot talk to anyone about how I feel about my kids, anxiety, fears, disappointment etc."

"Sometimes I feel like there is no-one who I can talk to who will understand and not judge or throw their opinions at me."

"Key problems are lack of understanding. Death is not a topic many can deal with as we do not as a nation deal with it well."

The parents' wish list

We also asked for a parent's 'wish-list' – what would they most like parents to be able to have, to help them with their family life? Here is a snap shot of what they told us:

"More help for parents, mainly mothers not to be put under pressure to put employment before your children. New law for working parents. This is a wish but free nursery. Ways of coping with bad behaviour and tiredness."

"I firmly believe that the best thing any of us can do for someone else is to listen to them. All families/parents need someone to listen to them from time to time."

"A magic wand would be nice!"

"Somewhere to encourage kids to go to discuss their concerns and to get them off the streets, a group I could go to to discuss experiences and get some tips and advice from other parents in the same situation. This would also be very supportive, it could have made a world of difference to the quality of my life."

"Love and the knowledge there is a friendly network of other people about who also like and care about your children.

Backed up with: Money. Decent housing. Gardens. Normal neighbours - no 'social housing' dumped among the drunks and junkies with no way out. Ways to meet for enjoyment not for 'coping' - parenting is not always a problem, loneliness always is."

"Help. Help around the house with the children with everything because no one else does it except you the cooking cleaning working ironing washing but still you look after the kids at the same time....."

"A counsellor, mentor, sympathetic police. Enforced camps or attendance centres for troubled teens, where they have to attend. I want there to be somewhere for us to go and speak to someone BEFORE the teen gets into serious trouble, when we can see the signs. There is help there once your child comes out of or is sent to prison, why not before?"

Recommendations – what works

Parentline Plus recommends the following to ensure parents and carers have the confidence to see that they have a right to ask for help and that the help they are given is supportive, appropriate and non-judgmental.

Public education

- Investment in a public education campaign developed with parents for parents delivered by independent and trusted organisations.

- An understanding that parents want to stay in control of the choices they make about their family. They must be able to self-select whatever level of information, support or advice they need.
- Even when referred to specialist services because of concerns about their own or their children's well-being, parents should have an important say in the types of services provided.
- An entitlement for parents for assessment at their own instigation.

Local services and commissioning

- Commitment to high quality, evidence-based universal and targeted services.
- An understanding of the need of parents for independent and confidential support.
- Accredited training to the National Occupational Standards for any professional working with parents.
- Commitment to working toward a kite-making or quality assurance scheme for all providers of parenting and family support services.
- Regulations that make it imperative to consult parents about services for themselves and their children, as well as consulting children and young people.
- Acceptance that one size does not fit all parents. Flexible high quality and affordable services, must be available and targets must reflect the needs and cultural beliefs of all parents whatever their ethnicity, gender and personal situation.
- There must be recognition that extended schools and children centres need the resources to be creative and innovative if they are to deliver effective support for parents.

National services

- Existing generalist independent parenting and support information and helplines should be expanded to provide an integrated national helpline information, advice, signposting and referrals system for parents and carers.
- Acknowledgement that web-based sources are the information channels of the future.

"I don't want to ask for help, for many issues about being a parent, because of the fear of being labelled a bad parent. The Parentline Plus helpline is invaluable for getting advice, or just generally having somewhere to get it all off my chest. I don't think there is enough support from 'official' places - again, the fear of being labelled puts you off. Confidential support is invaluable."

ⁱ Janet Boddy, Marjorie Smith & Antonia Simon, 2003, *Evaluation of Parentline Plus*

ⁱⁱ Parentline Plus Helpline Data 2004-2005.



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