

PARENTING BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

**Seeking help and feelings of failure:
how to make the difference for parents and families**

**A report by Parentline Plus
October 2005**

Parentline_{plus}

Because instructions aren't included

PARENTING BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

Seeking help and feelings of failure: how to make a difference for parents and families

"Being a parent is something you do. It's a roller coaster... the highs and joys are better than anything you can describe, but the lows and difficulties are much harder than anything you could have predicted. And it keeps changing as circumstances change and as children get older so you can never be sure what will be needed of you and whether you will feel up to the task."

INTRODUCTION

Parentline Plus, as the largest independent provider of parenting support in the UK, is concerned that many parents do not access the services available to them. Parenting is so private and intimate, that parents remain unwilling to admit publicly how difficult it can be. As a result, many feel unable to ask for help which could make significant improvements to their lives and the lives of their children.

It is made more difficult to admit to difficulties because it is perceived that the state and those providing public sector services intervene when it thinks that parents are doing a bad job, rather than acknowledging that all parents intend to do a good job and thus are entitled to help. It is also difficult because government currently tends to tell parents about the things it thinks matter rather than responding to the issues that parents think matter to them and to their children, and so parents have no incentive to admit to difficulties.

Parentline Plus exists to support parents and carers by providing parent to parent services. During the last year alone, the charity has helped over 160,000 parents directly, whilst reaching out to many thousands more through extensive public education programmes and web-based information, support and signposting. A look at the concerns raised by parents using Parentline Plus services - often at a time of crisis - clearly shows that families are facing a range

of huge difficulties. These issues only come to light when parents are so desperate that they will make contact despite all the difficulties that asking for help presents.¹

We can therefore surmise that below the surface millions of families are living with stressful situations, and keeping their anxiety private and within the family, because they are frightened about what could happen to them if they reached out for help at any level.

"Our family life is ours alone. It's private whatever the problems. Sometimes we talk to our family or maybe a friend who is in the same boat, but a lot gets unsaid."

JUST ASK



Parentline Plus is concerned that parents feel it is unjustified to ask for help and support, whatever that level may be, and only seem to ask for it when situations have reached crisis point or are so deeply entrenched that they feel helpless and hopeless. This has led to the development of the new Just Ask campaign, which aims to persuade and encourage parents to use services when they need an extra helping hand. The campaign message, above all, is that there is no stigma attached in talking about your family problems, but rather that it is a sign of strength.

The message also enforces that accessing information, advice and support, designed and delivered in partnerships and, where possible, parent to parent, really works. Part of this effectiveness is the ability of such services, often delivered by the voluntary sector, to encourage parents and families make better use of statutory services. To ensure therefore that appropriate and less

stigmatised health, educational, and social care services are available to parents, the campaign targets policy makers, commissioners and providers.

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.

"Sometimes in life there are chance happenings that change our lives for the better and Parentline Plus was that sort of chance for me. It gave me the means to cope with my daughter and helped in other areas of life like work and dealing with other people and friends."

THE EVIDENCE

Parentline Plus evidence

There is a real contradiction between what surveys and research show about parents seeking support, i.e. 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 a failure by the parents themselves.
- Most parents prefer to talk to other parents - their first port of call is usually to talk about their family life with family and friends (but 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 resulting from this. How they tackle these problems are seen to be private - asking for help means the risk of putting these situations in 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 matters. Parents are adamant that they feel uncomfortable receiving support in schools - particularly secondary schools. Some of the reasons given include that their child doesn't want to see them at school, and also a very strong feeling that they do not want other parents or teachers to know they might have problems.
- Parents perceive helplines, whether generalist or specialist, as there for those in crisis. Some parents even felt that they could not access such valued support because they would be taking time from other families, who they perceived as needing it more.
- 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 analyse the reasons given by parents who ring us. Parents contacting Parentline Plus often have multiple problems; they talk about highly stressful and very entrenched situations, and are often in crisis.²

It is quite clear from our extensive call data that parents need emotional support and a

chance to offload. They also need ideas and strategies about how to find solutions to their problems. The depth of their concerns clearly demonstrates that when parents are desperate enough to seek help, their problems are so complex that there is often much more than one call needed to help parents see their way out of the crises. *Appendix I gives details of the main issues raised by parents calling Parentline Plus.*

An analysis of parents who ring, also points to key groups needing support, especially lone parents. Last year, 46% of callers were lone parents and parents of teenagers made 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.³

"Sometimes as a single mother, you can feel very alone and not sure you are doing the right thing. But you have made me feel a lot better and stronger. Keep up the good work

Parents, families and responsibilities

Parents want to do the best for their children. They understand and value their responsibility to:

- Provide love, care, attention and encouragement for their children to enable them to thrive, physically and emotionally.
- Teach their children a sense of values and enable the child to have a clear sense of their own identity, race and culture.
- Listen to their children and make informed decisions to promote each child's health and education and overall well-being.
- Provide materially and financially for their children, accessing state support if necessary.
- Enable their children to mature and take appropriate responsibility for decisions as they grow older.

and thanks again."

Parents want to stay in control of their family - to make informed choices and to be respected for doing so. The state, therefore, has a responsibility to parents to respect the importance of their role and that when parents need assistance or help, they are listened to and supported, rather than judged.

THE RESEARCH EVIDENCE

The history of parenting and family support

Any trawl through academic and more generalist search engines reveal a paucity of research aimed at finding out what parents want, rather than evaluating interventions that have been made. For example, in a review of international evidence of 'what works' in parenting support, Moran and colleagues (2004)⁴ wrote more than 200 pages on various parenting programmes, sometimes noting high drop-out rates, and concluded that there was a need for both universal interventions (as opposed to services available) and for 'targeted interventions (aimed at specific populations or individuals deemed to be at risk for parenting difficulties) to tackle more complex types of parenting difficulties'.

There was no reference to evidence of what parents wanted or thought best. Whilst the same report also noted the importance of 'normalising' access to support, its conclusions reinforce the dichotomy at the heart of much of family support - wanting to tell parents (predominantly mothers) what their problems are, rather than asking parents what their problems are.

State provision has grown in response to the perceived shortcomings of parents - and implicitly those of mothers. Health visiting services were established to teach low

income mothers to feed and care for their children adequately, following concerns over high infant mortality rates.⁵ Most parenting provisions continue to be aimed at mothers rather than at fathers, and it is quite clear that to reach fathers specialist and targeted work is required.⁶ Yet, research also shows that fathers' access to help is generally mediated by mothers.⁷

Continuing the tradition of the state intervening when it believes parents need more help, government continues to provide information that it wants parents to have (for example about healthy diets, school attendance or the importance of reading to babies). Yet, parents think that the role of the state should focus less on telling them what is needed and more on making sure that the 'permitting circumstances'⁸ to enable children to thrive are in place. These include childcare, schooling, health provision, but goes beyond this to also include housing, transport, income, leisure and recreation and communications.

The National Family and Parenting Institute (NFPI) (2002)⁹ notes that, poverty-related issues are 'not registering as priorities in service providers' assessments'. Parenting difficulties, marital conflict, mental illness, drugs, self harm, and disability can affect everyone, but for many parents the impact of family problems can be reduced through the purchasing of services - nannies, sports clubs, counsellors, educational psychologists or babysitters. For those who cannot afford these choices, provision may be rationed, unavailable or subject to scrutiny within an environment that may already be punitive towards family life.

Where and how parents want to access support

Both NFPI (2002)¹⁰ and Quinton (2004)¹¹ agree that how parenting support is

delivered is crucial, and that parents need to feel in control of their situation. Quinton goes on to say that parents need to be able to solve their problems, even with help, by themselves and that they should be treated as experts. Support must be seen as a partnership between the service provider and the service user.

This suggests that parents are more likely to accept support from someone who is also a parent. Grimshaw and McGuire (1998)¹² found that with parenting programmes, parents prefer leaders who are also parents themselves and to select from ideas put forward rather than being told what to do. The same research also noted that both parents and agencies thought programmes should lead to benefits arising from group support, such as a support network of friends, improved parent-child relationships and greater knowledge of child-related issues.

Such findings are reinforced by a study of over 1,100 parents (Gillies and Edwards, 2003),¹³ which found that more than three quarters saw family and friends as the most appropriate sources of support for parents, with just under half feeling that only those with children of their own should advise people. The authors note that, 'Well over half the sample did not feel that parents need professional advice and guidance to help them bring up their children'.

Parents did, however, still see a role for the state and professionals in providing material help, be it financial or housing, or advice in relation to institutionalised areas of their children's lives, such as health or school. The study finds support in an NFPI survey (2001)¹⁴, which considered the views of 1,391 parents and found that 48% did not want more information about child development, with government sources of information being seen as less popular than information available from family and

friends, their GP, school or playgroup.

Lack of services

Research suggests that many parents know what their children's problems are, yet cannot access the service that they want or have to wait too long to receive it. For example, in a survey of parents who were receiving services from one local authority (Buchanan, Ritchie and Bream, 2001) ¹⁵, 83% of those with parent-child difficulties said that they would have liked help sooner, with 84% agreeing that, "Things have to reach crisis point before they [social services] help".

"I wanted help when he was 18 months but it was only when there was the possibility of exclusion at 5 that social services helped."

The same research asked parents to identify which services, from a list of 24, they would have liked and which they actually received. All parents were social service clients with children of school-age. The services most frequently given were parenting advice and support, one-to-one work with the children and help with children's behaviour. The services that parents most frequently identified as those they actually wanted were support with depression (38%), an opportunity to meet others in the same position (32%) and counselling (33%), yet two-thirds did not have their needs met. In five popular services - relationship counselling, debt counselling, anxiety management, assertiveness management and stress management, fewer than 25% of clients had their needs met. Only 8% of the sample received all the services they wanted.

The arguments against parents choosing and obtaining the services that they want are largely those of resource rationing and professionalism. In contrast to the NHS, where GPs act as gatekeepers to more specialist resources on the basis of need,

with relatively little questioning of their professional ability to know better than their patients, parents - as the research by Gillies and Edwards (2003) makes clear - tend to feel that they know more than social workers or non-specialist service providers, and indeed they do. Parenting and family life is much more complicated than medical diagnoses. It is about personal histories, connections, relationships, values... and most of all about love.

Parents, quite understandably, have to be in control of any intervention in this most private and intimate of arenas, and even when children are at risk, all the research evidence shows that working in partnership with parents and the wider family is the only way to improve outcomes for children and to reduce the risks.¹⁶

THE CURRENT SITUATION

The evolution of the welfare state from the Poor Laws, and the voluntary organisations set up to offset their shortcomings, has left us with a pattern of provision seemingly targeted - if no longer explicitly - at those on low incomes on the basis of perceived need.

It has so far proved impossible to move away from this model. The ambitious and welcome Sure Start programme is a case in point. The Sure Start programme, although universal within the geographical areas it is based in, was only made available in the poorest parts of the country.

More recently, the Every Child Matters programme of change has moved toward a more universal model, promising local needs' assessments and a children's centre in every community by 2010. However, these will provide much higher levels of parenting support services in areas of economic disadvantage than in other more affluent areas.

Family support has never been so high on the political agenda. The Every Child Matters programme will build on the existing patchy level of parenting services, but without an on-going campaign to persuade parents that there is no blame attached to seeking information, advice and support, many thousands of parents will continue to parent behind closed doors.

TOWARDS SOLUTIONS

"Parentline Plus helped build up my self-confidence and made me see I'm doing a very worthwhile and important job looking after my daughter. Now that I've found the way forward I can talk to her about taking responsibility for her own actions and I'm less demanding."

Parent participation

Parents are the biggest single influence on their children, and are of critical importance to achieving good outcomes for children.¹⁷ As such, their views and experiences must form part of the local commissioning process for services for children and families, along with the views of children and young people. The Family Policy Alliance has produced a toolkit on parent participation¹⁸, together with a handy bookmark that summarises what parents want from services as a reminder for professionals and for commissioners.

The resources available for parent support will only change when parents themselves demand this from local and national politicians, and begin to recognise that as citizens and voters, their voice counts.

Parent to parent

"Talking to another parent made so much difference. It seems OK to be miserable and worried when someone else knows exactly what you're talking about."

Among the range of universal and targeted services on offer to parents, a key element in the mix is the availability of parent to parent services. This is particularly needed where parents and families do not make good use of statutory services or do not have a strong network of family and friends as their first port of call.

In consultation, many parents say they value talking with other parents. Parents who are trained and supported to provide parenting support are an effective way of regenerating communities, enhancing community capacity, and developing the social care workforce. Government initiatives aimed at workforce development and at community regeneration must acknowledge and build on parent to parent services, especially volunteering by parents in organisations such as Parentline Plus, Home-Start and the wide range of local mentoring and befriending programmes that exist countrywide.

There is nothing more effective in demonstrating that family support works, than to hear what parents say about the help they found and the difference it made. When more parents hear these voices, they will be reassured and be encouraged to seek out information, advice and support. Parentline Plus' Just Ask campaign is facilitating parents to hear the voices of other parents and offering access to support where there is a parent, trained and supported, to talk things through with them and to help them find solutions that will work for them and their family.

Entitlement

Current legislation only entitles parents to any assessment of their or their child's need if the child is 'in need' or 'at risk of significant harm' - both are provisions of the 1989 Children Act. Access to services also exists as part of parenting orders, but most parents

receiving parenting support in this way had been asking for help for years, but it was not available to them because their child's behaviour was not sufficiently problematic. Parentline Plus, working within the Family Policy Alliance, (Family Welfare Association, Family Rights Group and Parentline Plus) would like to see an amendment to the Children Act so that parents would have an entitlement to assessment for services at their own instigation, along with the development of a self-assessment process by parents. This would help to identify levels of need and demand, so that service provision could be planned responsively. These ideas are expanded in a Family Policy Alliance briefing paper.¹⁹

Universal and targeted services

Policy and resource allocation for parenting and family support has an inherent tension about whether services and resources should be targeted to the most vulnerable and needy families, or whether it should be universal. This tension is not simply about resources but is also about understanding how different parents access services, and about understanding the types of difficulties that parents have.

Families who are living at the margins of society, who are disadvantaged as a result of poverty, poor housing, race or disability, find it very difficult to access any services at all. Unless services are targeted to them, and designed to meet their needs, they will not access them. But, because of the level of stigma attached to asking for help with parenting difficulties, if the only services available are targeted at the most vulnerable, it appears to say to them that they are bad parents because they are poor or disabled or black, which is patently untrue. Moreover, because all parents face difficulties from time to time, all parents need to be able to access support. The availability

of universal services to support parents provides access routes to all parents in a context of saying that parenting can be difficult and that parents need and deserve support with this role.

The development of extended schools and children's centres provide an important opportunity for universal services to develop. However, not all parents feel comfortable with schools²⁰ and therefore community outreach work from schools will have to be an important feature. Schools and children's centres must be resourced with staffing, space and time to develop the range of services and responses that are required locally, and to know how these connect to more targeted services.

Equally, new initiatives such as these should not be at the expense of small scale and more focused services such as neighbourhood family centres that, research shows, are greatly valued by some of the most socially isolated families and vulnerable children.²¹

Public education and information

Parents must be able to stay in control of the choices they make about their family, provided that it is safe to do so. This means that they should be able to self-select the level of information, support or advice that they need. But to do this, information about advice and support services and about parenting needs to be much more readily available.

A public education campaign that is developed by parents for parents, delivered by independent and trusted organisations, could normalise the ups and downs of family life, and highlight sources of information, advice and support.

Such a campaign needs to be supported by strengthening the existing parenting

information, advice and support network of helplines into a more integrated service offering signposting and referrals, as well as a full range of independent advice, information and support in response to parents' needs. Expanding the scope of Children Information Services and developing web-based information provision is welcome in this context.

Such a campaign also needs to be supported by strengthening the accessibility of information online and enabling all parents to access the internet so that they can seek information in privacy.

Quality assurance

Any service that offers parents help of any kind is by definition intervening in the most intimate and private of arenas. Not only does this mean that government should be extremely wary of providing this itself, but it also means that we urgently need to reassure parents of the quality of provision that they access. Anyone wanting an electrician can at least reassure themselves that they are members of a professional association, which offers some protection to the consumer. The same is not the case for parenting support services. We now have National Occupational Standards for working with parents²² and anyone offering services to parents should have staff trained and working within those standards. Over the next few years we need to look at developing some sort of kite-marking scheme so that parents and commissioners can be assured about the quality of the service.

Who do parents turn to?

It is clear that most parents turn first to their family and friends, and then to teachers and health professionals for information and support. An important minority, however, of the most vulnerable families look outside

family and neighbourhood because of fear of losing control or a sense of shame.²³ The bigger their difficulties, the more isolated parents tend to feel, and the less likely they are to turn to anyone for help and support.²⁴ This has huge implications for training and for public education.

Given that parents will turn to family and friends, the general public needs access to information about the kinds of difficulties that parents and children face, the range of services available locally and nationally, and the types of solutions that can work. This can only be achieved by long-term sustained public education campaigns.

At the same time, given that parents also turn to more generalist professionals, who are overstretched, they need some training to ensure that when they are turned to, they can listen, help to unravel the difficulties and signpost or refer parents appropriately. This is not the same as becoming the counsellor or social worker or parent support worker, but it does require particular skills that do not form part of the initial training of most teachers or GPs or health visitors. Such training has been developed for health visitors²⁵ and has shown to make a real difference to how they are able to support parents.

CONCLUSION

This briefing clearly shows a significant discrepancy between what parents who do not use services feel about asking for help, and what parents say after they have been supported by services that work for them. It is significant that where parents act as 'consumers' - for instance in the case of their child's education - they pursue and absorb information, advice and support. This should be case throughout their children's upbringing, whatever the concern.

The challenge to any professionals and policy makers looking to deliver and expand parenting support is to face this discrepancy full on.

Government and society is taking a very real risk of having to continue to intervene at great expense where individual families are in crisis if we do not invest in demonstrating respect for parents' very real desire to do the best for their family. The 'respect' agenda needs to reflect this - when services and politicians are respectful of parents, parents in turn will encourage respectful use of services by all the family.

This investment must not only enable universal, high quality and accessible family support, but must emphasise through independent public education campaigns, that all parents have a right to ask for support, and that doing so is a sign of strength.

Family life does not come with a set of instructions and this message is key to enabling parents to feel that they are entitled to ask for help, and that asking for it, far from indicating that they are 'bad' parents, indicates that they are good parents because they are actively engaged and responsible. Equally important to such campaigns is the importance of making sure that parents can trust the messenger. If the state is telling parents that they are entitled to ask for help, while at the same time threatening to imprison them for failing to get their children to school, it is important that the help provided is independent and confidential.

"Sometimes just having someone listening just makes all the difference. Parents sometimes need help - we shouldn't be afraid to ask someone to listen to us."

SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

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's 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.

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APPENDIX 1

Parentline Plus call data analysis

Summary of the issues raised by parents calling the Parentline Plus helpline

section	of all forms %
Children - challenging behaviour	119%
Children - emotional state	69%
Adults - isolation and loneliness	44%
Children - divorce and separation	35%
Adults - divorce and separation	31%
Adults - abuse	30%
Adults - couple disagreements and conflict	27%
Children - school and educational concerns	26%
Adults - mental health	21%
Children - bullying	20%
Children - mental health	18%
Children - abuse	14%
Adults - finances	13%
Children - early developmental issues	10%
Children - sex	8%
Adults - physical health	5%
Children - physical health	4%

Please note, callers to the Parentline Plus helpline may phone about more than one issue or more than one child per call.



Parentline Plus: 520 Highgate Studios, 53-79 Highgate Road, Kentish Town, London NW5 1TL
Free helpline: 0808 800 2222 Free textphone (for people with a speech or hearing impairment): 0800 783 6783
Email helpline: parentsupport@parentlineplus.org.uk Website: www.parentlineplus.org.uk

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