



Parentline Plus' response to The Primary Review.

February 2007

Parentline Plus is a national charity that works for, and with, parents. We are the biggest independent provider of parenting support in the country. We encourage parents to see that asking for help is a sign of strength, and work with them to offer practical solutions and to suggest ways to manage their particular situations and difficulties. We deliver this support through an innovative range of free, flexible, responsive services - shaped by parents for parents. Our flagship service is our free, confidential telephone line for parents – Parentline. Our integrated face to face services are delivered in our fourteen area offices located across England. We also provide information leaflets to meet parents' concerns through each stage of their child's development; a website with downloadable information for parents, resources for professionals and active message boards and email support offering a confidential, personal response to specific issues.

Parentline Plus' programme of family support is built on our understanding of how and why parents struggle. Key to its effectiveness is our use of parent to parent support which enables us to deliver non-stigmatising and respectful services, reaching traditionally hard-to-reach groups – both mothers and fathers, and those from different socio-economic, ethnic and faith groups. Our services are whole family focused. Our ethos evolves from a preventive and participative principle, working with parents to deliver long term positive outcomes for their particular child or children and family as against more directive behavioural programmes designed to influence specific behavioural problems demonstrated by the child. We understand that parents want to stay in control of their family life. They want the building blocks which allow them to make decisions and choices for their children and for themselves¹ and we work with them to look at solutions which will enable them to make such informed choices.

Parentline Plus's response has been compiled by Hilary Chamberlain, Policy Manager. If you have any questions or if you would like further clarifications please contact: hilaryc@parentlineplus.org.uk

This response concentrates on the questions that have been posed by the Primary Review Team that relate to parents in particular. These questions fall into themes 7-10 but please note that not all of the questions have a direct relevance to parents and therefore some have been omitted.

Theme 7 - Parenting, Caring and Educating.

- *What are the parenting and caring conditions on which children's welfare and their successful primary education depend?*

There are two factors to be considered when answering this question. The first is what Desforges refers to as "good at-home parenting"ⁱⁱ which is the provision of a secure and stable environment, intellectual stimulation, parent-child discussion, good models of social and educational values and high aspirations relating in personal fulfilment and good citizenship. Our own experience would back Desforges' other findings which are:

- That parental involvement is strongly influenced by:
 - Family social class
 - Mother's experience of education
 - Mother's health, including mental health
 - Degree of poverty or wealth in the home
 - Single parent status
 - Attitudes of staff within the school
 - And ethnicity to a lesser extent
- That parental involvement in education reduces as children grow older and as young people take on more responsibility for their own lives.
- That parental involvement is more likely with a highly achieving pupil than with a struggling pupil.
- That children's own attitudes are crucial. They hold a strong mediating role between parents and schools.
- That there is an increased need for parenting support and high levels of appreciation from those who receive support.
- That the research evaluating many parenting support programmes is not robust enough for the UK context. This does not mean that the programmes are not working but that the government prefers statistical evaluations, and these have not been funded in the UK context, so apply to overseas programmes only.

The second overarching factor is the concept of mutuality. If parents and school staff have mutual trust, mutual respect, mutual tolerance and mutual consideration then effective relationships can be built and sustained. Most parents start their relationship with school with positive aspirations for their children but many parents become disaffected during their children's primary school years because of their experiences. A sense of mutuality would help parents and school staff to understand each other's points of view and help to restore confidence after a particular concern had been raised.

- *But what, too, should educational and other services do to support parents and carers in their work? How are the challenges of home-school relationships most effectively met?*

Beyond demonstrating mutual trust and respect, when devising support, whether universal or targeted, it is essential that schools understand the innate wariness of parents to seek or to take up support early on. This is particularly apposite when looking at interventions geared to the more hard to reach families. Research shows

that many socially excluded families are isolated and make little use of social support networks of family and friends – often because these networks rely on reciprocity and families facing many challenges feel they have nothing to give in return.ⁱⁱⁱ

Research also shows that families who lack social networks are less likely to use formal services because it is usually word of mouth that enables parents to feel that a service will be beneficial to them. They also respond and want parent to parent delivery and as such, services have to reflect informal, social or family support networks.

Development of intervention needs to reflect the fact that most parents need a mixture of information, advice and support across a spectrum of need. Many do not distinguish between information, advice or support- so long as it answers their question and points them to a range of solutions enabling them to act to solve their problem. There is a crucial difference between the family learning programmes that many schools already run (such as literacy, ICT, English language and helping your child at school) and parenting support programmes (such as behaviour management, confidence building and child development). Both types of programme offer parents opportunities to learn from each other and to network with each other and both types of programmes have their own value. But if supporting parents is what schools are requested to do then family learning is simply not enough to tackle social exclusion and ensure that all children reach their full potential.

In our experience a number of factors are of critical importance in working with families:

- A willingness to facilitate parents attendance at events by providing practical support such crèches, refreshments and interpreters when necessary and also timing events to suit parents.
- A willingness to build a trusting relationship with the parent/carer – and this is not compatible with being the same person to issue a fine/penalty notice etc.
- A willingness to work alongside the parent – and this is compatible with child safety and protection BUT only if the worker is very well trained and very well supported and supervised.
- A willingness to hold confidentiality unless a child or another person is at risk of harm – and this can be difficult for statutory agencies, and also requires very well trained and supervised staff.
- Good working relationships with other agencies on the ground, so that further support can be obtained for family members, and agencies can intervene in risky and potentially dangerous situations.
- Often good working protocols are needed.

Parents must feel ownership of the support they are offered – acknowledging its appropriateness and being reassured that any service has been developed with the understanding of parental need. This cannot take place without parental involvement in the planning and delivery of services. Consultation with children and young people about the messages that would influence them is also recommended – especially in the development of information at key life cycle events.

- *By what means can parents/carers, teachers and other professionals operate as far as possible in harmony and pursue goals which, while not identical, are not in such conflict that they damage the child's educational prospects?*

The concept of mutuality is valuable here. Shared expectations and shared understanding would help parents and school staff to work co-operatively in the best interests of the children. As the more powerful partner schools could emphasise their willingness to listen to parental points of view by:

- holding information sharing events rather than information giving events
- establishing and maintaining dialogue with parents throughout their child's time at the school
- communicating with parents in a medium (speech, letters, email, different languages for community groups etc) and manner (tone, respect, patience etc) that works for both the parents and the school

Theme 8 – Beyond the school.

- *What do we know about children's lives beyond school and the impact on their development and education of those groups and influences - family, peer, community, media and so on - to which they are subject?*

Children spend a greater part of their waking hours away from school and under the influence of any of the factors mentioned above. School staff and the state do not always remember this as children's lives become ever more regulated. It would be helpful for bodies such as the teacher unions to ease off the culture of blame towards parents whenever a concern is raised at school. The concept of "in loco parentis" is considered out of date by many school staff but it may be helpful to reintroduce it as schools are asked to extend their behaviour policies beyond the school gate. Schools and parents have to work co-operatively to support children's progress and that co-operation is damaged if there is a culture of blame.

- *What is the current division of responsibilities between the people, institutions and agencies who are principally concerned with young children's education and those who are concerned with their upbringing and welfare – parents and carers especially, but also health services, social services and other statutory and voluntary agencies?*

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 the 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 such as schools, intervenes when they think parents are doing a bad job, rather than acknowledging that all parents intend to do a good job and thus are entitled to help.

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. One parent told us *"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"*.

- *How successfully does the work of these people and agencies articulate and cohere?*

The essence of this question is interagency co-operation, acting to achieve the very best outcome for the children and family. Practitioners working with parents and children must be given skills building training from the outset. An effective

workforce is essential to the delivery of high quality services and appropriate signposting or referral to specialist services, both local and national. On going development and high quality supervision should be offered as a matter of course.

Agencies should demonstrate respect and responsiveness- recognising that parents need to be seen to be in control of the decisions made about their family except where there is risk of harm to children....

- *In the context of changing familial demographics and growing concern about young children's wellbeing, might these relationships, and the attendant responsibilities, be differently conceived?*

Interagency working has to be promoted and old territories surrendered in order to provide the responsive, sustainable, customised support services that parents want. Funding is currently challenging to access and often offered for short term projects which make sustainability difficult. More investment is needed and more of that investment should be long term. Commissioning structures should not be an obstacle to parents accessing support when they need it. Both resident and non-resident parents should be able to have an effective relationship with their children's school. This does not necessarily mean extra time or extra expense for the school but it will have to show a commitment to engaging others.

Theme 9 - Structures and Phases.

- *When should formal schooling start, bearing in mind that many other countries start later than we do and conceive of the relationship of pre-school and formal schooling somewhat differently?*

There is a growing trend for the whole cohort of pupils to be admitted to Reception classes in the September before they turn five. This decision would appear to be made for financial and staff retention reasons rather than being in the best interests of the children. Parents are ambivalent about the best age for children to start school but would like to hold on to the autonomy to decide whether or not starting school before the term after their child's fifth birthday is in the best interests of their child. Many parents feel pressurised into adhering to school preferences, rather than their own, because they do not want to stand out from the crowd or to appear awkward in any way before their child has even started at school.

Whilst remembering that the principle purpose of a primary school is not a child care service, and the needs of these young children should be paramount; staggered starts for pupils are very difficult for working parents to manage because of irregular times for the start and end of the day for many weeks. This is particularly difficult for families who have become used to fulltime care during their child's pre-school years. Some parents are fortunate enough to have flexible employers and flexible childcare but it is important to remember that most all parents are in that position.

Theme 10 - Funding and Governance.

- *Through what system of school governance are the interests of children, teachers, parents and local communities most effectively and equitably addressed?*

Parents rarely contact us about concerns with school governance. This could be read as a sign of contentment or as a sign of bewilderment. Parents value the opportunity to make representation to school governors either through the now optional annual meeting or directly when they have particular praise or concerns.

ⁱ Quinton D, *Supporting Parents, messages from Research*. DH, DfES, 2004

ⁱⁱ Desforges C. with Abouchaar A., *The Impact of Parental Involvement, Parental Support and Family Education on Pupil Achievement and Adjustment: A Literature Review* DfES Research Report 433, 2003

ⁱⁱⁱ Quoted in Gbate, D., *Parenting in Poor Environments: Stress, Support & Coping* (2002)