

Submission by Parentline Plus

Committee Inquiry – Behaviour and Discipline in Schools

Parentline Plus, part of the Family Lives Group is the leading provider of family and parenting support in England. We work with over 700,000 families a year to improve the lives of around 1 million children. One of our services is a free 24 hour helpline. 27% of the calls to that helpline over the last two years were from families seeking advice on how to manage their child's behaviour.

We welcome this timely inquiry, at a point where new policies aimed at improving pupil behaviour are being considered and announced. We consider good pupil behaviour, including regular and timely attendance at school, to be a central component of academic attainment. We believe that a child's family play a vital role in children's behaviour, and where behaviour is a problem, supporting a family to change their child's behaviour can be extremely effective. Conversely, if a family is undermining the discipline delivered in school then a child can be receiving mixed messages about the correct way to behave and they will be likely to become more disruptive, or their attendance may worsen.

Parentline Plus has been working in collaboration with the Teacher Support Network over the past year to understand the dynamic between teachers and families, where this relationship can experience strain and how best to enable schools and families to work together and achieve the best for children. In 2009 the two organisations published a report "Beyond the School Gate" which looked at surveys of our respective service users, case studies and existing research evidence and drew a number of conclusions about barriers that prevent families from engaging with their child's school.

Our report found that a parent's own experience of the education system can affect their ability and desire to work with their child's school. For some parents, a feeling that the education system did not work for them leads to them placing less emphasis on the importance of getting a good education. This may make them less likely to instil their child with the necessary motivation and incentive to stay in school, behave well and learn. For many of the parents we have worked with, the school environment remains for them an alien and intimidating one, leaving them feeling anxious and panic stricken during dealings with teachers and school staff. We have heard from parents who have described being unable to take in what they are being told about their child's behaviour because of the anxiety they feel in the school environment.

One of the main difficulties in the home which can affect a child's behaviour in school can be a chaotic or disordered home environment – for example if a family is going through a difficult relationship breakdown, perhaps including conflict and animosity, this may be played out in the child's behaviour. In some cases, the impact of family breakdown on behaviour may be short term and in other cases the impact has been shown to be longer term.

There are other family circumstances which may be more entrenched difficulties that affect a child's behaviour. Parents may have mental health difficulties, drug and alcohol addictions or other factors which may inhibit a family from providing a stable home with a routine including nourishing food and sufficient sleep. This is likely to impact on a child's behaviour both inside and outside of the classroom.

The families described above may have varying levels of need. Obviously, schools and teachers cannot be expected to meet those needs, as they may require a number of specialist interventions. Our experience of working in schools has shown that having a non-statutory body such as Parentline Plus working with the family to help improve the child's behaviour and act as a link with the school, helping the family to identify solutions with the school that will work for the child.

Communication between a school and a child's family is key, particularly where behaviour is unacceptable. In a survey of parents conducted on Parentline Plus' website in October 2009, 62% of parents reported that they had felt patronised, sidelined or ignored when trying to deal with an issue in their child's school. Many parents felt that they only heard from their child's school when something was wrong. Many others felt that there was a lack of clarity in the communications, for example they would get a text message with a piece of information but no indication of what action was needed from the family. In some cases, technology had caused problems with inaccurate text messages or emails being generated saying that a child had been in trouble at school when in fact they had not. This undermined the discipline and made communications between school and home more difficult.

It is essential that communication between schools and families is got right. Our survey also showed that in some cases parents had what teacher's considered to be unrealistic expectations about frequency of communication and having a named contact at the school with an email address. In some schools, this would mean teachers spending so much time communicating with families that no time would be left to teach the children. There were, however, many examples of good practice with schools using the school environment to make parents feel included, for example having a family room where parents could drop in for coffee and meet each other, a regular slot where parents could talk informally to the headteacher, or having a parent support worker as a named contact that all the families in the school community could work with.

The Committee would be very welcome to visit Parentline Plus' project in Hertfordshire which is part of a pilot bullying project funded by the Department for Education and due to finish in March 2011. The project uses our method for supporting families, primarily using a number of skills that help parents to listen to their child and understand how they are feeling, combined with emotional support, information and advice, delivered by a parent support worker. The support worker also delivers training for all school staff on how to work effectively with families and acts as a liaison between the school and families where necessary.

The project has been very successful and the parents are powerful advocates who, having turned their own situation around are working within the school to help others. For many of the parents we worked with, the most significant issue preventing them from tackling their child's behaviour, despite warnings from a school, was that they simply had no idea what to do, what to try next and how to help their child to change their behaviour.

One of the parents on the project described her situation:

"I am 33 years old and have been a nurse* for 12 years. I am married to Nick, he is an engineer and we have lived together for ten years. We have two children together, Mark 7 years and Rachel 4 years. Life has been good for us, I have always considered us a well

grounded family from good backgrounds. Together we have worked hard to build a nice home and provide for our two children who we love dearly.

I'll be honest, I used to have quite an arrogant attitude towards varying conditions in children, such as ADHD, and would wrongly assume that the condition was down to bad parenting and lack of discipline and control. How wrong could I have been? I suppose it has taken me time to acknowledge the fact that Mark has this condition, or maybe my own personal attitude towards it, but thank goodness I took the decision to contact Parentline.

Mark was always a demanding child from the moment he was born, I just accepted this as the 'norm' and thought that all children were like this. As Mark has grown up I have found his behaviour becoming all the more challenging, especially coming into year 2 at school.

To be fair to Mark's school, they have been extremely supportive with varying learning support plans and reward schemes over the last two years. The school has made comment that Mark is very bright and does not struggle academically. During the past 6 months Mark has become more frustrated in himself and has been struggling to cope with going to school. I had seen my beautiful, vibrant little boy just falling to pieces in front of me and it was breaking my heart.

One of the parents at the school suggested that I speak to Sara from Parentline. I contacted Sara through the school and arranged a series of one to one session with her. These were a course of six sessions lasting one hour each. I wouldn't want to sound cliché, but I can honestly say that I have never looked back...Every aspect of the way I now interact with Mark has totally changed. It was never a case of what I was doing wrong, but to introduce new ways of actually listening and speaking to him.

We were at the point a few months ago where it was inevitable that Mark would be excluded from school. After following advice from Sara I have managed to get Mark back on the right track. .. I have my beautiful little boy back. He is not in danger of being excluded and most importantly he is doing well at school and is happy."

*details have been changed for anonymity

Recommendations

Every school should have adequate access to a visible parent support worker who is trained to deal with a spectrum of family and emotional issues and whose role and remit is fully understood by the whole school community.

Communications from the school to a child's family should detail how parents can help their child's education in the home. Teachers must be given adequate time to undertake this work.

