

PARENTLINE PLUS SUBMISSION TO THE INDEPENDENT REVIEW ON POVERTY AND LIFE CHANCES

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. Our services are, for the most part, universally available, but our service users tend to be those at the harder end of need. In the last year (April 09-April 10) 47% of callers to our Parentline service, a free 24 hour helpline, reported their annual household income as less than £20,000 per year.

In addition to Parentline we also run an information website, an email support service, live chat, local services based in 8 different areas, ongoing one to one telephone support and parenting groups and workshops.

Parentline Plus welcomes this review, and would like particularly to feed into the Family Environment section of the consultation.

In what ways do family and the home environment affect children's life chances?

Evidence shows that the way a child is raised and the type of parenting a child experiences are a key determinant in that child's outcomes. In the 2009 DEMOS report, Building Character, the researchers found that "for both the main carer and second parent, self esteem, sense of control over their environment, and perceived competence as a parent were all significantly and positively associated with children's character capability development". Our organisation was founded in the wake of a child abuse tragedy in the 1970s by a group of parents who believed that helping to support other parents was an important way to help improve life for children.

We believe that parents or carers are the single most important factor influencing a child's life chances in a whole variety of ways. It is essential that Government continues to invest in non-statutory family support. Parentline Plus is a charity providing an essential public service, supporting families, in many cases families for whom statutory services are not delivering results, to secure better futures for their children.

The overwhelming majority of families want the best for their children, but for a significant number the issues and challenges they face makes them unable to achieve this without support. The support we offer is confidential, non judgemental and delivered in a way that

empowers families, allowing them to find their own solutions and building their confidence in their parenting skills.

For many families, the fact that we are not a statutory body makes a significant difference, allowing them to trust us and build a relationship that works for them. Government must ensure that funding remains available for core national services such as Parentline, our 24 hour helpline. For many families who call Parentline, the service is a lifeline at a point of personal crisis. A selection of quotes from Parentline callers included in an independent evaluation of the service carried out by Thomas Coram illustrate:

'I needed to speak to someone objective... someone who wouldn't say 'there, there' like friends can do, or brush it aside.'

'Ten years I've been going for Social Services and I didn't know that they record it every time when I said I couldn't cope.'

'I needed help in that moment to help me gain control of the situation... She calmed me down, advised me to put my son on the phone and she spoke to him.'

'I'd been awake all night following an argument between my husband and [our child]. I found the [Parentline] number in the Yellow Pages at 4am. I'd come home to them arguing again and it felt like the last straw.'

Government must also take steps to ensure that key local services are not cut because the nature of their contracts makes them easy targets for local authorities seeking to make efficiency savings. Many of Parentline Plus' local projects are preventative, ensuring that less Government money will need to be spent in the long term, and protecting families from future harm. A project that has been running for the last 5 years in Durham prison is a good example of such work. The project offers parenting skills to fathers in prison, in the hope of preventing them from reoffending, but also preventing an intergenerational cycle of offending. Comments from participants suggest that the parenting skills have helped them:

'I only wish I had done this course before this jail sentence and I would have been around a lot more. Then I wouldn't have ended up in here.'

'I'm very glad I applied for this course so thanks a lot for making me realise the meaning of being a father.'

What role can the government play in supporting parents to ensure children grow up in a home environment which allows them to get the most out of their schooling?

We consider good pupil behaviour, including regular and timely attendance at school, to be a central component of academic attainment. A child's family play a vital role in children's behaviour in school, and where behaviour is a problem, supporting a family to change their child's behaviour can be extremely effective.

Parentline Plus has been working in collaboration with the Teacher Support Network over the past year to understand the dynamic between schools 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.

Good parenting can make the difference between a child achieving at school, or being excluded. In one of our projects in a school in Hertfordshire, families are taught simple techniques to help them listen to and understand their children better with remarkable results. In the example below a mother talks of the difference that she was able to make to her sons with the help of parenting support, preventing her youngest child from being excluded from school:

“My name is Kathie, I am a single parent of 2 wonderful boys, now aged 9 & 15. In brief, our history had been difficult, myself a recovering alcoholic of then, 2yrs. Together our

small family unit were repairing a damaged past with a limited support network. Both boys were experiencing separate difficulties at school, creating a huge set of problems for me to deal with alone. My youngest child was labelled as a bully, was very unhappy in school and sadly on the verge of being excluded. When you have a child with emotional behaviour difficulties the pressure on all the family is intense and exhausting thus leaving my eldest son struggling for attention and understanding & myself frustrated and isolated. ... After seeing the same poster, over a number of weeks on the school window – ‘less shouting more cooperation’ my instinct was I have nothing to lose! After calling the helpline number advertised, I was given the chance to tell someone of my struggle. I was amazed at the quick response and the solution of support offered to me. Within hours I was set up on a telephone support program which enabled me to speak openly and honestly about my feelings and fears on a weekly basis. I began my first workshop and within 2 weeks life was becoming clearer and manageable. Attending the workshop each week gave me the opportunity to share & listen to other parents experiencing their own share of worries and fears around their children, school and home. I no longer felt alone or isolated and we helped each other. I received direction, support and understanding with no hint of judgement from anyone I spoke to. I have attended many PLP workshops, all of which have given me invaluable insight into understanding my children & learning within these groups parenting skills which I can take home with me. I find it difficult to describe the comfort this gave me, to know that support was there and the new strategies I was being taught worked in my home and in my communication with my children’s schools... As a family things have moved on tremendously. Life is difficult for all of us at times and I believe parenting more difficult. However I am now able to identify needs and apply working solutions in our home and in my life. My youngest son is an absolute example of how supporting a parent can support a child. He is a very happy popular 9 yr old in the same school and a very promising student indeed. My eldest son and I have a close loving relationship, which I know would never have come to light had someone not listened and understood when I made my initial call to PLP over 2 yrs ago.”

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