

Helping parents to access parenting courses

An article by

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Introduction

Running parenting courses has become a well established practice among practitioners in health, education, statutory and voluntary social work sectors in the last 10 years. It is seen as an effective method of teaching new skills and enhancing confidence. There are increasing numbers of programmes on offer and work by Smith (1996) and Lloyd (1999) offers useful analysis to assist the professional wondering which course to use. Their significance is also reflected in mapping exercises carried out jointly by Parenting Education and Support Forum and the National Family and Parenting Institute in 2000. In Tyne and Wear, a mapping exercise was undertaken at the instigation of the Tyne and Wear Health Action Zone Child Health Core Group, in an attempt to identify possible gaps in the delivery of parenting courses, both by age of children and also geographically across the district.

However, although it is widely accepted that offering practical support helps parents to access training programmes, there has been no systematic evaluation of what types of support are effective in enabling parents to access such courses and what difference the support makes to parents. Certainly in the field of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) there are no examples of parenting courses with dedicated resources to provide a mechanism for the co-ordination of the provision of support for parents.

In 1999, in Newcastle upon Tyne, an innovative joint project was set up which explored the impact of a specific early parent group training intervention programme, but also, at the same time looked closely at how support could be offered and what impact support made on the issue of equal access to services. The Hanen programme 'More than Words' was developed by Sussman(1999) at the Hanen Centre in Canada to help parents of children with suspected ASD to learn how to promote communication and social skills in their young children. The programme has a family focus and emphasises the importance of parents' participation in the intervention process and the need to provide services as early as possible. The course has been used for some time by speech and language therapists in the North East and has received positive feedback from parents. However the course leaders and multi-disciplinary colleagues were interested in finding out whether or not it was an effective intervention for children where ASD might be suspected. At the same time, the Academic Child and Adolescent Mental Health team, University of Newcastle, was also keen to ensure that all relevant children could benefit by finding a method of maximising attendance by parents.

FACTS

The Child and Adolescent Mental Health academic team at the University of Newcastle joined forces with Children North East (CNE), a regional charity that manages a wide range of support services for children and families to

submit an application to the Community Fund's Research programme for a research study called FACTS (Families and Communication, Training and Support). Its purpose was to study both the effectiveness of 'More than Words' and the impact of funded support for parents attending the course. From this we hoped to achieve clear indications of how support can be offered that would be relevant to anyone running a parenting programme.

Fifteen courses were run over a period of 18 months for parents in 5 local authority areas (Gateshead, Newcastle, North Tyneside, Northumberland, South Tyneside and Sunderland.) Each course consisted of 10 sessions taking place over a period of 3 months with 8-10 families participating in each one. All families were offered support to help them attend the programme regularly.

Building the family support structure

From a shared base, the FACTS research team worked alongside the Family Support Co-ordinator. The Co-ordinator was employed and managed by CNE as were the childcare workers. This core team received additional training in the form of 3 x 2.5 hour training sessions in ASD. The course included seminar teaching from the specialist multi-disciplinary team and supervised direct observation and play/interaction with pre-school children with ASD. The training was delivered by staff at the Fleming Nuffield Unit, the regional day unit for pre-school children with complex social/communication developmental difficulties and their families.

We originally expected to provide the family support by employing a team of sessional child care workers and funding travel expenses for some families to attend the course. This proved impractical, as the volume of need required by each course was not necessarily consistent, families required greater flexibility of support provision and courses did not neatly follow on from each other. So we moved on to plan B. Children North East already has some sessional staff on the payroll, who have experience of child care and have been police checked. Similarly, our parent support projects, Family Link, have volunteers, some of whom were interested in gaining wider experience. From these two sources we were able to build up a core team with additional ASD expertise and with the funded Co-ordinator, we explored a broader range of support options. In addition to the funded (ASD specialist)child care worker sessions and taxi fares, the project was able to pay for transport when required and child care payments for families to use with their usual carers (such as grandparents, other family members, neighbours and other local baby sitters).

The role of the Co-ordinator

The Co-ordinator visited families prior to the parenting courses to explain the range of family support that the service could provide and how parents could use it. The Co-ordinator was the crucial factor in being able to deliver the family support. Course leaders did not have the time to investigate and set up the structures for providing the level of support nor the expertise that was offered by the FACTS Family Support Co-ordinator for their own course, never mind co-ordinating support across a number of courses. Indeed, at the

recent local seminar when we presented the early results of the family support research, managers explicitly asserted that this was not the role of speech and language therapists.

The research was carried out in a number of adjacent health districts, resulting in a level of demand that produced economies of scale. At the same time, the variety and volume of support required by families was not easily predictable and needed to remain flexible, making the employment of dedicated child care staff impracticable. By using CNE it was possible to provide a vetted and trained team of staff at various times. However in order to mobilise this resource, it required a specific person to co-ordinate responses, someone with expertise, able to work directly with parents independently of the parenting courses and with the knowledge and skills to access relevant networks. We also found that the Co-ordinator needed to be willing and able to provide child care herself if staff were suddenly unavailable.

The Co-ordinator's routine visits to parents to explain the nature of the family support provided by FACTS often led to her advice being sought on a range of associated issues, demonstrating the value of using the expertise of an established family support agency, with easy access to relevant information and networks.

Because the service was provided by the same Co-ordinator across the district, it meant that lessons learnt from one course could easily be implemented in succeeding courses. It also meant that as information about the service spread throughout the informal grapevine, families could feel that their confidence in using the service would not be misplaced. They would be accessing the same service, not a similar one operated by a different organisation.

Project outcomes

As the project unfolded, a fascinating picture emerged of how to provide family support most effectively, in tune with families' needs. Eighty per cent of parents involved in the research used some form of support and twenty per cent used more than one form of support. By the time the courses offered as part of the research concluded, the following lessons had been learnt:-

- 60% of parents, when interviewed after the course, said that they would not have been able to attend the course without the support.

- The provision of support allowed a significant number of parents to attend as couples. This was particularly beneficial as it overcame the tendency of mothers to take on or be pushed into the role of gate-keeper and 'family expert' on how to care for their child. It was an important means of affirming that fathers are valued parents as well as mothers.

- Initially some parents were reluctant to use support. However they gained confidence as they realised that different types of support were available and as they saw how the childcare workers had been able to follow the families' routines for their children. They also heard positive feedback from other courses by word of mouth, leading to increase in take up.

ü Some families had a friend or relative who could provide childcare but families were reluctant to ask them to commit to 10 sessions as they felt they could never repay them. We decided to offer to pay childcare fees so that parents could use a known carer without feeling under an obligation.

ü Families with a number of children were more likely to use CNE child carers.

ü Some children really appreciated having a new person i.e. the child care worker, coming into the home who was interested in doing things with them. A child with a specific difficulty can often become the focus of a family's attentions, potentially leaving less time available for other children.

ü It was a novel experience for some families to go out as a couple, albeit to attend a training course. Not only did this have a positive benefit for couples, for whom time together was something of a luxury, but it also benefited the children with ASD, as parents were able to encourage each other in using strategies learnt on the course.

ü Courses were generally offered at centralised locations. This could have been a barrier, but we were able to offer help with transport costs and this made a big difference for families without transport, particularly those in rural areas.

ü Families showed increased confidence in making links with other agencies and accepting other types of social support.

ü The role of the co-ordinator was crucially important. Parental confidence was gained by meeting her either in the groups or in their own home, and experiencing the care that was taken in identifying and responding to their particular support requirements.

ü The flexibility of the service was a direct result of the ability of the co-ordinator to use her resources most effectively and her availability to parents through her mobile phone.

ü Without the co-ordinator's role, consistent service delivery across all the courses in all the districts would have been much more difficult to achieve.

'As a single parent, I would not have been able to attend without the support of a childcare worker. I have no family living nearby and it is very difficult to find baby-sitters who can cope with a child with autism. The worker was very competent and reliable and she supported me emotionally as well as practically. My son with autism is very often the focus of the family, but the worker gave my daughter lots of attention and made her feel that she was her special friend'

Conclusion

The range and volume of support and the simplicity of access to it is shown by the research to have had a positive impact on families. Because it offered variety and flexibility and parents accessed it directly, parents gained confidence and felt that they could trust it. However, providing such a service requires above all else, specific funding for a co-ordinator, as well as paying for child care and transport costs. It is also clear that co-ordinating the support is a complex issue, requiring specific resources, and some organisations are better placed to do this than others.

There was consistent feedback throughout the research that the role and skills of the Co-ordinator made a significant difference to families who would not otherwise attend and as a result could use other services inappropriately to the frustration of themselves and the detriment of their child. This element of support would not have been available to families if the service had been provided separately by each course leader.

Wider applicability

Very few of the lessons learnt about providing support are specific to children with ASD and a wide range of parenting courses could benefit from the availability of flexible forms of support to enable parents to attend. The nature of the child's disability probably resulted in a higher level of anxiety on the part of parents about leaving their children with people who did not know their child well, but this is not specific to children with ASD. The lessons learned around building confidence in parents and also funding the costs of using their regular carer to provide child care, thus allowing both parents to attend a training course, would be equally relevant to other targeted parenting courses e.g. parents of children with behaviour difficulties or other specific disabilities.

The opportunity it presented to facilitate the attendance of both parents is particularly significant. Other work carried out by CNE has explored various ways of making sure that fathers are valued as parents. This project underlines that practical forms of support can be very effective in achieving changes in the way that parents take up the opportunity of accessing parenting programmes.

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March 2003.

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