

Chapter #18

PARENTING PROGRAMMES: A TRANSPLANT MODEL IN PRACTICE

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ABSTRACT

This mixed-methods research explored parents' and trainers' perceptions of the impact of parenting programmes by following 136 families through a total of 20 courses (*Triple-P*, *Incredible Years* and *PEEP*). The research questions investigated their views on the parenting programme process, parental behaviour changes taking place post-intervention and subsequent behavioural, developmental and/or educational impact on their children. A major theme that developed from the analysis of parents' data was the importance of the right learning environment, specifically one which promotes a Transplant as opposed to an Expert Model of parent-professional practice. Another notable finding was the significance of the family working together in order to avoid creating an imbalance in the parenting structure within the family.

Keywords: Parenting, transplant model, parenting programme.

1. INTRODUCTION

A number of parenting programmes have been developed, both internationally and in the UK, to meet the varying needs and approaches most suitable to parents. One of the key aims of many such programmes is to help parents develop positive parenting skills to support them in preventing or reducing challenging behaviour in children. Other aims integral to the philosophy of parenting programmes include strengthening the parent-child relationship, increasing children's social and emotional learning, promoting school readiness, promoting parents' awareness of children's development and the importance of maximising learning opportunities.

As part of a wider agenda, parenting programmes have had a greater emphasis placed on their value after the research findings of Desforges and Abouchaar (2003); this had a powerful influence on UK local authorities offering and delivering more parenting programmes. The existing research into parenting programmes has primarily focused on their impact on children's behaviour; this could be attributed to the primary aim of many parenting programmes being directed in this area. However, having a background in psychology and education my research focused on the impact that the programmes have on parental behaviour and the subsequent effects on children's development and attainment. Specifically, I was interested in the parents' perspectives; my research provided parents the opportunity to voice their views.

This study followed families as they each attended one of three parenting programmes and then beyond into the subsequent twelve months. My aim was not to advocate any particular parenting programme or indeed parenting programmes in general; rather my purpose was to explore parents' perspectives on whether they considered parenting programmes had an impact on their own behaviour and whether they considered this

subsequently had any impact on their child. The three parenting programmes my research focused on were *Triple-P*, Webster Stratton's *The Incredible Years* and *Peers Early Education Partnership (PEEP)*, three of the most popularly adopted programmes across the south-west of the UK at the time of starting my study (Triple-P, 2012; Incredible Years, 2012; PEEP, 2015). All three of these parenting programmes are run by trained and experienced practitioners and are standardised in how they are delivered with the expectation that parents attend all the sessions. The aims of these programmes include improving knowledge on child development and parenting skills, improving parent-child relationships and promoting appropriate behaviour.

By gaining the parents perspectives I aimed to establish how effective parenting programmes were in terms of being a vehicle to deliver advice and guidance. How well did they succeed in getting across information and new ideas? Did they ensure parents felt empowered by the programme rather than being made to feel inadequate? The prescriptive nature of many accredited structured parenting programmes means that they are not designed in a way that allows trainers the flexibility to respond or adapt the programme in acknowledgment of what a parent already knows, how they already interact with their child or even their cultural or religious background. This would place parenting programmes within the Expert classification of Cunningham and Davis (1985) Expert, Transplant and Consumer models: "Professionals use this model if they view themselves as having total expertise in relation to the parent. Here essentially professionals take total control and make all the decisions" (Cunningham & Davis, 1985, p.10). Some previous research has suggested that parenting programmes can disempower parents by making them feel inadequate (Cottam & Espie, 2014) and that trainers can view themselves as the expert and have a deficit view of the parents (Crozier, 1998). In my experience trainers often identify more with the Transplant model "where they view themselves as having expertise, but also recognize the advantage of the parent as a resource" (Cunningham & Davis, 1985, p.11) however the prescriptive nature of many programmes can make this difficult. By gaining the parents perspectives I hoped to explore whether these concerns were valid.

2. BACKGROUND

With the growing international recognition of the importance of the parents' role in their child's education, the UK Government commissioned Charles Desforges and Alberto Abouchaar to examine research findings on the relationship between family education, parental support and parental engagement on the one hand and their child's achievement and adjustment in schools on the other. Desforges and Abouchaar's (2003) review suggested that to improve the educational achievement of children and young people parents need to support their children; this goes beyond providing the basic needs such as housing, love, safety and nutrition and extends to include parent-child interaction, helping with school work and educational choices and communication with their child's educational setting.

The most important finding from Desforges and Abouchaar's review (2003) was that parental engagement in their child's learning and development could have a notable positive impact on their child's attainment and achievement:

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In the primary age range the impact caused by different levels of parental involvement is much bigger than differences associated with variations in the quality of schools. The scale of the impact is evident across all social classes and all ethnic groups. (Desforges & Abouchaar, 2003, pp.4-5)

This suggests that parental engagement can have a greater impact on the child's achievement than the variations in teaching quality among schools. This is quite a remarkable finding.

Desforges and Abouchaar's (2003) review was a key factor that led to the UK Government initiatives aimed at promoting children's attainment through parental interaction with their children and their children's school. Particular emphasis was placed on local authorities' engagement with parenting with Government funding being made available to provide training for and delivery of parenting programmes. To access this funding, each authority was presented with five evidence-based parenting programmes to choose from. An expected outcome from this provision was the improvement of parental engagement with their child's education and a subsequent improvement in their child's educational attainment. Children's centres also received funding to ensure they provided similar support for parents whose children were not yet in school, including the delivery of parenting programmes.

In 2010 the UK Government commissioned Frank Field to conduct an independent review on life chances and poverty. Field's (2010) review also acknowledged the importance of the role of parents in preventing poor children becoming poor adults: "Nothing can be achieved without working with parents. All our recommendations are about enabling parents to achieve the aspirations that they have for their children." (Field, 2010, p.6)

Field's (2010) review highlighted the increasing number of parenting programmes being offered at the time of writing his report in support of disadvantaged families, particularly those with children in the early years, and the positive impact such programmes can have on parenting and the home learning environment. One of his recommendations was that all new parents should be encouraged by children's centres to take advantage of a parenting programme.

3. RESEARCH DESIGN

I recruited a total of 136 parents across 20 courses (Table 1) in the south-west of the UK to take part in my study, the majority of which had pre-school-aged children (0-4 years). I employed a mixed methods research approach utilising questionnaires, featuring both quantitative and qualitative questions, as well as semi-structured interviews.

Table 1.
Parents Recruited per Programme.

Parenting Programme	Number of Parents	Number of Courses	Age Groups of Children
Triple-P	7	2	One parent attended Primary Triple-P and had at least one child that attended primary school. Six parents attended Teen Triple-P and had at least one child attending a secondary school
The Incredible Years	17	4	Seven parents accessed the baby programme; four attended the preschool programme; six went to a primary programme
PEEP	112	14	All parents had at least one child under the age of four
TOTALS	136	20	

Access to participants was through local authorities, schools, children's centres and parent programme facilitators. Through my work as both a teacher and local authority adviser I had already developed a number of contacts in each of these areas who were able to assist me in accessing parenting groups. Additionally I was able to use my knowledge of the local authority structure to contact advisers who were also able to help me access the parenting programmes that were included in my research.

I initially used questionnaires to record demographic data and to establish parental practices and expectations pre-intervention. This was then supplemented by a follow-up questionnaire at the end of the programme (referred to below as "Q-post") to explore parents' initial perspectives, having attended the course, regarding what they then did differently and what they thought they had gained from the course. Questions included: "How much time are you able to spend playing with your children?", "What activities do you share with your children?", "How do you support your children's nursery, pre-school or school?", "How confident are you in each of these areas?". Additionally I incorporated several qualitative questions to increase the availability of parental subjective views. To provide participants with maximum protection I devised a system where parents could remain anonymous to me whilst also ensuring that the trainers did not see their data. This system allowed me to directly compare pre- and post-programme responses from individual parents, while still respecting both the confidentiality of the questionnaire data and the parents' wishes to remain anonymous.

The findings from an analysis of the questionnaire responses were then used to direct a series of post-programme semi-structured interviews with parents (referred to below as "I-post"). I devised an interview schedule based on the questionnaire responses to examine parents' views on the parenting programme process, how it impacted their behaviour and how this subsequently affected their child. I selected a subset of eight parents (Table 2) for these interviews, allowing me to gain a deeper insight into their perspectives. The selection process was based on criteria derived from the information provided on the pre- and post-programme questionnaires and comprised four key factors:

- contactability of parents;
- parental confidence levels;
- representation from all three of the parenting programmes;
- representation from both local authority targeted groups (low socio-economic status, teenage parents, fathers) and non-targeted groups.

Table 2.
Parents Selected for Interview.

Pseudonym	Relationship to child	Teenage parent?	Low socio-economic status?	Programme attended	Number of children
Adelajda	Mother			PEEP	2
Ava	Grandmother			The Incredible Years	4
Emily	Mother			Triple P	2
Emma	Mother	Yes	Yes	PEEP	2
Isabella	Mother			Triple P	2
Jacob	Father		Yes	PEEP	2
Olivia	Mother		Yes	The Incredible Years	4
Sophia	Mother			PEEP	1

The interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed and then analysed using a thematic approach based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) model. Prior to commencing the analysis, I created a provisional start list of thematic codes; the interviews were then analysed to extract further themes, moving from a deductive to an inductive paradigm. Using the NVivo software package I was able to go through each transcript in turn creating descriptive codes, or using the NVivo terminology "nodes", with each node corresponding to a short section of the transcript. This analysis drew upon a mixture of semantic coding, capturing the surface meaning of the data, and latent coding capturing deeper assumptions and interpretations. In all 388 nodes were created from three hours 49 minutes of post-programme interview recordings with the parents.

The next phase of analysing the data was to group together the nodes representing common areas. Some groupings had already been identified from my professional experience and the literature review (deductive), whilst others were generated solely from the data (inductive). Repeated hierarchical phases of this grouping procedure eventually resulted in a final set of six themes being created from the parents' interview data. It is important to note that the number of occurrences of a topic does not alone make it a theme; rather it is about whether the topic has captured something important that is related to the research question (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

My study explored the longitudinal perspective by revisiting the families one year after they had completed the programme with a third questionnaire ("Q-year") to examine the parents' perceptions of any lasting impact. The one-year-on questionnaire included both quantitative and qualitative questions that were asked on the pre- and post-programme questionnaires to establish whether there had been any lasting parental behaviour changes since attending the programme and whether there had been any longer-term impact on the child. I also carried out one-year-on interviews ("I-year") with the original interview participants following up on the themes which developed from the post-programme analysis.

To ensure a degree of triangulation and to promote trustworthiness in the data (Robson, 2002), I sought a secondary source to provide an alternative perspective to the parents' reports. To this end my research incorporated the views from the parent programme trainers – they saw the parents typically on a weekly basis, following them through the entirety of the course, and were well-placed to provide this additional viewpoint.

4. FINDINGS

This section presents findings from my study in terms of two key themes that I developed from the rigorous qualitative analysis of the interview transcripts. I illustrate these themes making use of quotations from parents' questionnaires, as completed by all 136 participants, and interviews with the sub-sample of eight parents. All names used here are pseudonyms.

4.1. Creating the right environment

A key theme that developed in response to my research question *What are the views of parents and trainers regarding the parenting programme?*, and a particularly noteworthy theme, was the parents' perception that the environment needs to be right to share parenting experiences with other parents. This theme developed from seven of the parents' interviews making this an especially important aspect of my findings. The "right" environment includes a number of factors such as friendly, approachable and helpful staff; a clean and safe place for children to play; the structure and calmness of group; and being able to spend quality time with their child.

A key element in creating the right atmosphere where parents felt comfortable and safe to share their experiences was the staff. One parent wrote on her post-programme questionnaire:

"The staff have been amazing and the structure has been really good" (Q-post)

A year after the first interview Jacob, a PEEP parent, still remembered the value of being able to talk to other parents:

"I think you can kind of just exchange ideas and just be comforted to know that everybody's just got the same problems" (I-year)

This was a common theme that was evident both in the questionnaires and during the interviews. For some parents having the right environment gave them somewhere to go where they could meet other parents:

"PEEP was hugely beneficial to both Lily and me. Always stimulating and friendly. Much of Lily's childcare has always fallen to me due to my wife's severe illnesses since Lily's birth. Organised groups were fun in themselves and also gave me good contact with other parents" (Q-year)

For some parents these sessions could become a lifeline to help them through some very difficult times:

"Making friends as I suffered from postnatal depression" (Q-post)

"..that I am not the only one with dealing with sharing and tantrums" (Q-post)

"Sometimes I thought I was not good with my children" (Q-post)

Emma, a young mother of two, found that by talking to other parents she added to her toolkit of strategies in managing her children's behaviour:

“...for me speaking to other adults has helped me as well because I have learnt like different ways to manage their behaviour and stuff, and obviously at that age like to put rules down and I learnt and feel more confident.” (I-post)

An analysis of the data suggests that without groups where they can get together to share experiences and ideas, many parents could feel isolated, as if they are the only one who is experiencing these difficulties and in some cases even doubt their abilities to be a good parent.

Jacob home tutors his sons and looks after the main household chores. He shared that if it was not for attending the children’s centre he “*wouldn’t see anybody during the day*”. Jacob went on to say that the *PEEP* group was a “*calmer group, there’s more opportunity to talk to each other*” and for Jacob this was one of the key themes that developed from his interview, being able to share and talk to other parents:

“... but at this group the people talk to each other more so I think that’s an important thing about coming to these groups as well, for the parents to get out and talk to each other as well as children” (I-post)

For Adelajda she found talking to other parents especially valuable; having come from Eastern Europe she did not have any family nearby so turned to these sessions to extend her knowledge around child development and also the English school system. As a primary school teacher, I have found parents who have moved to England often find our school system very different from that in their own countries and their own childhood experience; unless a relationship between the parent and educational setting is developed this can be overlooked.

Having the right environment to share information with other parents was a recurring theme across all three parenting programmes. The data suggest one of the most important benefits of attending a parenting programme is the meeting, sharing, talking and learning from other parents. Seven out of the eight parents’ data had this as a developing theme, despite there being no questions specifically asking whether parental interaction was an important aspect of the parenting programme. The one exception was Ava, a grandmother who attended the programme with her daughter Olivia; although this theme did not develop from the analysis of Ava’s interview, she did however comment that she would have welcomed the opportunity to have attended a parenting programme when her own children were young.

It is interesting to note that this theme, the importance of other parents on the programme, was not found to diminish the role of the parenting programme trainer. The parents recognised the role of the trainer in “setting the scene” and supporting them through challenging times in addition to providing general parenting advice and information. However the findings do reflect the importance of creating the right environment for parents to get together and share their experiences.

From the interviews and questionnaires, we can conclude that parents value parenting programmes as an opportunity for them to meet and share information with other parents at least as much as they appreciate them for their intrinsic educational value. For some parents, particularly those with pre-school children, it might be the only opportunity they get to interact with other parents and indeed get out of the house. For *The Incredible Years* and *Triple-P* programme, parents usually attend because they have concerns around their child’s behaviour; by the end they have developed a toolkit of strategies to support them. For *PEEP* parents, the suggestion is it is more about going to a toddler group to meet other parents, play with their child and for their child to socialise. However from talking to parents and analysing the data it seems that they come away with much more; they have learnt about child development, the importance of sharing stories and rhymes, healthy eating and a myriad of other topics that are covered in the programme.

4.2. Whole family engagement

A second key theme that developed from the parents' interviews was how some of the parents considered that whole family engagement was an important element in ensuring the success of parenting programmes; this was particularly evident in the responses from parents attending *The Incredible Years* and *Triple-P* programmes. Although there was no explicit question asking whether the parents felt it important or necessary that there was whole family engagement in the parenting programme, three out of the eight parents spontaneously referred to this topic, commenting on the importance of both parents being engaged in the programme. Isabella, a mother of teenage boys who attended a *Triple-P* Teens programme, felt particularly strongly that it would be beneficial:

"This is where I think you need something where you do as a family" (I-post)

One benefit she considered of involving the whole family was:

"...you know if different members of the family are not remembering the right strategy someone else can say 'mum go away and sit down'." (I-post)

Isabella identifies here one important aspect of family engagement; that is the recognition that sometimes you can forget to use the strategies and may need the occasional prompt. This was something that Emily, who attended the *Triple-P* Primary programme, also brought up at her one-year-on interview:

"When I forget it's more chaotic because they haven't got any expectations of what they're supposed to be doing when you go somewhere." (I-year)

Strategies which Emily had previously found to be effective, but had not used for several months, were now forgotten. Had her partner attended then maybe these would not be lost.

Olivia, a mother of four who attended *The Incredible Years* parenting programme, also commented that:

"It would be beneficial for partners [to attend the programme]" (I-post)

Emily, a mother of two young sons suggested at her post-programme interview that:

"I think it's helpful if you both go 'cause it's harder for one parent to tell the other parent what to do" (I-post)

Emily went on to share that she had a very different parenting style to her partner, however for her it would always be her partner's position that would be enforced.

Different styles of parenting could become a contentious issue and put further pressures on a family who may already be experiencing difficulties, as parents disagree or even argue in front of the children, displaying a fractured unit – one that the children could play upon. The lack of family consistency was certainly a contentious issue for Isabella and one which she thought the course could help address:

"Um I realise now when he starting to get tired, that's a flash, that's a real anger flash point when he's starting to get tired. So because he had a very sporty day yesterday, I tried to get him to bed early; I say early I mean eight o'clock. And at quarter to nine I'm telling his dad off because they've been up there playing games" (I-post)

Olivia's husband, at the time of this interview, was working with the trainer on a one-to-one basis on the strategies taught on *The Incredible Years* programme. For Olivia this:

"...was absolutely brilliant, 'cause all these changes were happening and I felt I was equipped but he wasn't, and it's a very difficult time to tell your husband ... it can be a bit condescending" (I-post)

From talking to one of the other mothers on this programme, it became evident that her husband was also going to be working with the same trainer on a one-to-one basis. Having both parents taking part in the programme and adopting the same positive strategies would certainly promote continuity and consistency in their parenting.

5. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

I would like to elaborate on two specific areas which I feel would benefit from further study. Firstly, is there a place for parenting programmes within the school curriculum? Secondly, what is the impact of parenting programmes on child attainment in school?

A question on the post-programme questionnaire (Q-post) asked “When would you have liked to start learning about children and parenting?”: 14 (23%) of the 62 parents who answered this question considered that it would be beneficial to start learning about parenting while still at school. This is an important outcome as it could suggest that there is a place for parenting programmes within the school curriculum; further research is needed to explore the possibility and value of such an approach.

One of the original aims of my study was to investigate the impact of parenting programmes on the child’s attainment in school however due to the low number of participants who had school age children, I was unable to pursue the line of research. This area is important, and so is suggested here as an opportunity for further research, as it is associated more directly with the impact of parenting programmes on a child’s educational development.

6. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

6.1. Creating the right environment

A key finding from this research is how parents valued the role of the trainers in creating the right environment, where they could share their parenting experiences and support each other within the structure of a parenting group. Importantly, although the perspectives and experiences of other parents were viewed as a critical element of the programme, this was not found to diminish the role of the parenting programme trainer. Seven out of the eight parents interviewed recognised the role of the trainer in setting the scene and supporting them through challenging times in addition to providing general parenting advice and information. The parents spoke positively of their experience of attending a parenting programme and considered that they worked in partnership with the trainers rather than being explicitly instructed and directed. I would like to emphasise this point because it suggests trainers are not adopting the role of an expert, as in Cunningham and Davis’ *Expert* model, but rather are working together with parents as in their *Transplant* model (Cunningham and Davis, 1985). This is important because it suggests that parents are being empowered by the approaches to learning being adopted by the trainers, rather than disempowered by being made to feel inadequate as suggested could be the case (Cottam & Espie, 2014). This also indicates that the concerns raised by Crozier (1998), whereby trainers view themselves as the expert and have a deficit view of the parents, may have been successfully overcome – at least on the programmes which formed part of my research.

6.2. Whole family engagement

From both the literature review and my own professional experience, it was expected that certain themes would probably develop from the analysis of the questionnaire and interview data as they had been the focus of previous research: themes such as an improvement in children’s behaviour (Barlow & Parsons, 2005; Hutchings et al., 2007; Furlong et al., 2012) or parents adopting positive parenting strategies (Coren & Barlow, 2009; Lindsay & Cullen, 2011; Furlong et al., 2012). However what was interesting from

the interviews with *Triple-P* and *The Incredible Years* parents was the emphasis that they placed on whole family engagement in the programme. This is important because it is about providing continuity and consistency in parenting and reducing family conflict, and was identified by the parents as being more likely to take place if both parents adopted the same positive parenting strategies. For one parent to be perceived as the expert, telling the other how they should be parenting, could place a strain on their relationship or possibly make the other parent feel disempowered. It seems the concerns raised in the literature around Cunningham and Davis (1985) *Expert* model could apply more to the inter-parent relationship rather than the parent-trainer relationship.

6.3. Parenting programme availability

Parents and trainers both raised concerns around the reduction in the availability of parenting programmes and how the remaining programmes are largely only available for targeted groups of parents; for example fathers, teenaged parents and those from areas of socio-economic deprivation. I fear this could promote the return of the perception that parenting programmes and children's centres are a place where only "failing" or "disadvantaged" parents go. Although there is a need to encourage targeted parents to attend, I believe that parenting programmes should be offered universally, with every parent invited and encouraged to join a parenting group with their child. The groups should be structured such that they offer opportunities for both parents to attend, including the case where one or both are in work. Additionally there needs to be improved access to and greater availability of parenting programmes which support parents of school-age children; new challenges face parents as children get older. This is important because the stigma around parenting programmes, especially for those who attend with older children, could be reduced with greater emphasis placed on availability to all parents.

6.4. Conclusion

The parenting programmes that formed part of my study can be seen to be adopting a Transplant Model of parent-professional practice. Parents commented on the importance of creating a learning environment in which their pre-existing knowledge was recognised and that this need was being satisfied by the parenting programme they attended. Further, parents reported that having become an "expert" through attending the programme, they subsequently found that this could lead to an imbalance and inconsistency in the home parenting environment. They noted that it was important to include the whole family in at least part of the transplant of parenting skills.

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