

Parent Education Programmes: A Review

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Introduction

Child contact after parental separation or divorce is now a highly contentious and politicised social policy issue in the UK. However, despite a relatively high incidence of divorce and one-parent families, the UK has not hitherto been in the forefront of developing services for separated families. Hence with the growing pressure to 'do something', we are increasingly looking for ideas to other jurisdictions which have developed more creative interventions. Such 'ideas' are often presented by enthusiasts in terms of 'they do X in Y jurisdiction and it works.' Since policy-makers, opinion-formers and practitioners are not usually in a position critically to evaluate such reports, claims can rapidly acquire the status of proven fact.

The work on which this paper is based was an attempt to facilitate a more informed and evidence-based approach to the legitimate desire to learn from other jurisdictions. Constraints of resources and time meant it had to be limited to a review of the English language literature and focus on interventions in other Western European countries, Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States. It also concentrated on interventions aimed at litigating families. While only a small minority of parents go to court to resolve their disputes and even fewer return to court repeatedly, they absorb a disproportionate amount of professional time and resources and the impact on their children can be severe. Legislation was also being planned to enhance the courts' powers to deal with the enforcement of contact orders.

This paper focuses on one type of intervention: parent education. The idea that effective parenting skills can be taught through group-based education is now accepted in a variety of contexts in the UK. It has not been part of the formal system for dealing with separation and divorce, however, although a very basic form, 'information meetings' were piloted ten years ago as part of legislation intended to reform the divorce process, but not proceeded with. Very recently, the government has also piloted the Family Resolutions Project, which included two educational sessions. This prototype too is unlikely to be rolled out more widely. However given the positive finding of the evaluation in relation to the educational element in the project it is possible that other variants may be developed.

What does education in post-separation parenting involve?

Programmes are not about teaching parenting *per se* but about helping parents, and through them their children, cope with the transition. Their rationale stems from research showing that separating parents are often unaware of how poorly their children are coping and underestimate the effects on children of their conflicts. Typical aims are to increase participants' knowledge of the effects of divorce on children; improve parental communication; reduce children's exposure to conflict and facilitate the child's post-separation adjustment. Programmes vary enormously (in target group, duration, content and teaching strategies) but most court-related classes are short (1-2 sessions of up to 3 hours) with limited participant involvement, relying on lectures, videos and handouts to increase knowledge and understanding. Some programmes use more interactive approaches to help parents develop practical skills in conflict management and communication and there is some evidence that these are more effective. Classes may be voluntary or mandatory, run

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by the court, on behalf of the court or entirely outside the court process. Court-related classes may be mandatory or voluntary. Classes aimed at high conflict families are relatively rare but a growing area of interest. Classes may be standalone, or, particularly when aimed at higher conflict families, may be part of a broader programme of intervention.

Are they effective?

Educational programmes clearly meet a need, typically reporting high levels of parental satisfaction even among those ordered to attend. Parents usually say they would recommend them to others and the majority consider they should be mandatory. Programmes are also highly regarded by professionals, many of whom report parents being more conciliatory, child-focused, easier to work with and likely to reach agreement.

The effectiveness of most programmes, however, has not been established in robust research. Only a minority have been evaluated, typically by participant exit surveys. There are some studies measuring impact by means of before and after measures but few using control groups. Where robust research has been carried out the findings are mixed, suggesting that programmes are not of equal efficacy. Positive impacts are also not dramatic and researchers caution against unrealistic expectations.

Programmes generally achieve their objectives in terms of enabling parents to acquire and retain useful knowledge, understanding and (where this is the objective) skills, and giving them more confidence in dealing with the children and even their ex-partner. These may translate into improvements in *parental* well-being. There is some evidence of (self-reported) attitudinal change and expressed intentions to make more effort to work with the other parent. The evidence about the impact of parent education on dispute resolution is insubstantial and that on repeat litigation sparse and inconsistent.

Protecting children from conflict is one of the key messages educational programmes try to get across. They are not always successful but positive findings are reported in several studies. The on-going involvement of the non-resident parent may be facilitated. However only one programme has been able to demonstrate a positive effect on child well-being

Conclusions

While the effectiveness of parent education programmes has not been conclusively demonstrated, they do appear to have some benefits and their striking popularity with parents and with professionals should not be lightly dismissed. The study therefore concluded that there were good reasons for making such classes widely available in this country, taking account of the features of the more promising programmes which may contribute to effectiveness. Key issues include where classes should fit in the system; how to take appropriate account of domestic violence and whether classes should be mandatory and if so, for whom.