

A Review of Parent Education Programmes

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Introduction

- The UK Policy context
- The briefing paper
- The growth of parent education programmes internationally

The UK policy context

- Children and Adoption Act 2006
 - Gives courts powers to direct any parent to a 'contact activity':
'information session, programme, class, counselling or guidance session or any other activity which can assist a person to establish, maintain, or improve contact with a child'
- Options for dealing with breach to be extended to include:
 - Require attendance at class or programme

The Briefing Paper

- Dearth of UK programmes dealing with disputed contact
- 'They do it much better elsewhere' syndrome
- Aims:
 - What do other jurisdictions do?
 - What is the range of interventions used?
 - What evidence is there that any of these work (and in what sense?) for them?
 - Could they work in a UK context?

Methodology

- Bibliographic data-base search (English language)/journal scan
- Follow-up of references
- Internet search
 - Key words
 - Likely sites
- Personal contact
 - Academics
 - Courts
 - Governments
 - Programme providers

The growth of parent education programmes

- Began US 1978; now widespread (>1500 programmes in 1998)
- Well established Canada
- Developing elsewhere: Australia, New Zealand; Europe
- The UK: tentative beginnings

Measuring effectiveness

The almost wholesale endorsement of these programs has occurred prior to the conducting of ongoing serious systematic research into their effectiveness.

(Whitworth et al, 2002)

The problem of diversity

- Variation in court-related programmes in US
 - Mandatory v voluntary
 - All cases v disputing only
 - Length (1-36 hrs; typically 2 hrs)
 - Topic coverage
 - Information only or include skills acquisition
 - Teaching strategies
 - Whether linked children's programmes

The limitations of the research evidence

- Few evaluations; often in-house
- Parental satisfaction exit survey most common method
- Before & after measures/follow-up/control groups rare; RCT even rarer
- Problems of sample attrition and response rates
- Reliance on self, typically parent, report

Do parent education programmes 'work'?

Tapping into parental need

- Review of 10 Canadian programmes - overall rating 8.02/10 > 73% 8+
- 93% glad opportunity to attend; 92% would recommend
- Consistently high praise for information on:
 - needs of children during separation/divorce
 - reactions of children at different ages and stages
 - keeping children out of the middle of conflicts
 - how to communicate with the other parent.

(Bacon and McKenzie, 2001)

Satisfied 'customers'

'We were 'persuaded' to put aside everything we are going through right now to take time out to think about our children - how they feel, how this affects them and what we can do to help them through this with as little conflict or problems/anxiety as possible.'

I wish I had had a program like this a year ago. Maybe I wouldn't be so full of anger.

'Made me understand how important it is to try to get along with my child's father.'

(Parents attending the US Children in the Middle programme, Arbuthnot and Gordon, 1996).

Satisfied stakeholders

- US survey of 246 judges referring to Children Cope with Divorce programme (39% response).
- 80% quicker resolution of disputes
- 79% decreased litigation re child
- 96% lessens negative effects of divorce on children
- 98% benefits families

(Fischer, 1997)

Oiling the wheels of the system

There were numerous reports that the process of working with parents subsequent to attendance was easier, shorter, and more focused on the needs of the children. Those in the legal community reported that parents gained awareness about the court process and the range of legal options in addition to litigation. Some suggested that programs contribute to quicker settlements and better quality agreements re children.

(Bacon and McKenzie, 2001)

Reported Impacts: a summary

- Increase parental knowledge about children's needs/impact conflict
- Parents learn & maintain skills dealing with children and ex
- May improve communication; reduce conflict
- May reduce children's exposure to adult conflict
- May produce more positive attitudes to contact
- May promote settlement and reduce re-litigation
- Attendees more willing to accept other services
- Rarely produces improvement in child well-being

The Children in the Middle programme

- 2 hr, ct-mandated, free US programme for all divorcing parents/children disputes
- Focuses on preventing children being caught in adult conflicts
- Acquisition of conflict resolution skills
 - Videos of common scenarios; functional/dysfunctional versions
 - Interactive discussion format
 - Workbooks

Evaluation (Kramer et al, 1998)

- 607 parents randomly assigned either to CIM (325) or Children First in Divorce
 - Self-completion questionnaires 3 time points: pre-class; post-class; 3 months on
 - 138 CIM completed all 3 (114 CFD)
- Control group 208 parents divorcing in neighbouring state without programme
 - 2 time-points (64 completed both)
 - Similar demographic profile but significantly more problematic group (conflict, domestic violence, child symptoms).

Results

- CIM parents' communication skills increased (CFD and control no change)
- Both progs reduced child exposure to conflict (SS); control no change
- No effect parental conflict or domestic violence: diminished all groups
- No effect child behavioural problems
- Modest correlation parental knowledge/skills and:
 - reduced conflict; child exposure to conflict; domestic violence; child problems.

Findings from other CIM evaluations 1

- Treatment group prepared for twice as much contact time
 - but no more willing to encourage child to have contact.
- Less angry, depressed, upset by ex
- Better able to work through how would handle difficult situations
 - but no significant difference in % conversations which ended in argument
- Children significantly fewer school absences and fewer visits to doctors. (at 6 mos)
 - But no difference in parent ratings of adjustment

Re-litigation

- Study 1: 2 yrs; 89 CIM/23 comparison
 - Significantly less likely to re-litigate over any issue (tho no differences re contact)
 - Likelihood related to skill mastery
- Study 2: 2 yrs; 94 CIM; 129 comparison
 - Non-significant trend
- Study 3: 6 mos; 127 CIM; 200 other progs; 294 comparison
 - No difference v comparison group; another programme more effective

Judicial perspectives

26 courts using all/part of CIM video 2 yrs+

- Judges viewed positively; found it extremely helpful for parents
- Half thought noticeably reduced re-litigation
- Produced more positive parental attitudes
- Greater parental sensitivity to children's needs

Children's evidence

- 72 children, aged 5-17 in therapy.
- Random assignment of parents to:
 - Skills video/handbook; information booklet only; wait-list control
- Children in skills group reported:
 - caught in conflict less often (others did not differ)
 - significantly less stress regardless of frequency of being caught in middle.
 - greater improvement in some aspects of parent-child relationships

Factors contributing to effectiveness

- Narrow focus
- Interactive teaching strategies
- Skills-based

The way forward in the UK

- Is there enough evidence to trial parent education programmes here?
- What kind of trial?
- Where should parent education fit in the system?
- Should classes be compulsory?
- How do we address the question of domestic violence?