The Parliamentary Inquiry into Parenting and Social Mobility

Enhancing parenting support across the UK

All Party Parliamentary Group on Parents and Families
All Party Parliamentary Group on Social Mobility

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Foreword

Parenting matters, and yet it has rarely been taken as such by policy-makers. For too long, fear of being criticised for interfering in family life has led politicians and policy makers to shy away from this arena. The hope has been that all parents would be able to provide the most appropriate social and emotional development for their children in the pre-school years, which we now know is the vital underpinning for educational attainment and emotional wellbeing, without needing any help and support in doing this critically important job. To a certain extent, this hope is understandable: all parents want the best for their children, and most of them do a fantastic job. Yet it is time to change our views about parenting: not all parents know how to be a good parent, not because of lack of skills or bad intentions, but often because of poor information, advice and support.

Good parenting matters for everyone concerned about improving social mobility in this country. Indeed the gap between disadvantaged children and more advantaged children emerges by age three – even before the first day of school begins. The 2012 report "Seven Key Truths about Social Mobility" produced by the All Party Parliamentary Group on Social Mobility clearly indicated that "the point of greatest leverage for social mobility is what happens between ages 0 and 3, primarily in the home."

A growing body of evidence also demonstrates that parenting style is the strongest factor in shaping children's development. The influence of parenting goes well beyond academic attainment and income, it is also critical for emotional wellbeing and the development of essential character and resilience skills which the All Party Parliamentary Group's earlier work has also shown to be crucial to improving social mobility. The work of the Nobel Prize-winning economist James Heckman has clearly demonstrated that the earlier the intervention, the greater the effect will be in the long-term. In recent years it has become much more widely recognised that early years education is crucial to ensuring that all children have a fair start in life and successive governments have invested in this area. It is now time to realise that early years' education starts at home. Whatever the efforts and resources we put into formal early education, the impact will always be limited if they are not combined with a good home environment.

The good news is parenting is not an innate skill: it is a learned skill that everyone can acquire. This is why one of the key recommendations of this Report is the importance of conveying simple and clear messages about child development to parents, so that parents can draw on best practice and advice in their daily parenting .The Report also clearly recognises the need to ensure that seeking help with parenting is not seen as stigmatising or an admission of failure. We think that the best way to reduce stigma is to make the promotion of parenting advice a norm (which will therefore best help the families most in need of help). We are also very clear that fathers matter greatly – so parenting support needs to be redesigned to better understand and engage with fathers. Our overall approach is that parenting should become a national priority but with local comprehension and delivery so a new central- local partnership is needed, with a named minister nationally and a duty on local authorities to coordinate locally. It will be vitally important to draw on the expertise that already exists in the voluntary sector.

In short it is time to end the "last great taboo in public policy" which is how Alan Milburn, the Chair of the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, has vividly described parenting. The early years and particularly what happens in the home are of utmost importance for a child's future, and it is parents – not teachers or government – who are ultimately responsible for a child's development in these early years. Helping and supporting parents through the range of measure recommended in this report has the potential to make a tangible difference to the life chances of our children, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds. All parents want to be better informed, and all of them want to be the best parents possible. Let's offer all of them such opportunities.



Baroness Tyler of Enfield

Chair of the Parliamentary Inquiry into Parenting and Social Mobility

About the Inquiry

In early 2015, the All Party Parliamentary Groups on Parents and Families, and on Social Mobility, came together to conduct a cross-party Parliamentary Inquiry into the key issue of parenting and social mobility, focussing specifically on the potential for enhancing parenting support. This final report is the result of the detailed evidence, and areas for action, gained through wide-ranging written submissions and two oral evidence sessions held at Parliament.

To ensure the best possible understanding of the current landscape, and of the most pressing challenges, the Inquiry brought together witnesses from broad professional backgrounds with extensive experience of this area. Witnesses included representatives from local government, academics, voluntary/charity sector experts, non-departmental public bodies, government officials, members of both the House of Commons and the House of Lords, and former government ministers.

To emphasise the importance of this issue and the need for a collegiate approach, the Inquiry's panel consisted of cross-party parliamentarians from both Houses of Parliament:

- Annette Brooke MP
- The Bishop of Durham
- Meg Hillier MP
- Baroness Howe of Idlicote
- Jeremy Lefroy MP
- The Earl of Listowel
- Jack Lopresti MP
- Baroness Morris of Yardley
- Lord Northbourne
- Baroness Tyler of Enfield (Chair of the Inquiry)

The aims of the Inquiry were to firstly acknowledge the role of parenting in social mobility, before conducting an in-depth investigation into the creation of a parenting support campaign or programme; identifying and assessing the present parenting support offer in the UK, highlighting barriers to the effective delivery of parenting, and, finally, identifying good practice and examples of parenting support that achieve key social mobility goals.

Based on these findings, the Inquiry examined potential models for a national parenting programme or campaign, concluding with key recommendations on potential action by government and others to enhance parenting support in the UK.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all the groups and individuals who submitted written evidence to the Inquiry, or appeared as witnesses to give oral testimony.

The Inquiry would like to specifically thank the Family and Childcare Trust for providing the Secretariat for this Inquiry and, in particular, Ross Matthewman, for co-ordinating both the written and oral evidence sessions, and for the writing of this report.



Executive Summary

Key Findings

The evidence highlighted a number of fundamental issues when looking at the creation of national parenting campaign:

- The present parenting support offer across the UK is fragmented with little leadership from national government.
- With family policy spread across a number of departments, a lack of joined up government is a key barrier to any successful parenting support campaign being developed and implemented.
- A fear of the "nanny state" label has made government reluctant to develop policy that may be seen as too interventionist.
- A national parenting programme can most usefully focus on the early years, as this is where there is the most potential to support parents to develop positive parenting styles, and influence the life chances of children
- There is a large role for central government in funding and promoting parenting support, but any programme or campaign must build on the local knowledge and conditions of a specific area.
- Any successful programme or campaign simply must be forged and implemented at ground level. It must also be fully supported and promoted by public sector, private sector, and voluntary/charity sector, organisations, with strong national - local partnerships and resource sharing developed
- Any parenting support scheme must not be overly prescriptive and cannot be seen by parents as a punishment if it is to be successful.
- The role and quality of parental relationships is neglected when considering parental support models.
- Although there is stigma attached to attending parenting classes, this need not be the case. How parents are engaged and made aware of the available support is a key factor in determining the popularity and sustainability of any programme.
- Fathers are an important resource in early years child development, which is conducive to bringing about social mobility, but are underused and often sidelined when family services are developed. This issue means that parenting support is often designed with mothers in mind, and parental engagement conducted in environments preferable to women.
- There must be a joined up approach across the public, private, and voluntary/charity, sectors at a local level for any parenting support programme to be successful.
- Only a small number of local authorities currently carry out strategic needs evaluations for family support services, meaning the majority are unaware of the level of provision in their areas, let alone the need and demand for these services.

Recommendations

Having collated evidence from a wide range of sources, and sought the views of key experts, the Inquiry has mapped out steps to begin tackling the potential of parenting support to improve life chances and social mobility:

1. Building on recent calls from the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, an incoming Government should look to develop and implement a national parenting support campaign:
   - In view of the current economic climate, and central government funding constraints, trials of best practice based parenting support classes should continue and develop with a view to rolling out successful models nationally, promoting national – local partnerships, as and when resources allow.
   - In doing so, particular focus should be given to the models of parenting support shown to be positive and non-stigmatising, and effective in aiding the development of children's character and resilience.
2. The Government should provide all local authorities across the UK, and parents and providers, with best practice guides and guidelines for developing parenting support campaigns in their areas based on positive, non-prescriptive models.
3. The creation of a cabinet level "Minister for Families", with the purpose of working across departments to ensure a joined up approach to policy creation and implementation in areas that impact heavily on families.
4. The Government should encourage early years services to actively engage fathers by clarifying guidance, promoting activities that are accessible to fathers, and promoting the participation of men in the early years workforce. Specifically, the instigation of a UK-wide "fathers and children" reading campaign to be designed, funded, and promoted, by national government, and implemented by local government.
5. The Government should create a new statutory duty for all local authorities to carry out a strategic needs evaluation for family support services in their areas. Parenting support provision statistics should be easily accessible for all local authorities, and would not place an undue burden.
6. The Government should build on the introduction of the Family Test by promoting and supporting strong family relationships, recognising that they are the bases for good parenting.
   - The Government should in future strengthen the test to ensure that families are supported by government, including through relationship support and parenting skills.
   - The Government should set out an effective family test process and ensure a strategic cross-government perspective by applying the family test at key points such as the annual Budget and at spending reviews.
7. The Government should seek to improve the effectiveness of personal, social and health education (PHSE) by adding in practical parenting guidance as a key component, to be dependent on the needs of individual schools and classes.

Parenting and social mobility

The issue of social mobility is of growing importance for all mainstream political parties and social commentators. While already low compared to most OECD countries, the recent economic crisis and the budgetary tightening that followed have spurred concerns regarding the effectiveness of public spending in education, employment or training. Yet it is imperative that the Government takes action to ensure that life chances are not inextricably linked to people's background and the circumstances of their birth. So now is an important opportunity to consider the best ways to enhance social mobility: not only do we have less money to spend, but also we have to use it better.

One of the solutions is to focus on the early pre- school years. The work of the American Nobel Prize-winning economist James Heckman have demonstrated that the earlier the intervention, the greater the effect will be in the long-term, and the lesser will be the cost[1]. Since the quality of parenting has a huge impact on a child's development in the early years, it is time for policy makers to turn their attention squarely to parenting and not shy away from the issue for fear of being criticised for interfering in an area which is solely the preserve of the private domain..

Whether we are looking at academic ability, vital character and resilience traits, or social skills, a child's interaction with their parents and their upbringing will be a defining factor in their life, if not the most influential factor. That is not to say that wealth, class or education do not matter: they do, and improved social mobility has also to be addressed through better education and less social inequalities.

Yet research highlights that effective parenting has a bigger influence on a child's life than income, class or education. Research also highlights the long-term developmental impacts that good parenting, and an effective home learning environment, can have on education attainment, poverty, and ultimately children's futures. As the 2014 "State of the Nation" report from the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission set out:

"The early years matter profoundly to child poverty and social mobility. It is here that children learn basic skills, such as language and communication, which are the foundations of their future learning. It is also here that the gaps in development between children from poor and rich backgrounds begin to emerge."[2]

Key evidence supplied by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation[3] pointed to four main areas where parenting impacts greatly on poverty:

- A child's educational attainment is deeply affected by the relationship with, and between, their parents.
- Additionally, if a child's parents themselves are already living in poverty, it means that they may lake the resources to support their child in breaking free from their mould.
- On top of this, relationship breakdown between parents undoubtedly has a detrimental impact on the likelihood of a child ending up in poverty.
- However, living in poverty is proven to increase the chances of relationship breakdown.

In short, a spiral is created where breaking free from the prison of poverty and social breakdown can become almost insurmountable.

Whilst perceived state intervention in family life has been resisted by some, the detrimental impact poor parenting can have on a child's entire life is now too important an issue for the Government simply to adopt a laissez faire attitude. However, sensitivities towards an area that is, quite rightly, seen to be fundamentally the responsibility of parents, have to be taken into account.

Government-promoted parenting support can bridge this divide. By providing helpful guidance and support to parents on a voluntary and accessible basis, the responsibility for child development in the early years would still be the domain of the family, but with outcomes greatly enhanced for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. There is a real chance for improvements in the essential area of the early home learning environment.

Forging and implementing a national parenting support campaign that meets this requirement is a substantial challenge. Getting to the heart of the issue, and looking at what support already exists, how it is administered, and whether it has been a success or not, is an important first step. Only then can a new national parenting support plan be conceived, tailored by learning from past experiences.

1 Professor James Heckman, Schools, Skills, and Synapses, 2008

2 Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, State of the Nation 2014: Social Mobility and Child Poverty in Great Britain, 2014

3 Joseph Rowntree Foundation (2015), Written evidence submitted to the Inquiry

Parenting and social mobility



Building on work undertaken as part of the APPG on Social Mobility's Seven Key Truths about Social Mobility report[4], this report assesses the present parenting support offer in the United Kingdom, identifies barriers to the effective delivery of parenting support, highlights good practice, and proposes key recommendations to government.

Successfully addressing the role of parenting in social mobility, and laying the groundwork for a positive and sustainable national parenting campaign, would represent a substantial achievement and has the potential to improve the life chances of millions of British children.

4 All Party Parliamentary Group on Social Mobility, Seven Key Truths About Social Mobility, 2012

Parenting support in the UK

The provision of family support services across the UK, including parenting support, is a mixture of public sector, private sector, and voluntary/charity sector, initiatives, with very little overarching guidance from central government. There is no uniform structure or model, no shared outcome goals, funding and delivery differs from area to area, and there is no adequate evaluation process to measure impact.

The term family support services means community-based services provided for the safety, development, and well-being of children and families.

Our evidence suggests[5] this mixed landscape consists of multiple layers of potential support. Most parents access informal, peer-to-peer support, that comes from family and friends or through message boards. These essentially informal social networks can be integral in encouraging good parenting.

Additionally, there is less formal direct advice, often delivered by those who work with a child such as a nursery worker or a teacher, such as the Start for Life programme run through the NHS.

There are patchy efforts by public services, heavily influenced by "nudge" policy, which seek to change cultural norms and promote best practice through organised parenting support. This can take the form of special events or weeks run by schools and children's centres which encourage a certain action or focus.

Finally, there are the targeted parenting support programmes, specifically designed to engage with certain parents and families. These programmes can be split into a number of categories.

There are organised peer-to-peer advice schemes, where pre-identified families are engaged and supported by friends, family, or those simply "in the same boat".

There are "light touch" group drop in advice sessions on specific issues facing parents and families, which cover a range of key issues from bedtimes and food preferences, to more hard-hitting topics such as child developmental concerns and relationship breakdown. Additionally, there is "light touch" one-to-one parenting advice to parents who are generally coping well but have more specific concerns with their own child's behaviour or development.

For more severe issues, there are intensive and longer lasting group sessions, where pre-prepared programmes are used. These programmes have overarching methods, goals, and evaluation, but offer a degree of flexibility to allow the programme to be tailored to a specific situation.

Finally there is the long-term formal one-to-one support from a professional, for example, through the Family Nurse Partnership or a social worker. One key example is the Troubled Families programme, which seeks to change the repeating generational patterns of poor parenting, abuse, violence, drug use, anti-social behaviour, and crime, in the most troubled families in the UK

Generally, the approach taken is psycho-educational, where actual or perceived deficits in 'parenting skills' are addressed through teaching and learning[6]. For example, one of the most popular programmes, The Incredible Years programme, describes itself as "a series of programs focused on strengthening parenting competencies and fostering parents' involvement in children's school experiences", while another popular and well-established programme, Triple P, is described as "a system of evidence based programmes that vary in delivery mode and intensity and length. Giving parents simple and practical strategies to help them confidently manage their children's behaviour, prevent problems developing and build strong, healthy relationships".[7]

The delivery of these myriad offerings is often split across sectors, with minimal coordination. This scattergun approach means that gaps in provision and availability are widespread. For instance, the Parenting Early Intervention Programme, which provided government funding to local authorities to deliver parenting programmes from 2008-11[8], focused on a small number of very dysfunctional families, with little consideration of the families just above this level who are only just about coping and in desperate need of support themselves. These families were largely ignored because they were not yet at crisis point.

5 Family and Childcare Trust (2015), Written evidence submitted to the Inquiry

6 The Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships (2015), Written evidence submitted to the Inquiry

7 Triple P UK (2015), Written evidence submitted to the Inquiry

8 Department for Education, Parenting Early Education Programme Evaluation, 2011

Parenting support in the UK



The uneven and ad hoc approach prevalent across the UK is manifest in the differences between how nurseries and schools engage with parents, with some quite startling varying degrees of success. This issue has recently been highlighted by Ofsted, which sees one of the criteria of quality early education as the way in which providers engage and offer support to parents.[9]

The fragmented, and apparent chaotic, nature of the present parenting support offer across the UK has led to calls from a number of areas, most notably the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, for a national parenting support programme with a shared structure, funding system, and evaluation process. The merits of such an approach are legion, with Cllr Richard Watts suggesting that effective parenting support would relieve some serious financial pressures on local authorities.[10]

If government is genuinely interested in breaking the chains of poverty, and improving social mobility, it must recognise the need for a strong and sustainable approach to parenting support based on past failures and current successes.

9 Ofsted, Early Years Annual Report 2012–13, 2014

10 Parliamentary Inquiry into Parenting and Social Mobility (2015), Oral evidence session

Barriers to delivery and parental engagement

With the overarching goal of creating a national parenting campaign that is sustainable, effective, and even popular, it was imperative for the Inquiry to probe some of the areas where previous attempts have failed entirely, or where current efforts are experiencing challenges.

In the second of the Inquiry's oral evidence sessions, Professor Geoff Lindsay pointed to two distinct levels where previous programmes had not met expectations, or had encountered substantial challenges. One is the quality of the programmes, with the other being the quality of the organisational base. Professor Lindsay highlighted extensive work he had undertaken looking at what factors helped or impaired the delivery of a programme[11]. Research has previously focussed on leadership and management factors, with a need to distinguish strategic leadership from management, but also concentrate on the quality of the facilitators and client facing staff. Surprisingly, the level of qualifications of the facilitators, which is often seen to be crucial, is not as important to parents as is generally thought. What is important is the quality of the relationship between themselves and the facilitators.

One of the key themes that arose when considering barriers to delivery and parental engagement was the issue of stigma. Whilst there was broad agreement that there is a certain amount of stigma attached to attending parenting support classes or programmes from some quarters, the Inquiry heard contradictory evidence about the level of stigma felt by parents, and whether this had a substantial impact on whether they would engage with any form of parenting support.

One view was that there is a stigma attached to formal parenting programmes, with an associated mistrust of officialdom, with some parents being implacably opposed to both universal (or "open access") and targeted help.[12]

There is support for this view, and the view that attendance of a parenting programme may be seen to imply a "failure" or that a couple or individual is a bad parent. However, much of the evidence the Inquiry received highlighted that this can be fairly easily overcome through appropriate initial interaction with parents. In the most basic terminology, it is not what the programme is doing, but how it is doing it. Professor Lindsay noted that when "handled" carefully, research shows that parents are far more likely to engage with a parenting programme, especially if introduced to the concept by someone they trust or respect.[13]

The provider, Parent Gym, echoed the view that stigma was the main barrier to parents effectively engaging with parenting support services. Their strategy for dealing with this issue is to provide a universal service, focusing specifically on the positive elements of such a programme and branding it as something that is there to help parents make informed choices, and not dictate what they should or should not be doing.[14]

There is clear evidence that once parents are fully engaged with a programme, they are extremely positive about its impact, usability, and effectiveness. Considering the CANparent example, feedback showed that 92% of parents were positive about the classes, and 94% would recommend the classes to other parents.[15]

In fact, a necessity to move away from seeing parenting support as some sort of "blame game" was a point often made, most notably by Frank Field MP[16]. Recognising that some parents may need help in bringing up their children, and also that their behavior and social norms can have a detrimental impact on a child's life chances, is not to hold parents solely responsible, but to acknowledge a number of external factors and constraints that may have led to this state of affairs.

Some of the evidence the Inquiry received pointed to a view that parenting support is all too often focussed on parental behaviours and parenting techniques, instead of considering the quality of the parents' relationship, and the vital impact this has on a child's life chances. Evidence is this area points to the positive effects on children of being brought up by parents who have a compassionate, loving, and stable relationship[17]. As such, one of the many arguments for the failure of previous parenting support efforts was that they failed to consider this essential issue.

11 Parliamentary Inquiry into Parenting and Social Mobility (2015), Oral evidence session

12 Family and Childcare Trust (2015), Written evidence submitted to the Inquiry

13 Parliamentary Inquiry into Parenting and Social Mobility (2015), Oral evidence session

14 Parent Gym (2015), Written evidence submitted to the Inquiry

15 Family Lives (2105), Written evidence submitted to the Inquiry

16 Parliamentary Inquiry into Parenting and Social Mobility (2015), Oral evidence session

17 The Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships (2015), Written evidence submitted to the Inquiry

Barriers to delivery and parental engagement

One fundamental issue that repeatedly came to the fore from a number of those giving evidence was the very low levels of engagement with fathers or male carers of parenting and family support services. With evidence clearly pointing to the positive impact on social mobility of fully engaged fathers in the upbringing of their children, the current landscape and offering is widely considered to be weighted against actively involving fathers.[18]

Although there appears to be no attempt to deliberately stack the odds against positive engagement with fathers, the female dominance of the early years workforce has led to programmes being designed and implemented that best suit the environmental preferences, language, and personal circumstances of women, causing men to be alienated from the process.

Honor Rhodes from the Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships also emphasised this point in the Inquiry's second oral evidence session, arguing that despite decades of thinking about whole family work, we still have a workforce that tends to focus on working with women and is predominantly female. As a result, the UK is not doing enough to engage fathers, which is a particular concern when considering the positive impact of fathers on social mobility.[19]

The Fatherhood Institute highlighted the importance of existing family support and child development programmes engaging with men, as when parenting support is based on the availability of stay at home mothers as the primary carers, the term "Parent" effectively comes to mean "mother".[20] This only perpetuates the current view of gender roles and keeps fathers out of the equation.

Some of the main issues with previous attempts at delivering effective parenting support programmes or campaigns is the absolute need to ensure local "buy-in". A parenting support model imposed on an area without substantial local support will almost inevitably lead to a failure of the programme due to a lack of will to meet challenges and ensure implementation.

Additionally, there have been previous concerns about the sheer complexity of schemes, with the CANparent model being cited as a prime example of a programme hamstrung by its own complexities. Hand in hand with this criticism, and further relating to poor planning for how a programme will function in reality, is an apparent failure to effectively assess costs, with development costs often overlooked and providers being exposed to substantial financial risk.[21]

Concerning the question of parental engagement and take-up, it is clear that attendance at parenting programmes is heavily affected by the demands on a parent's time, the suitability of the location, and the time of the programme.

A further barrier is the issue of schools' engagement with parents. With a large number of schools already working with parents as a way to improve the performance of children at school, it is cause for concern that this is not replicated across the board. One way to address this issue would be to make accessing a parenting programme a usual part of starting school.[22]

One area the Inquiry was particularly keen to investigate were the political barriers to future policy in this field being taken forward. An inherent fear of being labelled the "nanny state" has made politicians reluctant to create policy that is seen to unduly intervene in the home. There was also a real concern that any government policy would inevitably focus on the negatives as opposed to encouraging the positives, and neglect the need to hold up positive role models. Finally, the lack of joined up government was cited as a key barrier to an effective government policy being created and implemented. Tim Loughton MP argued that only by having a cross departmental cabinet level Minister for Families can a certain level of policy "buy in" be ensured across the board.[23]

Ultimately, there are a number of barriers to parental engagement with support programmes and campaigns. It was essential that this Inquiry was aware of these issues so as to properly influence this report's final conclusions.

18 Parliamentary Inquiry into Parenting and Social Mobility (2015), Oral evidence session

19 Parliamentary Inquiry into Parenting and Social Mobility (2015), Oral evidence session

20 The Fatherhood Institute (2015), Written evidence submitted to the Inquiry

21 Safe Ground (2015), Written evidence submitted to the Inquiry

22 School Home Support (2015), Written evidence submitted to the Inquiry

23 Parliamentary Inquiry into Parenting and Social Mobility (2015), Oral evidence session

Good practice and successful programmes

Whilst it is vital to consider the mistakes and challenges of previous parenting support efforts, it is also imperative that successes are identified and replicated if a new national parenting programme or campaign is to be designed, implemented, and ultimately successful.

Evidence from the charity Safe Ground[24], noted that successful models and providers share a number of characteristics, such as advocacy. Advocacy is an integral aspect of a parenting programme engaging with the wider community, local authorities, schools, children's services, and other stakeholders. Effective advocacy has a unique ability to build momentum, secure support, and raise the profile of family support services. An essential ingredient when considering a new parenting support campaign.

A common theme that soon became evident was that any effective parenting support programme must be based on cross sector and multi-agency partnership working. Partnership working is key to delivering a holistic approach to the wide ranging needs of families that inevitably cover a myriad of services. Perusing this partnership approach to service provision allows for the efficient sharing of crucial resources, knowledge, and experience. Which, of course, will be of significant benefit to families and parenting support efforts.

There is absolutely no doubt that management and governance are key to the effective delivery of a parenting support programme, especially in relation to the senior management team. Quality leadership at this level has the power to overcome barriers in particularly challenging areas and circumstances, and allows for the programme or campaign to adapt quickly to developments and an altering landscape.

In addition, a key passage in the evidence the Inquiry received from Safe Ground argued:

> *"Those organisations which had survived and thrived in difficult conditions and over a period of considerable change were clear on their mission and focus and tended to have a strong strategic perspective in terms of their future development. Such organisations tended also, however, to be pragmatic and politically aware, linked in to local stakeholders and at strategic level, with well managed funder relationships and a systematic approach to fund-raising."*

Further evidence from Safe Ground clearly points to the key characteristics shared by hitherto successful programmes, regarding interaction with the target individual and families, as being in line with a range of other evidence submitted to the Inquiry. Notably, that any parenting programme must endeavour to be non-judgmental, seen as a positive development, flexible, and fundamentally tailored to specific circumstances, even if existing within a universal framework.

One key example is that of CANparent. Although it has received a significant level of criticism, there have also been a number of successes that should influence the way a new parenting programme is designed. Specifically, the ability of the campaign to attract a diverse range of parents from across social-economic statuses and ethnicity should be considered. The evidence from CANparent showed that a universal approach in designing and implementing a parenting programme resulted in those who needed it the most being those who actually engaged[25]. This view was echoed in a number of evidence submissions, most notably from the Triple P Programme, who pointed to an independent evaluation from University of Galway that show the levels of success they have achieved with their universal approach in Ireland.[26]

However, it must be noted that, whilst the Triple P Programme does advocate a universal approach, it also highlights the need for sufficient flexibility within the programme to allow it to be tailored to individual areas, families, and situations.

Specific good practice examples were provided by the charity Action for Children, who outlined their "Mellow Parenting" programme[27]. This programme runs over a 14-week period, with weekly group sessions designed to support families with relationship problems with their children under 5. It combines personal support for parents through videos with direct work with parents and children. The charity says that this programme has proven to be effective in engaging hard-to-reach families and in helping parents to make changes in their relationships with their children.

In October 2014, Action for Children launched National Children's Hour to encourage people to spend quality time with their children. To achieve this, the campaign aims to engage parents across the UK, and encourage them to make more time for their children. The campaign provides parents with free activity packs for children of varying ages. The focus of this campaign supports the view that any future national parenting programme or campaign should be positive, fun, and non-prescriptive.

24 Safe Ground (2015), Written evidence submitted to the Inquiry

25 Family Lives (2015), Written evidence submitted to the Inquiry

26 Triple P UK (2015), Written evidence submitted to the Inquiry

27 Action for Children (2015), Written evidence submitted to the Inquiry

Good practice and successful programmes

Another successful case study is the Parent Champions peer to peer support scheme, developed by the Family and Childcare Trust alongside Action for Children. The scheme has been markedly successful in bringing more parents into contact with local support services, with those parents then going on to promote these services to other parents in their communities. Early evaluation of the scheme is positive. Data from 12 sites showed that Parent Champions gave parents useful information and referred them to a range of services. 49% of referrals led to parents using children's centres regularly, enabling them to receive support, information and help from health and education professionals.[28]

As families will best engage with support that suits them, it is important to provide support through a range of settings and in a variety of formats. Flexible programmes can be delivered in one-to-one or group settings to allow parents to choose which approach they are most comfortable with, and increase the likelihood that they will want to participate. Help should also be made widely available online, instead of offline, so that parents have a source of support whenever, and however, they want it.

Once again, fostering a productive relationship with fathers and male carers was a dominant theme of evidence when looking at the issue of best practice and successful parenting support models.

The Fatherhood Institute outlined the importance of involving fathers early on, pointing out that early engagement with their children's lives created a positive relationship that was very likely to endure[29]. It became clear that parenting support models that aim to effectively engage fathers would have to change the mind-sets of health workers and other providers into valuing the positive role that fathers can play in family life.

It was argued that adopting a flexible and genuinely inclusive universal approach to a parenting support programme or campaign would have a greater chance of engaging with fathers. The concern being that fathers who may not be considered to be part of the "normal" and universal services currently available, and who already feel side lined, will become further disillusioned by attempts to "target" them specifically.

Honor Rhodes highlighted to the Inquiry that the adverse effect of the lack of father involvement in a child's attainment and learning is now so clear that efforts must be made to involve them in their child's educational development[30]. Reading in the home environment would be a good start.

The amount of time that parents spend reading with children has vastly increased over the last 20 years, highlighting a marked shift in societal attitudes, and has been achieved through schools encouraging parents to read at home. For example, Dr Jill Rutter outlined how four local authorities in south London worked with an arts and education project where parents had reading with children to do at home and stories to write at home, they came back to the school and the school laid on pizzas and parents listened to their children reading[31]. That was achieved through good planning ensuring that the activity was actually fun and not heavy handed. Home reading is undoubtedly one of the great successes of the last 20 years.

When considering the evidence submitted to the Inquiry, a point that was made time and again was that for any programme to be successful, it must take it account the need for early intervention. The Inquiry was told that successful programmes targeted intervention as early as possible, so as to have the greatest effect and avoid expensive late-stage interventions wherever possible.

Taken as a whole, the evidence highlights key characteristics of successful programmes and campaigns, important areas that need development, and opportunities for building on past foundations whilst avoiding previous mistakes. Bringing this information together is essential when looking to gauge a detailed picture of the current parenting support landscape.

28 Action for Children (2015), Written evidence submitted to the Inquiry

29 The Fatherhood Institute (2015), Written evidence submitted to the Inquiry

30 Parliamentary Inquiry into Parenting and Social Mobility (2015), Oral evidence session

31 Parliamentary Inquiry into Parenting and Social Mobility (2015), Oral evidence session

Conclusion

When considering all of the evidence submitted to the Inquiry, both orally and in writing, a clear picture can be painted. The link between good parenting and social mobility, or life chances, is self-evident. The focus is now on what support the Government can, or should, provide to parents to help improve social mobility, and how this can be delivered.

How can the Government build on anti-natal classes and ensure that seeking parenting advice becomes the social norm? Ante-natal classes are a useful benchmark as they are seen as entirely socially acceptable, and something that is generally expected of people. Ideally, parenting classes should be seen in the same light.

Evidence points to specifically targeted approaches as not being the most effective methods for providing parenting support capable of having a population level impact. There is a place for well-evidence programmes that target specific problems and groups, but these programmes will not of themselves increase national parenting capability.

Instead, a universal approach aimed at all parents appears to be the best way forward for a national parenting programme. Adopting a "light touch" inclusive parenting support model, developed at a local level with cross-sector buy in, has the potential to not only successfully engage parents, but to also be sustainable in the long-term[32].

An inclusive offer, reaching all parents, has the power to go a long way in tackling the perceived stigma of attending parenting support programmes, or engaging with parenting support campaigns.

Ultimately, what came through clearly from the evidence was that any successful programme or campaign simply must be forged and implemented at ground level. It must also be fully supported and promoted by public sector, private sector, and voluntary/charity sector, organisations, with strong partnerships and resource sharing developed. Whilst a UK-wide universal approach, perhaps within a set framework and with clear guidelines, is a desirable outcome, these programmes or campaigns must retain the ability to be flexible and suit the individual conditions and landscapes of distinct areas and regions.

However, national government,and the devolved institutions, who of course have a high level of responsibility in this area, Their unique ability to monitor and share successful examples of locally created parenting support campaigns must be harnessed, with national government being in the perfect position to collate the evidence and then provide best practice guides to parents and local authorities across the UK.

As pointed out by the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, there are a number of trials of parenting support campaigns taking place across the nation[33] and, when considering the above, the Government should seek to accommodate these trials, before looking to roll out a UK-wide scheme based on detailed evaluation and financial commitments.

Going hand in hand with this is a real need for both national, and local, government to be aware of the family and parenting support provision on the ground from area to area. Only by having this information can effective and tailored parenting support campaigns be successfully devised. The current situation, outlined by Leon Feinstein, where only a small number of local authorities regularly monitor and evaluate the offer in their areas is far from ideal[34]. To move forward, it would be positive development if all local authorities were required to conduct such an evaluation and report to central government. As this information should be easily accessible, it would not place an unreasonable burden on local authorities, and would be intensely helpful in the creating of new parenting support campaigns that meet the needs of distinct areas.

Another easy conclusion to draw from the evidence is that services are falling woefully short in engaging with fathers; arguably paying insufficient attention to their role in a child's development and future life chances.

There is a strong cross-sector consensus that government must seek to encourage services to adapt their programmes and campaigns to better engage with men, a point strongly made by Jonathan Rallings from Barnardo's[35]. The female domination of the early years workforce, combined with ingrained gender stereotypes, has created an environment of family support services which are aimed almost exclusively at women, and which, inadvertently, do not appear to sufficiently value the role of fathers.

A first step to rectify this unfortunate state of affairs would be to instigate a campaign aimed specifically at encouraging fathers to engage with their child's development. Campaigns to promote parents reading

32 Triple P UK (2015), Written evidence submitted to the Inquiry

33 Parliamentary Inquiry into Parenting and Social Mobility (2015), Oral evidence session

34 Parliamentary Inquiry into Parenting and Social Mobility (2015), Oral evidence session

35 Parliamentary Inquiry into Parenting and Social Mobility (2015), Oral evidence session

Conclusion

with their children at home have been very successful. A small step forward would be to build on this success and promote a "father and child" reading campaign. Although only a modest development, the Inquiry heard from Pamela Park that it is eminently achievable in the short term[36], provides a tangible policy objective, and sets the ground for a far wider cultural shift. In the longer term, changing the composition of the workforce would not only attract more fathers, it is likely to improve the quality and relevance of services for fathers.

A further consideration is that family policy covers a wide range of areas, and spans multiple government departments. This renders the likelihood of a holistic, and joined up, approach to policy development that benefits families in the long term very unlikely. A remedy for this substantial issue would be the creation of a cabinet-level "Minister for Families" whose purpose would be to work across government departments to co-ordinate and monitor policy that impacts heavily on families.

It was clear from evidence that the quality of parental, and wider family, relationships is an important issue when assessing a child's life chances and social mobility. It is time that this vital area is properly acknowledged at government level, with future policy taking into account a need to support these relationships. The Government's new Family Test is an ideal platform to further this necessity. Government should set out how the Family Test will operate, at what stages it will be applied to policy development, and how this will be evaluated.

The government has already committed to supporting a culture where the key aspects of good parenting are widely understood, and where all parents can benefit from advice and support. This must remain and develop as a key focal point of government policy on social mobility. An additional step towards ensuring this would be to include parenting guidance as a key component of future PSHE classes in schools. However, to maximise the effectiveness of this approach, the exact nature of the parenting support component should be decided at individual school level so as best to engage with the needs of their specific students.

Positive steps have been taken. The Inquiry heard from Tim Loughton MP how some government policy relating to family support and social mobility is achieving heartening success[37]. The Pupil Premium, reforms to childcare, flexible working, and the Troubled Families Programme (reference – Tim Loughton, oral evidence) were highlighted as being positive developments, and even a "game changer" in the latter's case. However, there is still far more to do.

Through parenting support the government has a real chance to improve the life chances of children and increase the quality of family life. Much must change for access to parenting support to become a reality for all, with a coherent strategy from national government, in partnership with the devolved institutions and local government, centred on early intervention, being of primary importance. As the next General Election approaches, all political parties must recognise the importance of parenting in social mobility, and look to implement the key recommendations of this report if we as country are to begin to truly get to grips with inequality. As Frank Field told the Inquiry:

> *"Parenting is the building block of a successful society and economy"*[38]

This should never be forgotten.

36 Parliamentary Inquiry into Parenting and Social Mobility (2015), Oral evidence session

37 Parliamentary Inquiry into Parenting and Social Mobility (2015), Oral evidence session

38 Parliamentary Inquiry into Parenting and Social Mobility (2015), Oral evidence session

Recommendations

1. Building on recent calls from the Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, an incoming Government should look to develop and implement a national parenting support campaign:
   - In view of the current economic climate, and central government funding constraints, trials of best practice based parenting support classes should continue and develop with a view to rolling out successful models nationally, promoting national – local partnerships, as and when resources allow.
   - In doing so, particular focus should be given to the models of parenting support shown to be positive and non-stigmatising, and effective in aiding the development of children's character and resilience.
2. The Government should provide all local authorities across the UK, and parents and providers, with best practice guides and guidelines for developing parenting support campaigns in their areas based on positive, non-prescriptive models.
3. The creation of a cabinet level "Minister for Families", with the purpose of working across departments to ensure a joined up approach to policy creation and implementation in areas that impact heavily on families.
4. The Government should encourage early years services to actively engage fathers by clarifying guidance, promoting activities that are accessible to fathers, and promoting the participation of men in the early years workforce. Specifically, the instigation of a UK-wide "fathers and children" reading campaign to be designed, funded, and promoted, by national government, and implemented by local government.
5. The Government should create a new statutory duty for all local authorities to carry out a strategic needs evaluation for family support services in their areas. Parenting support provision statistics should be easily accessible for all local authorities, and would not place an undue burden.
6. The Government should build on the introduction of the Family Test by promoting and supporting strong family relationships, recognising that they are the bases for good parenting.
   - The Government should in future strengthen the test to ensure that families are supported by government, including through relationship support and parenting skills.
   - The Government should set out an effective family test process and ensure a strategic cross-government perspective by applying the family test at key points such as the annual Budget and at spending reviews.
7. The Government should seek to improve the effectiveness of PSHE by adding in practical parenting guidance as a key component, to be dependent on the needs of individual schools and classes.



Evidence

List of Written Evidence Received

Action for Children

All Party Parliamentary Group on Social Mobility

Barnardo's

Capacity

Contact a Family

Every Family Matters

Family and Childcare Trust

Family Lives

Fatherhood Institute

Frank Field MP

Joseph Rowntree Foundation

Ministry of Justice

Oxfordshire Parenting Forum

Parent Gym

Parenting UK

Relate

Safe Ground

School Home Support

Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships

Tavistock Institute of Human Relations

Triple P UK

University of Warwick

List of Oral Evidence

Monday 26 January 2015

Dr Jill Rutter, Head of Policy and Research at Family and Childcare Trust

Jen Lexmond, Director at Character Counts

Lucy O'Sullivan, Head of Policy and Research at Relate

Leon Feinstein, Director of Evidence at Early Intervention Foundation

Matt Buttery, CEO of Triple P UK

Ben Cox, Programme Manager of London Youth Rowing

Adam Moll, Business Development Director at Safe Ground

Monday 9 February 2015

Professor Geoff Lindsay, Professor of Educational Psychology at Warwick University

Honor Rhodes OBE, Director of Strategic Development at Tavistock

Jonathan Rallings, Assistant Director of Policy and Research at Barnardos

Pamela Park, Deputy Chief Executive at Family Lives

Cllr Richard Watts, Leader of Islington Borough Council

Frank Field MP, Former Head of Review into Poverty and Life Chances

Tim Loughton MP, Former Parliamentary Undersecretary of State for Children and Families

Baroness Shephard, Commissioner on Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission

Anne Marie Carrie, Commissioner on Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission



Family and Childcare Trust

Creating a family friendly UK

Family and Childcare Trust

The Family and Childcare Trust works to make the UK a better place for families. Our vision is of a society where government, business and communities do all they can to support every family to thrive. Through our research, campaigning and practical support we are creating a more family friendly UK.

The Family and Childcare Trust's annual childcare costs survey is the definitive report on childcare costs and sufficiency in the UK and its data is used by the Department for Education and OECD.

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