

Focus on...

Outcomes for parents

The desirable outcomes for the children of parents and carers receiving parenting support are currently well studied and publicised: better behaviour, resumed school attendance, rejection of substance abuse and many more.

In the face of this it is all too easy to lose sight of some of the outcomes for parents themselves. These can vary from something as simple as getting more sleep to more fundamental changes such as gaining enough confidence to move on to a basic literacy group at the local college. Such outcomes can have far-reaching and long-lasting effects for the whole family: clearly the parent now getting enough sleep will cope better with all aspects of her/his daily challenges and the parent who learns to read can help the family with reading and homework as well as moving on in his/her own career and life.

The importance of outcomes for parents should not be overlooked; there is nothing like a good parenting programme for getting people to look at themselves, their family and their future in a new, more positive light. Much can be gained from a holistic view which considers not only outcomes for children but also outcomes for parents and the wider community.

Promoting well-being in parenting support

By Yvonne Roberts, The Young Foundation

The promotion of well-being is an implicit theme in Every Child Matters but it is strangely absent from current parenting support strategies. This is a gap that the Local Well-being Project at the Young Foundation is attempting to address, working with three local authorities – South Tyneside, Manchester and Hertfordshire.

The parenting strategy in South Tyneside is part of an entire local authority approach to well-being, set out in the *Spirit of South Tyneside* report. Among the strategy's objectives is 'promoting culture and well-being so that everyone in our communities can be the best that they can be' and this obviously includes parents.

At its most simple, well-being is defined by nef (the new economics foundation) as, 'good feelings and positive outcomes'. This translates into the ability to make strong relationships, to engage with the community, to put a value on yourself and those you love and to feel reasonably secure in health and income.

Common sense tells us that parents who feel better about themselves have a higher chance of engaging positively with their children – and this is the key. Parenting support that focusses simply on managing the behaviour of a child at a particular time in his or her life may fail to plant the seeds that can help an entire family to flourish. In South Tyneside, for example, parenting support – whether it's just a chat and

a coffee or a compulsory 13 week course – is treated as the door to other opportunities that are as much focussed on the parent as on the child. At one children's centre, parenting support has encouraged parents – many classed as hard to reach, or, more accurately, easy to ignore – to graduate to other courses, job skills and more involvement with the local community. This all helps to enhance well-being.

The approach to improving well-being in South Tyneside is that what you do for an individual parent and child, you do for the benefit of the whole local area. This also helps to destigmatise parenting support: it becomes everyone's investment, not a sign of 'bad' parenting. 'We aim for more than just making things a little better,' says Margaret Welch, the Parenting Commissioner for South Tyneside, 'This is about the well-being of the whole family.'

While well-being is not yet a widely used measure in the outcomes for parenting support, many of the changes parenting support may trigger resonate with key indicators of well-being. These include improved social networks and relationships – so it is essential that funding should be available to help parents to continue to meet up, if they wish, after a parenting course has ended.

Another indicator is an increase in a parent's trust in her or himself and trust in others. Parents report that the opportunity to hear the views and experiences of other parents normalises parenting problems. This is especially evident if the practitioner treats parents as equals.

The quality of the parents' relationship with each other or a partner is also vital to well-being and often overlooked in parenting support. Charities such as One Plus One and Relate point out that this is not given much direct and sustained attention in parenting support and argue that this area of need should be mainstreamed.

A sense of belonging and connectedness also helps to boost well-being. When parenting support is linked to opportunities in education, employment and engagement in the local community this can help build social networks, for parents and children, and give access to families who may model different, more positive styles of parenting.

Parenting support can also help to improve well-being by providing opportunities for having fun. A successful parenting workshop, for instance, a group picnic, can remind a parent that children are a source of huge emotional rewards, and that awareness also enhances well-being – especially as an improvement in behaviour and interactions begin to be seen.

An experienced and intuitive parenting support worker can also help a parent to change the story they tell themselves. Their perception can be changed from having things 'done' to them, rather to being active agents in their own lives – a vital element in resilience and well-being, and changing behaviour.

Another issue to consider in measuring both parenting skills and well-being is the matter of class and the impact of deprivation. What is seen as 'poor' parenting is sometimes an incorrect diagnosis. Some academics argue that the main issue is poverty and inadequate support, and that many parents, against the odds, have very strong relationships with their children in ways that are not recognised when viewed through a middle class lens. A greater recognition of these sometimes Herculean efforts could itself have an impact on well-being. At present, the association of parenting support with negative

behaviour reinforces the stigma of asking for help, and means that support is viewed as a deficit model of intervention. 'What's going wrong?' is the question that pervades even very positive interventions. A focus on well-being – what it means, why it matters and how it can be encouraged plus using well-being as a measure in outcomes – could shift the emphasis from a deficit to a 'plus' model. Parenting support could then be viewed as a way of maximising the benefits of having a family and embracing the challenge of becoming and being a good enough parent.

The Young Foundation suggests that the Government establish a parenting support innovation fund. The fund could provide financial and practical support to encourage a range of new approaches, some developed by parents, which widen the horizons of support. This approach has proved highly effective in New Zealand with projects such as Strategies with Kids, Information for Parents (SKIP) reaping rich rewards in child and parental well-being and community.

Ultimately, as Mary MacLeod, chief executive of the Family and Parenting Institute has pointed out many times, parenting support is about well-being, love and relationships: 'Building, sustaining, repairing frail and fractured relationships is what this work is all about... Relationships that are not only "social contracts" but about that most contradictory thing: the completely prosaic everyday business of living together and about our deepest feelings of love and commitment.'

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The Young Foundation is a centre for social innovation developing practical initiatives to address unmet social needs.
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The full report *A Door to a Better Future – Well-being and Parenting Support* written by Yvonne Young and Dr Marcia Brophy of the Young Foundation will be published in the autumn.

Case study: Paradise Park Children's Centre

By Patricia Alert

Parenting courses have an essential place in children's centres – according to the parents who have attended courses at Paradise Park Children's Centre they have felt able to become further involved in the development of the children's centre activities.

Over the past nine months we have run two 'Strengthening Families, Strengthening Communities' courses which have proved beneficial not only to the parents attending, but also to the centre and the wider community. Over 30 people enrolled in the two 13-week courses.

We spoke to some of the parents who completed the course to see how it benefited them. Hayley, who has a toddler, joined the course after attending a number of training and information sessions at the children's centre. At first she felt that the course would not be for her as, in her words, 'I did not have a problem, so why am I going?' However, she saw this as opportunity to perhaps learn something new. Hayley was sceptical about what the course could 'teach' her about her parenting, but was open to the fact that it, 'could teach me something about myself and about me in this community'.

Through the course, Hayley was able to meet up with old friends and form new friendships. This has involved her looking after other participants' children while they attended appointments or went shopping, supporting the more isolated parents in her community.

The course introduced Hayley to people from different age ranges and backgrounds, 'There was people on the course who were grandparents caring for their grandchildren,' says Hayley, 'who I learnt a lot from'. It helped Hayley to develop a sense of who she is within her community. 'When I started the course I did not feel that I was spiritual and did not think much about my ethnicity,' Hayley remarks, 'but since doing the course I have gone with my son and his father to celebrate St Patrick's Day because his father is Irish, we have never done that before!'

The parenting course at Paradise Park actually built on Hayley's abilities as a parent, 'I believe more in my abilities as a parent,' she says, 'I thought I was doing okay, and the course showed me that I was. I still feel that I am lacking in confidence when speaking publicly, but it has helped me to build up my self-esteem, it made me feel listened to and I had a real connection with the others.'

The course hasn't just boosted her confidence in her parenting skills but has also given Hayley the encouragement to attend local talks about her area and its history. She now works in the Paradise Park café as a volunteer and is in the process of setting up a Parents' Forum for the children's centre. 'I feel that I can help people with certain issues,' says Hayley, 'and give them information, I am a good listener.'



Hayley has become an invaluable member of the café staff and she uses every opportunity in her contact with parents to inform and point them in the right direction to our services and to wider community

activities, using her knowledge of services and the area.

Since first attending the 'Strengthening Families, Strengthening Communities' course, Hayley has completed a number of other courses including, Special Needs, Childcare, Getting Started in a Pre-school Setting, Helping in School (Level 2), and she has decided that she wants to work with children with special needs in a school setting.

By providing this course, we as a children's centre have been lucky in that we can now develop an area of our service which is not as strong as it could be, the 'parent's voice', and have a positive effect on the local community. And with Hayley working with us to set up the Parent's Forum, we also have an ambassador in the forum who can inform and encourage parents to use our services.