

Working to support positive parenting and relationships

What can councils do?

Foreword

We know that good parenting acts as a buffer against adversity, keeps children safe and aids their development. It is now well established that the first years of a child's life have a significant impact on the opportunities and successes that child will have as they grow up and beyond.

While being a parent is one of the most important jobs there is, it can also be one of the most difficult. The hours are long, there is no fail safe set of instructions provided and parents juggle it with all their other commitments. Whether it's the pressures of unemployment, poor housing, mental illness or simply the strains of everyday life, parents can end up struggling. These factors and the very challenge of raising children can also cause inter-parental relationship difficulties. There is growing recognition that the quality of the relationship between parents has a significant impact on young children, and conflict and anxiety, can make the job of parenting even more difficult.

We know there are children in our communities who grow up in households affected by poverty, domestic violence, mental illness, drug and alcohol abuse and family conflict. We also recognise the important contribution councils can make in supporting and working with parents to tackle these issues; as councillors, we regularly make decisions which impact on housing, employment, education and health in our local areas. These factors will of course have an impact on the pressures of everyday living and in turn the relationship between a parent and child.

Over the years, councils have focused primarily on helping children. That is clearly still important, but now it's time to do more to help parents as well. This is not about dictating to people how to parent and conduct themselves. We want to work with families and support parents, to equip them to deal with some of the challenges of daily living and overcome the hurdles that get in the way of building safe, stable and nurturing environments that all children can thrive in.



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Izzi Seccombe'.

Councillor Izzi Seccombe
Chair, Community Wellbeing Board



A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Richard Watts'.

Councillor Richard Watts
Chair, Children and Young People Board

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Why do we need to support parents?

Perhaps the easiest way to measure our success as a nation is to look at how children are developing in the early years. Figures from the Early Years Foundation Stage Profiles show that by the age of five, nearly one in four children do not reach the expected level in language and communication skills and a fifth fall short of the expected level in personal, social and emotional development.

This should not be surprising. A quarter of children are born into home environments that are not conducive to good parenting because the household is affected by domestic violence, mental illness or drug and alcohol problems. One of the most common problems is postnatal depression. One in five mothers suffers from some kind of depression, anxiety or psychosis during pregnancy or in the first year of their baby's life.

Relationships come under strain in these sort of circumstances – and in other situations.

Work by the Early Intervention Foundation (EIF) has illustrated the impact that a breakdown in parental relationships is likely to have on the child. The EIF's research shows parents embroiled in difficult relationships are typically more aggressive toward their children and less responsive to their needs. In turn children who experience this are more likely to become aggressive and hostile themselves or develop low self-esteem, anxiety and depression.

It also reduces their academic performance and limits the development of their social and emotional skills. In the worst-case scenarios, the family unit disintegrates so much that social workers need to intervene.

What can councils do?

There is now more evidence than ever about what works. Providing access to universal support in the early years and dedicated parenting programmes for those that need extra help can make a huge difference to the relationship that parents have with their children.

Support to help parents overcome “stressors” such as alcohol abuse can free them from the shackles that hinder parenting, while mediation and counselling for couples in conflict can save relationships and help maintain a strong family unit for children to flourish.

As always, intervening early is key. A review by the Darlington Social Research Unit, Warwick University and Coventry University has looked over 100 different types of interventions. It found that there was a range of “well evidenced and promising” interventions. The work – commissioned by the EIF – identified the strong evidence for programmes that picked up on the early signals of risk such as child behaviour problems, insecure attachment, delayed development and lack of maternal sensitivity.

So what can councils do? Increasing access to support is the most obvious step – polling suggests a fifth of mothers find it difficult to get help when they need it. Plenty of local authorities are already running nationally-recognised parenting programmes, such as Incredible Years and Triple P, which can help. But the most innovative are doing more. Children’s centres, early years teams, health visitors and social care staff are changing the way they work to engage parents in new and novel ways.

Support is being delivered in group settings, one-to-one and to mass audiences via seminars, media work and publicity as councils join with an ever-expanding range of partners from the voluntary sector and schools to the NHS and parents themselves.

You can find out more by reading the case studies in this document.

Must knows

Top five tips

- Think about both prevention and support and robustly monitor and evaluate everything you do.
- Consider how you can get midwives and health visitors involved – they will be the first contact parents have with the system.
- Remember parents can help design and deliver services through being peer mentors.
- Support everyone through universal interventions – it will help you pick up on those who need more specialist help.
- Don't forget the importance of inter-parental relationships – regardless of whether the couple is together or not.

Key statistics

- One in four children are born into households affected by drink, drugs, mental illness and domestic violence.
- One in five mothers suffer from postnatal depression and anxiety during pregnancy and in the first year of their baby's life.
- 61 per cent of parents described parenting as 'fairly' or 'very' difficult.
- One in five mothers find it difficult to access help with parenting.
- Half of children born today can expect to see their parents split by the time they are 15.

Case studies

Hertfordshire County Council and Essex County Council: getting talking about inter-parental relationships

Hertfordshire and Essex county councils are providing training to local health and care professionals so they can provide healthy relationships support and advice.

Hertfordshire has focused on family support services, health visitors and children's centres to tackle problems before they reach the stage where social care involvement is needed.

Essex's approach involves early years staff and GP surgeries working together as evidence shows patients are presenting with issues related to relationship problems.

Hertfordshire and Essex are two of the 12 areas involved in the Department of Work and Pensions' local family offer. Each has received just over £40,000 of funding to pilot new ways of working by focusing on training key staff to provide healthy relationship support and advice.

The councils have used the One Plus One charity to run workshops to train staff in how to identify and recognise relationship issues and offer ongoing support or refer people to other services if needed. The funding is also helping the councils set up a free mediation and counselling service. Both projects are to be closely evaluated as they are rolled out over the coming months.

Hertfordshire County Council

Hertfordshire has focused on training family support service staff, health visitors and children's centre workers. More than 50 staff attended the training during the summer. But the idea has proved so popular that another two workshops are being planned – paid for by the council – for a further 100 staff.

One of those who has already completed the training is children's centre outreach worker Lynn Corbett. She says it has proved invaluable for the work she does:

“We're seeing an awful lot of families facing difficulties now, but in the past there has been little we have been able to do for them. A lot of the relationships and family advice that has been available has had to be paid for. But thanks to the training, there is something we can do. I have started sitting down with some of the families we're aware are having difficulties. We talk through things and I try to help them or signpost them to services that are available. I think families trust us, they talk to us, so it is really good that we can do something for them.”

Lynn is one of 36 people who have volunteered to be ambassadors. The idea is that these people will champion the issue, support colleagues and raise awareness of the importance of healthy relationships, building a network of support for the county in the process.

To complement the training the council is developing a toolkit to provide guidance to staff as well as for parents. The council has also developed a Families First web portal – a directory of local early help services for families, covering everything from debt advice and benefits to what help is available for those facing domestic abuse. It was launched in January and is being used by early help practitioners and the public. Laura McAvoy, the council's strategy manager for family support, hopes this approach will help create a change in culture in the way we talk about conflict and support relationships to thrive.

“Relationship breakdown is a critical issue for many families presenting at social care. There is more support needed at a much earlier stage. We need open, constructive and empowering conversations with parents around managing conflict, alongside practical support. Raising awareness of need and increasing practitioner confidence and skills is key.”

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Essex County Council

Data indicates there are high levels of emotional health and wellbeing needs among parents and this was corroborated by front-line staff. In particular GPs said they were often seeing cases where they believed poor inter-parental relationships were at the heart of problems patients were presenting with.

The Unity Project will provide healthy relationships training to about 60 professionals, including GPs, practice nurses, receptionists, midwives, health visitors and staff from local children's centres and pre-schools nurseries. Two GP practices – in Basildon and Harlow – and the local early years workforce will be involved in the pilot.

The professionals will be working together to support the parents and, where necessary, signpost them to the network of local early help services, including a bespoke combined counselling and coaching intervention. This has been designed specifically for the Unity Project with voluntary sector partners Kids Inspire and the Ministry of Parenting.

Clare Burrell, the council's head of commissioning for vulnerable people says: "GPs and front-line practitioners are increasingly concerned about the state of inter-parental relationships and the negative impact this is having on children and young people's outcomes. This project gives us the opportunity to target some resource to better understand the issues, and the learning will influence all of our work across the children's system in Essex."

Marguerite Cuttings, practice manager at the Basildon Langdon Hills Medical Centre, which is taking part in the project, says: "We have a young population and GPs are seeing a lot of patients with problems that are linked to relationships – depression, anxiety and sleeping difficulties, so I think getting this training will allow us to do more for our patients and help them deal with the underlying causes of the problems."

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Blackpool: tackling stressors on parents

Blackpool has embarked on a National Lottery-backed 10-year programme to transform the support it offers to young children and their families.

The work involves offering support to some of the most vulnerable families, including those with drug and alcohol problems and where domestic violence is a risk, by giving them the support they need to parent well.

Universal services are also being developed and improved to transform opportunities.

Blackpool is one of the most deprived parts of the UK. Parenting in these circumstances is not easy. But aspirations are high now that the new Better Start partnership – led by the NSPCC and involving the council, NHS, police, voluntary sector and, of course, local parents – will help transform the opportunities available to families by tackling the "stressors" that get in the way.

With £45 million of National Lottery funding, the partnership is in the process of launching a host of schemes. These include:

- Step Up, a four-year programme that will see early help coordinators working with families where domestic abuse is an issue.
- The 20-week Parents Under Pressure parenting programme, which works with mothers and fathers who are undergoing drug and alcohol treatment to support them in their parenting.
- Survivor Mums, based on a US self-help scheme, designed to help pregnant women who have experienced abuse cope with pregnancy.
- The NSPCC's Video Interaction Guidance project which builds confidence in parents skills by showing them, through the use of video, how they are engaging well with their children to build attachment.

Merle Davies, the director of the Centre for Early Child Development, the delivery arm of the partnership, says:

“Our aim is to break the intergenerational cycle of poor outcomes by moving the focus from high-end and high-need services to earlier intervention and working with partners to transform the way we deliver services. To do this we have a theory of change which is based on reducing the stressors that impact on the parent’s ability to parent. Stressors such as domestic abuse, mental ill health, drugs and alcohol and social isolation can be addressed by building parental and community capabilities around parenting knowledge and skills, attachment, self-efficacy and social cohesion.”

The pump priming from the lottery will allow the schemes to get going and fund the evaluation of the work with a view to making sure what works best is sustainable in the long-term once the 10-year project is finished.

The programme is being coordinated by the Better Start board, which includes representatives from all the key partners, with the day-to-day work driven by a 16-strong team at the Centre for Early Child Development.

At the heart of the programme is Community Voice, a parents’ forum which has over 160 members and is growing daily. The forum plays a key role in the design and development of the different projects. For example, mothers are working with professors at the University of Michigan to ensure that the work books for Survivor Mums are appropriate and understandable for a local audience.

As well as pioneering new projects, the partnership is also working with existing services, bringing in the latest learning and research. An example of this is the delivery of antenatal classes.

There is now a more flexible offer which includes evenings, and a family engagement team has been created to visit pregnant women in the third trimester, encouraging them to take up the support available. Participation rates are already improving. As well as improving access, the classes – based on the Baby Steps model – also offer support post-birth. In total there are nine sessions, six before and three after birth.

And to help build community cohesion, a number of universal projects have been launched. These have included physical activity classes run by Blackpool Football Club Community Trust and the Baby Rover scheme, which offers parents bundles of baby clothes for £1. The community is also involved in spending £1.6 million in redesigning parks and open spaces for young families to use.

Other work is aimed at engaging fathers too, as they have said they feel left out of the whole pregnancy experience. Mellow Dads, involving parenting workshops and fun play for children and their fathers, will be getting under way soon, while an outdoor activities programme has been run in partnership with Sport Blackpool.

There is also a reading project that has involved dads working with local libraries to redesign their reading spaces, including working with the world-famous Blackpool Illuminations team to design and build bespoke reading areas in libraries. Scott Moseley, a local dad who has been involved in the project, says it promises to have a significant impact.

“I know that it’s going to make a real difference to families who use each of these libraries, and encourage more families to read to their children. I feel proud of being part of it.”

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Nottinghamshire County Council: offering support to fathers in prison

- Nottinghamshire runs a variety of parenting programmes including one that works with families where fathers are in prison.
- The scheme involves family fun days with fathers and parenting support for when the father leaves prison.
- About 140 families have benefited in the past year with all rating the scheme as “good” or “excellent”.

Research by Barnado’s shows that children with parents in prison are twice as likely to suffer mental health and conduct problems and three times as likely to be involved in offending. Nottinghamshire County Council has sought to address these problems by running a parenting project aimed at fathers in prison.

The partnership between the local children’s centres and Ranby Prison, a resettlement institution, sees families invited in for fun activity days. Children’s centre outreach workers accompany the families who get to play games and take part in arts and crafts and spend valuable quality time together.

Approximately 140 families have taken part over the past year with 80 per cent rating the scheme as ‘excellent’ for their children and the remaining 20 per cent classing them as ‘good’.

Fathers are also offered parenting courses in preparation for their release. These are based on Incredible Years, 123 Magic and Solihull parenting programmes. The courses are delivered over six weeks and encourage fathers to support their children to learn through play, understand their children’s emotions, maintain good communication, the importance of praise and rewards and how to develop routines and reintegrate back in to family life.

So far 27 fathers have completed the parenting programme – and the feedback provided has been very encouraging. One father said it made him reconsider his approach to parenting and in particular the impact his prison sentence had had on his children, while another said it had given him the motivation to “stay out of prison and spend more time with my family”.

More recently fathers have also been given support to help reduce stress and anxiety through a scheme called Take Five, which is delivered by voluntary sector group ‘Each Amazing Breath’.

Rachel Clark, Nottinghamshire’s strategic lead for parenting, says: “children of prisoners are among the most socially excluded in society and we know time in prisons breaks those crucial family bonds. That has an adverse effect on both children and fathers – those with strong family units are less likely to re-offend. So we have tried to do something to help maintain or even improve that family dynamic.”

Mainstream support services and other initiatives in Nottinghamshire

Alongside this targeted work, the council also has a comprehensive universal offer for all parents and carers of children with the county’s parenting and family strategy making early intervention a key priority. Ms Clark says:

“We have an early help unit that receives referrals and then filters cases through to the most appropriate areas whether that is the children’s centre, family service or social care. The aim is to intervene early before more deep-rooted problems develop.”

Mainstream parenting support in the early years is delivered through the county’s children’s centres and include nationally-accredited programmes such as Incredible Years and 123 Magic. Last year over 2,700 parents took part in programmes.

Ms Clark says: “Partnership working is also crucial to the successful delivery of parenting programmes. This has worked particularly well in Mansfield, one of our areas of highest need, where the district council has continued to fund a parenting coordinator role. As well as delivering programmes, the coordinator also links with a wider locality planning group. This has resulted in some of the highest numbers of parents accessing programmes.”

One of the most innovative interventions is a family therapy model called Non-Violent Resistance (NVR) which Nottinghamshire County Council, in partnership with Mansfield District Council and the local CAHMS services, began to use in 2010. It can be delivered in a one-to-one or group setting and equips parents with the skills to manage, reduce and avoid aggressive encounters. It is generally delivered to the parents of children aged 10 and above and teaches them specific ways to challenge their child’s use of violence and how to increase the amount of positive interaction in their family.

“Societally there is a great deal of shame surrounding family violence which can lead to families feeling extremely isolated and helpless,” says Ms Clark. “NVR introduces tools which help parents to generate positive authority and support. Fundamentally it helps parents and carers to care for their children in the way they would like to.”

Referrals are generated from police, schools, social workers and mental health services. Some 250 families have benefited over the past two years. One mother who took part said it helped her alter her approach to parenting – and her relationship with her son has been transformed as a result. “I was afraid to make changes in my response to my child’s aggressive behaviours in case he kicked off, but it gave me the confidence to try something different. I’m so glad I did.”

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Sheffield: taking parenting help to a mass audience

- Sheffield City Council is taking traditional parenting programmes to a mass audience by launching a “light-touch” version of the Triple P programme.
- Seminars for up to 200 parents are being held alongside more intimate one-off discussion groups.
- Parenting specialists running the new formats report they are helping them reach more people and “normalise” parenting support.

Like many councils, Sheffield runs evidence-based group parenting programmes. They can run for up to 15 weeks and operate on a referral basis. But the city council has now taken this a step further by working with Triple P to launch new forms of parenting support for a mass audience.

September saw a new Triple P “light touch” programme launched. It involves parenting seminars for up to 200 parents being offered as well as more intimate discussion groups. The idea has been to provide parents with easy-to-access one-off support alongside the more intensive help.

Candi Lawson, who oversees the parenting team, which is part of the children’s and families directorate, says the council decided to pilot the new way of working after seeing demand rise for parenting support. Two thirds of cases coming through the early intervention and prevention service, which filters cases referred in from council teams as well as health professionals, schools and early years services, were citing problems parenting or the home environment as a reason for needing help.

“We were seeing high levels of referrals for evidence-based parenting support,” says Ms Lawson. “Last year we provided support to over 500 parents, but there were clearly much higher numbers that needed to access support – so we had to find a way of providing increased access.”

“But this new way of working is not just about relieving the pressure on the other programmes. We believe these new formats will reach out to people we have not always managed to help in the past because they either do not want to do the longer courses or do not need to.”

In order to deliver the new levels of support, the parenting team has reduced the number of longer programmes it is delivering by a third. During the next year, Sheffield will evaluate how effective the “light touch” approach is by gathering feedback from those who attend and monitoring referrals for the other parenting programmes.

Ms Lawson says: “It is still early days, but we’re very hopeful. The seminars and discussion groups are proving popular and we hope by taking this approach it will help to normalise parenting support and encourage parents and carers to access the service at the earliest stage.”

The seminars have been delivered in partnership with schools with those taking part marketing the event and providing the venue. The parenting team then provide the practitioners to deliver the 90-minute talks. So far five secondary schools have got involved with seminars being run once a fortnight on average at the moment. Although, in time, the council aims to roll them out to more schools and is also hoping to run them in city centre venues.

There are six types of seminars – three for parents of children 12 and under and three for parents of teenagers:

- Positive parenting
- Raising confident and competent children
- Raising resilient children
- Raising responsible teenagers
- Raising competent teenagers
- Getting teenagers connected (friendships and social activities).

Meanwhile, the discussion groups are more intimate and involve small groups of up to 12 people taking part in a two-hour long discussion led by a parenting specialist. They are again split into groups for the parents of younger children and groups for parents of teenagers. The topics include dealing with disobedience, managing family conflict and developing good bedtime routines. While the seminars are operated on a drop-in basis, parents have to sign up to the discussions or get referred on to them.

The new formats are to be accompanied by a media and publicity campaign, which will look to use social media to promote these events and the importance of good parenting. It means the council is now providing a five-level programme of parenting support – media and publicity (level one), seminars (level two), discussion groups (level three), group programmes including Triple P and Incredible Years (level four) and specialist programmes tailored to those who need extra support such as the victims of domestic abuse (level five).

Specialist parenting practitioner Liz Hill says the flexibility has enabled her and her colleagues to have a greater impact. “We are now reaching all sorts of people we just could not before. For example, we had a discussion group recently with parents from the Roma/ Slovak communities. I just don’t think they would have been able or wanted to commit themselves to a 15-week programme, but by having these different formats we are able to tailor our programmes to different groups. We can hold them at different times too – in the evenings as well as during the day.”

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Cheshire East: creating a 12-stop parent journey for all

Cheshire East's early years, family services and health visiting teams are working in a more integrated way to create a 12-stop "parent journey".

The model gives all parents access to key practitioners at important points during the first five years of their child's life.

The aim is to give all parents the "best possible support" and make sure those that need extra help get it at an early stage.

Cheshire East Council has re-modelled the way it runs its parenting support to create a 12-stop "parent journey". The timeline provides parents with a definitive route through the first five years – from pre-birth to the start of school.

At each key point along the journey the council provides families with the opportunity to have contact with a relevant key worker – whether it's a health visitor, children's centre worker or member of the early years team. Leaflets are also handed out with helpful advice about what they need to look out for in terms of how they parent and their child's development.

The aim of the initiative – a partnership between the council's early years, family services and health visiting teams – is to ensure all parents get the best possible support and, for those that need it, specialist help. The 12 stops are:

- Stop 1 (antenatal) – a health visitor visits the mother at home to talk about their and their family's health.
- Stop 2 (antenatal) – a session offering advice and information on preparing for the arrival of the baby and on the local children's centre.
- Stop 3 (shortly after birth) – a home visit from the health visitor to talk about the mother and baby's health and development.

- Stop 4 (four to six weeks) – a home visit from the health visitor to support the mother and baby and identify whether other help may be needed.
- Stop 5 (nine to 16 weeks) – an opportunity to meet with other parents and babies of a similar age at a children's centre.
- Stop 6 (four to seven months) – a session at the local children's centre offering advice about making the home safe, communication and language and weaning.
- Stop 7 (nine to 12 months) – an opportunity to discuss the child's health and development with a health visitor.
- Stop 8 (from 12 months) – a play session exploring how parents can support and understand their child's language and communication development.
- Stop 9 (18 to 24 months) – a fun and active session introducing "five-a-day".
- Stop 10 (two years) – the integrated review with a member of the health visiting team.
- Stop 11 (three to four years) – a fun and active play session with an opportunity to find out about helping the child to play, read and write at home.
- Stop 12 (before school) – Ready, Steady, Play session to support parent and child in getting ready for school.

Of course a number of these stops are the statutory offerings that councils are required to make under the Healthy Child Programme, but not all. "It is an enhanced offering," says Carol Sharples, the council's early years and childcare manager. "There are 5,000 babies born each year in East Cheshire and we wanted to make sure we gave them a clear pathway they could follow.

For many parents it will be about having that regular contact with the age-appropriate professionals and making sure they do not have any concerns. But for others more targeted support will be needed.

That help can include everything from support for postnatal depression and breast-feeding to evidence-based parenting programmes, such as Triple P.”

The new approach was rolled out to babies born in April 2016 in three areas with the remaining six localities to follow in February 2017. It has involved 150 front-line staff getting training on the parent pathway and the support they need to offer. For some, specialist training is being offered in areas such as the Solihull Approach parenting programme, while all pre-school settings such as nurseries and childminders are being given a linked health visitor to ensure they are part of the “parent journey”.

Apart from the cost of the training and printing of the literature, the new approach has been entirely funded from existing budgets. Health visiting and school nursing manager Liz Jones says: “It’s really about trying to integrate the way we work. We had been working closely in the past, but this has taken it on to another level. We’re sharing records and working side-by-side much more and working in different settings, such as children’s centres.”

Jan Cooper, the council’s family services manager, agrees. She believes the approach will even help change the way such support is viewed. “We want to create a culture where parenting support is not stigmatised, where it is seen as normal and where parents feel comfortable coming to us for advice, asking questions and receiving support.”

The new approach will be evaluated as it is rolled out with parental feedback, the numbers being referred on to specialist interventions and school readiness all being monitored.

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Southwark: helping with the tricky secondary school years

Southwark’s Strengthening Families parenting programme works mostly with the families of secondary school children.

The programme – delivered via group and one-to-one work – helps parents struggling during these challenging years as children move into adolescence.

About 200 people a year are supported with parents praising the way it has transformed their approach to parenting.

The move from primary to secondary school is a big moment – for both the child and parent. The milestone marks the start of a new, more independent life for children. But in turn it makes the challenge of parenting more difficult, particularly in families where problems have started appearing.

This is where Southwark Council’s Family Focus team comes in. The team, part of the family and safeguarding service, provides both group work and one-to-one support to parents and children experiencing difficulties.

The Family Focus team uses the Race Equality Foundation’s Strengthening Families Strengthening Communities (SFSC) parenting programme, which teaches families to build positive relationships, manage anger and stress, implement discipline strategies and develop better communication skills.

Referrals into the programme come from a variety of sources, including the multi-agency safeguarding hub, other family support programmes, schools and the local CAHMS service. The children range in age from eight to 18, although most are in those early years of secondary school.

“It is a tricky period,” says Anthony Mitchell, one of Southwark’s four parenting coordinators. “Children are growing up and hitting puberty. They become less reliant on their parents and don’t want to spend so much time with them compared to earlier on. They may be travelling to school themselves so absences become harder to manage. It can become quite isolating as a parent. Relationships can become strained as problems develop and communication breaks down.”

The group work involves only the parents and is delivered during a 13-week course of half-day workshops. The groups are normally kept to a maximum of 10 and key professionals, such as nurses and police officers, are invited to speak with the families. The courses culminate with a “graduation day” where the whole family attends.

Alongside the four parenting coordinators are four sessional workers, who are parents who have been through the scheme and work in the group sessions. There are also four therapists who are part of the Family Focus team and can provide specialist help for parents with more deep-rooted problems. Their particular focus is tackling problems of antisocial behaviour, youth crime, school exclusion and family breakdown.

They can work alongside the parenting coordinators and provide therapeutic help in the home environment during the one-to-one support. This typically lasts between three and six months during which the team spend time with the parents looking at how they interact with their children and develop an action plan that parents and children can keep to. That may involve a day out together, introducing a new bedtime routine or “special time” whereby a parent and their child have regulator time each week to develop their relationship.

But the workers also find themselves helping out with day-to-day family life.

“I had one case recently where the house was very disorganised and untidy,” says Mr Mitchell. “So I helped the mother and child to clean up and organise the home. It was causing her stress and anxiety so we did it all together. It is about rebuilding those relationships and reskilling the parents – and sometimes you have to deal with things that are in the way even though it may not be part of your job.”

About 120 people go through the group programmes each year, while another 80 are provided with one-to-one support. The cost of the parenting support is about 250,000 per annum.

Those who have been helped are full of praise. Sam (not their real name) says they have become a better parent since completing the course. “I’ve personally improved a lot and I understand more about parenthood.” Another parent, Nicky, who went through the scheme, says the support has particularly helped her learn how to “handle” her children and provides a better way to approach discipline.

The impact of the parenting programmes has been assessed using the Government’s family progress data tool and parental feedback. It shows over 80 per cent of participants report improved outcomes. Brendan Ring, head of Southwark’s Troubled Families programme, who oversees the Family Focus team, says: “The aim is to give parents the tools and confidence to improve things. We want to help people to help themselves. This is a much better use of public funding than treating the costly symptoms of family breakdown.”

The programme is just one of the ways Southwark works with parents and families. The council also uses both the Incredible Years and Triple P schemes within its early help and children’s centre services.

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Want to know more?

Foundations for life: what works to support parent child interactions in the early years (Early Intervention Foundation review of interventions)

www.eif.org.uk/publication/foundations-for-life-what-works-to-support-parent-child-interaction-in-the-early-years/

Early Intervention Foundation research on inter-parental relationships

www.eif.org.uk/inter-parental-relationships/

1,001 Critical Days (Cross-party early years manifesto)

www.1001criticaldays.co.uk/

NSPCC pages on parenting support

www.nspcc.org.uk/services-and-resources/services-for-children-and-families/improving-parenting-improving-practice1/

Barnado's pages on parenting support

www.barnardos.org.uk/what_we_do/our_work/parenting_supporting.htm



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