

Parenting work which focuses on the parental couple relationship

SUMMARY

- Parenting support all too often focuses on parental behaviours and parenting techniques, and fails to adequately take into account the quality of the couple relationship and its effect on children's well-being and outcomes.
- TCCR believes the parental couple relationship must in future become the central focus for this kind of work if it is to be effective.
- Compelling research evidence from randomised controlled trials followed up over a number of years, as well as the TCCR's own clinical experience over many decades, demonstrates that there are many positive effects on children of being brought up by parents who enjoy a healthy and well-functioning relationship.
- The quality of the relationship between separated couples is also of great importance in mitigating the impact of divorce on children.
- Evidence shows that parenting work which specifically focuses on the parental couple relationship – however that parental couple may be constituted – is more effective in improving outcomes for children than parenting work that focuses on parenting issues alone.

Parenting classes and parenting research – a disjunct?

Parenting programmes and classes have enjoyed widespread political support in recent years. Adopting a largely, though not exclusively, psycho-educational approach, these programmes seek to address problematic behaviour in children, or a breakdown in the relationship between parents and teenage children, by teaching particular skills to parents which can then be applied in the home environment and in the context of family relationships.

Some of the claims which parenting programme providers make for the effectiveness of their work are backed up by research studies, including randomized controlled trials; while independent reviews of evidence – Cochrane reviews for example – report some, albeit limited, effectiveness in these approaches, and highlight the need for further research to be undertaken, particularly about the long-term benefits of such approaches (Barlow, 2010) (Barlow, 2011) (Bryanton, 2010).

Research on factors affecting children's outcomes, in terms of their social, emotional and psychological development, overwhelmingly implicates the quality of parental relationships. For example, one extensively studied area – the effects of inter-parental conflict on children – shows clearly that frequent, intense and poorly resolved conflict, as well as non-acrimonious conflict (i.e. involving

emotional withdrawal, lack of warmth/affection), is detrimental to children's development. Importantly however, this research also shows that how parents manage conflict may determine children's adjustment to conflict more so than the actual occurrence of conflict per se (Harold, 2011).

It seems therefore that something of a disconnect exists between the approaches used by parenting education programmes and the evidence from studies on parenting. This briefing paper explores possible reasons for this, and looks at an alternative approach which may be able to bridge the gap.

What approach do parenting classes generally take?

The problems which parenting classes usually seek to address are manifold and include behavioural issues (tantrums, unruly teenage behaviour), sleeping difficulties in babies, problems around boundaries and discipline, and the merits and demerits of particular parenting styles (e.g. authoritative v. authoritarian).

Generally, the approach taken is psycho-educational, where actual or perceived deficits in 'parenting skills' are addressed through teaching and learning. For example, one of the most popular programmes, The Incredible Years, describes itself as 'a series of programs focused on strengthening parenting competencies (monitoring, positive discipline, confidence) and fostering parents' involvement in children's school experiences in order to promote children's academic, social and emotional competencies and reduce conduct problems¹'; while another well-established programme, Triple P, is described by the Children's Workforce Development Council as an approach which 'aims to increase knowledge of child development and care and increase knowledge and use of behaviour management skills. The programme is delivered through a series of seminars to groups. Learning methods include didactic teaching and discussion².

Some programmes do focus less on behavioural approaches and more on parents' internal lives, though these tend to be in the minority. Mellow Parenting, for example, acknowledges that 'Teaching parents to use behavioural management strategies is [...] not enough in itself to change the relationships parents have with their children if the parents have no "internal model" of good parenting to draw on from their own childhoods and are unable to understand their feelings and behaviour, and are burdened by their own issues³.

In general however, what these approaches lack is an acknowledgement of the fundamental importance of the quality of the relationship between parents, and how parents' insight into their own relationship can be harnessed to improve outcomes for children as well as maintain the quality of the couple relationship.

The need for a new approach

The primary focus of family-based interventions has in recent years been on promoting positive parenting practices in order to address behavioural and developmental problems in children and adolescents. Recently, however, researchers have begun to ask whether a wider family intervention that incorporates a focus on the inter-parental relationship might be of more sustainable benefit to children and parents within the context of general family stress and parental relationship breakdown. Foremost among these researchers are

Professors Phil and Carolyn Cowan, based at the University of California, Berkeley, whose research studies are described below.

This hitherto reluctance to look more deeply at the possible relationship-based factors that may be linked to the kinds of problems which parenting programmes seek to ameliorate is, to some extent, understandable. Policy-makers may be loath to engage with, or be seen to be engaging with, what some may see as the private realm of individual couple relationships. Such reluctance may also reflect a view that sees relationship difficulties as intractable. The current largely behavioural, skills-based approach may also reflect pragmatism on behalf of providers who fear that focusing on the parental couple relationship would have negative implications for the take-up of their programmes. The reluctance is also most likely to be a function of the skills and knowledge of the current children's workforce, which do not include competencies in working with adult couples and their troubles.

Whatever the reasons underlying this lack of focus on relationship factors, the Cowans' work nevertheless demonstrates that it is the nature and quality of the relating that takes place between the parental couple which has the most profound effect on the outcomes, behaviour and development of children. Failure either to recognise this, or to tailor programmes to meaningfully address it, means that a great deal of well-intentioned activity is undertaken with parents which is far less beneficial to those parents than they might suspect.

Current parenting approaches lack an acknowledgement of the fundamental importance of the quality of the relationship between parents, and how parents' insight into their own relationship can be harnessed to improve outcomes for children as well as maintain the quality of the couple relationship.

¹ www.incredibleyears.com/program/parent.asp

² www.commissioningtoolkit.org for more details

³ www.mellowparenting.org/index.php/programmes/core_programme

The work of the Cowans

Professors Philip and Carolyn Cowan have conducted a number of longitudinal studies (which include randomized clinical trials) exploring the impact of different parenting interventions on issues such as relationship satisfaction. Three of these studies – all of which have shown statistically significant differences between intervention and control participants – are briefly described below.

Becoming a Family project

Professionally-led couples groups for partners becoming parents was associated with maintained levels of both men's and women's marital quality and satisfaction over the next six years until their children had begun their elementary school careers, whereas relationship satisfaction declined for new parents without any intervention (Cowan & Cowan, 2000).

Schoolchildren and their Families project

In this project focusing on couples with a first child making the transition to primary school, participation in professionally-led groups for couples kept men's and women's marital quality and satisfaction from declining, and their parenting style more responsive, appropriately structured, and less harsh in comparison to attendance at a one-off consultation. Furthermore, the children of those attending the couples groups showed fewer academic, social and emotional behaviour problems over the next 10 years than those whose parents were in the control group (i.e. the brief consultation). Being assigned to a couples group with an emphasis on couple relationship issues (compared to parenting issues) not only increased parenting effectiveness but reduced conflict between the parents in a problem-solving discussion (Cowan, 2005).

Supporting Father Involvement project

In this study of low-income parents, those offered professionally-led couples or fathers groups reported greater involvement of fathers in caring for their children and fewer problematic behaviours in the children compared to those in the control group who were randomly offered a one-off meeting. Compared to parents in the control group and the fathers-only groups, those from a couples group also reported reduced parenting stress and no decline in relationship quality and satisfaction over 18 months (Cowan, 2009).

The importance of longitudinal research

Too few randomised controlled trials undertake long-term follow-up, although this is the most relevant kind of research study in relation to early development and children's outcomes.

Those randomised controlled trials which do undertake follow-up work however show that insight-oriented interventions (for example those which encourage parents to reflect upon the nature and quality of their relationship and how those aspects might affect their children's socio-emotional development) subsequently show

effects that were not present at the point at which the intervention ended.

One of the major implications of the work of the Cowans is that their studies demonstrate that relatively small interventions at crucial, or trigger, points can result in significant changes for adults and children over time.

Researchers have recently begun to ask whether a wider family intervention that incorporates a focus on the inter-parental relationship might be of more sustainable benefit to children and parents within the context of general family stress and parental relationship breakdown.

Couple relationships: why are they important?

Few would dispute the suggestion that the quality of our closest relationships profoundly affects how we feel about ourselves. Much less widely acknowledged however – although just as true – is the fact that the quality of these relationships has material and measurable consequences for our lives and those around us, affecting the emotional, cognitive and physical development of our children, our capacity to work and to be fulfilled in work, and our physical and mental health as we get older.

Policy-makers, commissioners of health and social care services and frontline staff delivering care, amongst others, have an invaluable opportunity to make the quality of couple relationships a central focus of their work. This series of briefings from TCCR aims to inform and support them to do this, since no serious attempt to improve the nation's health and well-being can afford to overlook the fundamental role which the quality of our close relationships has on our lives.

Established in 1948, The Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships is recognised in its field as a centre of advanced practice and study, both nationally and internationally. Our ethos is to develop practice, research and policy activities which complement and inform the development of services to couples.

We run a variety of practitioner trainings, ranging from introductory courses to doctoral programmes in couple counselling and psychotherapy. Our courses are accredited by the British Association of Couple Counselling and Psychotherapy, the British Psychoanalytic Council and the College of Sexual and Relationship Therapists. Our trainings are validated by the University of East London (UEL).

TCCR also supports the work of frontline practitioners, and aims to foster an approach to family support and mental health service provision which takes the impact of couple relationships on child and family functioning into account.

In addition, we undertake research and policy activities which encourage the development and growth of effective and innovative relationship support services. TCCR also provides services to couples and parents throughout London. We operate a range of affordable counselling and psychotherapy services supporting clients experiencing challenges in their relationships, their sexual lives and their parenting.

References

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