

Supporting the parents of runaways: a review – Summary report

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This is a summary report on the main findings from a 2006 Review of the work with two projects working with the parents of young runaways.

Introduction

This summary report presents the main findings of a review of the parenting support work carried out with the parents of young runaways by Safe in the City and WAVES – two projects of The Children’s Society. In July 2004, The Children’s Society received funding from The Parenting Fund which enabled two established projects, Safe in the City and WAVES, to offer parenting support work to parents and carers whose children run away or are at risk of running away.

Aim of the review

The aim of the review was to address the following questions in relation to the aim of the work as identified in the introduction. These were:

- to describe the parenting support work undertaken
- to explore the effectiveness of the parenting support work in terms of styles of working with families and young people
- to identify key learning points which can inform future developments in work with the families of young runaways.

Methods

The following methodology was used for the review of the parenting support work, comprising

- face-to-face interviews with Parenting Support Officers
- data collection from case files
- telephone interviews with parents.

Findings of the review

Numbers of parents participating

Between April 2005 to March 2006 seventy-three parents participated in the parenting support work provided by the projects.

Referral sources

Referrals came from a range of sources. The two main referral sources were Social Services and other teams within WAVES and Safe in the City, while further referral sources included schools, Family Intervention Services, Exclusion Services and Housing Services.

Focus of the parenting support work

The Parenting support was established to work with parents whose children are at risk of running away or have already run away from home. The aims of the work were:

- to 'better equip' parents to deal with family crisis through direct work with parents, and to enable them to access support from other agencies where appropriate
- to stabilise the parent/child relationship
- to reduce the number of repeat runaway incidents, as a result of the above.

Description of the parenting work

The following describes the support provided by the Parenting Support Officers who:

- provide one-to-one listening support work for parents and for the child
- provide parents with suggestions relating to parenting techniques and strategies for them to address the issues with their child
- provide children with suggestions and strategies to deal with their own issues
- provide parents with information and advice
- support parents at meetings
- act as an advocate for the parent and/or child and liaise with schools and other agencies
- provide mediation for the parent and child
- transport children to appointments
- refer parents and children to other sources of support. This may be in-house or to external agencies.

Working with parents in crisis with a range of issues

A number of issues were apparent in the lives of the families where parenting support work was undertaken. Some of these issues affected the whole family, while other issues related specifically to parents, but impacted upon their children. There were also issues and behaviours that related to children and young people. In the majority of cases, parents were referred, or self-refer, to the service at point of crisis when they are dealing with a number of very difficult issues.

Networking and outreach work with parents

Networking and outreach work takes place with parents at events within the local community such as, for example, interactive workshops and seminars where parents can walk in and access information about parenting support. From Safe in the City's perspective, this has resulted in contact being made with a significant section of the BME community. The worker has also

undertaken outreach work with women in hostels and refuges, some of which cater specifically for women from particular ethnic communities.

Working with other agencies

A significant part of the role of Parenting Support Officers is to identify issues and refer the parent, child or family to other agencies where appropriate. There are, therefore, many cases where the Parenting Support Service is one of a number of agencies involved with a family, and the worker is dependent upon other agencies, whilst they provide support with parenting. For example, in one case success was achieved because of the specialist housing provision provided by an external agency, which enabled the Parenting Support Officer to work with the parent in a stable and supportive environment.

Strategic work

Both Parenting Support Officers had been involved in strategic work. The Parenting Support Worker at Safe in the City has worked closely with the BME Development Worker, and also undertaken strategic work at a national level. The Parenting Support Officer has, alongside parents from the BME community, presented key issues, including the barriers facing BME parents when accessing services, to the Black and Asian Workers' Forum. In addition, contributions have been made to the Education Forum in Manchester. The Parenting Support Worker at WAVES has been an active member of the Parenting across Dorset Strategy Forum.

The parenting course provided by Safe in the City

Safe in the City, as part of its parenting support work, provides twelve-week parenting courses. All the parents interviewed who attended the parenting support courses were very positive about the experience.

Factors that have facilitated the parenting support work

Parents receiving support from both WAVES and Safe in the City shared similar views regarding what they found particularly helpful and positive about the parenting support work. They liked:

- The general attitude and approaches adopted by the workers which were perceived to be respectful, non-critical, non-judgmental, and without blame.
- The positive approach taken was perceived as supportive towards parents.
- The informality, friendliness and approachability of the workers enabled parents to feel at ease and to open up.
- Workers were non-authoritative and did not tell parents what to do but talked through possible approaches with them.
- Workers openness and honesty which engendered trust and confidence in the parents.
- Receiving reassurance from the workers motivated parents to persevere, even when things were more difficult.
- They valued knowing that someone was there to help and support them in times of need.
- They valued the 'outside' nature of the help.
- The open-ended nature of the intervention reassured parents that someone would be there for them.
- The informal and friendly atmosphere of the whole service.

Factors that facilitated Parenting Support Officers to carry out their role effectively

The Parenting Support Officers identified factors that they felt enabled them to carry out their parent supporting work effectively.

- Being part of a larger project.
- Being able to work in a manner where there is time to build positive relationships with parents.
- Providing outreach work within the family home.
- Preparation work with external agencies resulting in appropriate referrals being made.

Factors that hindered positive outcomes

A number of factors that impacted negatively upon the parenting support service, or acted as a barrier to receiving the intervention, were also identified.

- Parents' previous and present experience of agency interventions impacting upon the parenting support work.
- The geographical area in which one of the project's operates.
- Parents becoming despondent when improvements in their situation are not witnessed immediately.
- Interventions set in place after crisis within a family has escalated to a point where it is impossible to get parents and children to communicate with one another.

- A general lack of participation from fathers.
- The impact of other issues upon the parenting support work.
- Working on a one-to-one basis without group support for parents.

Specific barriers for parents from BME communities included

- a general lack of knowledge about services or information
- a lack of confidence in approaching mainstream services, because they do not reflect cultural background or diversity
- a lack of trust, due to concerns that they will be stereotyped, stigmatised or further isolated once they receive interventions from services
- a lack of trust in confidentiality policies, often stemming from a lack of knowledge about who has access to the information held about them, and what will happen to them as a result of the information they share with agencies.

Barriers for parents to attending group sessions

These can be broken down into three categories. First, for some parents there are issues related to the practicalities of attending the group sessions such as

- no childcare support offered on site
- location too far away
- no training during the evening for working parents
- not wanting to leave young children with someone else.

Second, for some parents there are issues relating to their own life that hinder their attendance at group sessions. These include

- chaotic living conditions in temporary accommodation or at home
- attendance at court and other appointments
- crisis at home.

Third, for other parents, there are factors relating to themselves, including:

- not being able to read or write
- a lack of confidence in a group setting
- a lack of confidence in speaking in front of other people
- a reluctance to share their private life with strangers

- for some Asian parents, fear that attending group sessions will result in stigma and shame has prevented them from attending group sessions.

Positive Changes

This review is not an outcome-based evaluation. However, a number of positive changes have been witnessed by both parents and the Parent Support Officers. Examples of positive changes included

- a cessation or reduction in running away
- practice-based evidence of the reduction in the need for parents to report their children as missing to the police
- a reduction in major concerns about safety of a child due to improved communication and assertive techniques
- a decrease in conflict and confrontation at home
- improved communication between all family members
- improvements in behaviour
- parent/s feeling more in control of their children
- parent/s feeling more confident about discipline and setting boundaries.

Future development of the service

The projects felt that there is a need for an increase in the number of Parenting Support Officers, as their workload is heavy in relation both to the number of families they are working with, and also to the amount of work entailed in relation to each family.

In relation to WAVES, the large geographical area covered by the Parenting Support Officer was found to be an issue. Resources are needed to enable parenting support to take place within a group environment as well as the one-to-one outreach work within the family home.

At Safe in the City, the need for a minimum of two Parenting Support Officers within the project was highlighted.

The importance of preventative work in schools, and in the wider community, was also highlighted, specifically at the transitional stage.

Summary of key issues

The review highlighted a number of key issues:

1. The Parenting Support Officers have worked with a significant number of families, many of whom experience a diverse range of serious issues and are referred at crisis point. This necessitates a wide range of interventions which involve direct

work with parents and/or their children and work with external agencies.

2. The experience of the Parenting Support Officers reveals that initial work to discuss parenting issues can uncover a range of other issues, which require addressing before parenting work can begin.
3. As well as undertaking direct parenting support work, the Parenting Support Officers have effectively carried out networking with parents and external agencies and strategic work.
4. The benefits of being able to provide both one-to-one parenting support and group work was highlighted. Those parents who have attended parenting support work have also identified the benefits of both forms of work.
5. Parents have identified how the attributes of, and the approaches adopted by, the Parenting Support Workers have led parents to feel supported, motivated and reassured, engendering trust in the Parenting Support Officers themselves and in the interventions set in place.
6. Parents have also valued support from outside the family, the open-ended nature of the intervention and the informal and friendly atmosphere of the whole parenting support service.
7. Parenting Support Officers, in turn, have identified a number of factors enabling positive outcomes. These include being part of a larger project, having time to build positive relationships with parents, providing outreach work within the family home and the benefits of carrying preparation work with external agencies to ensure appropriate referrals are made.
8. A number of factors that hinder positive outcomes have also been identified. These include parents' experience of external agencies' interventions, parents becoming despondent when they do not witness immediate improvements in their situation, setting interventions in place after crisis has been reached and the impact of other issues upon parenting support work.
9. A number of other issues have been identified in the review that are specific to one area or to particular groups from the community.
 - Whilst it is acknowledged that the Parenting Support Officer at WAVES is able to reach those families who would not otherwise have access to any services, the extent of

the geographical area that the Parenting Support Officer covers reduces the amount of time spent on direct work with families.

- Specific barriers have been identified that either prevent or hinder parents from particular ethnic backgrounds from accessing the service.
- There has been a general lack of participation from fathers.

The Parenting Support Officers have identified how the parenting support service can be developed further. The proposed developments refer to

- the need to increase the number of Parenting Support Officers to meet demand and provide the range of service required
- delivering preventative work in the wider community.

Concluding comments

The review has highlighted that this work has effectively engaged parents and, where appropriate, their children, and achieved a number of positive outcomes in the first year of practice. The findings from the review also offer a number of themes for consideration in the further development of the parenting support service.

- There is a clear need for parenting support for parents whose children run away, or are at risk of running away. This support may take different forms, and the combination of one-to-one outreach work in the home and group sessions has been identified as successful. In addition, the holistic needs of parents also have to be addressed to meet parenting needs effectively. The associated case-conferencing work and liaison with external agencies is another substantial and important part of the parenting support work to ensure positive outcomes with parents and their children.
- Further work is needed to effectively reach those sections of the community that are less likely to engage with services. Methods to achieve this require further exploration. They may be partly met by offering parenting support in locations in the wider community, that parents are able to access with ease.
- In relation to fathers, there is a need to further identify and address the barriers that prevent fathers from participating in the parenting support work.
- There is a need to increase the number of Parenting Support Officers so that the different elements of their role are effectively

met, parents receive the support that they require and positive change is not hindered by factors identified in this review.

- It is also suggested that further thought should be given to the timing of interventions. If some preventative support could be set in place before family relations reach crisis stage, it may be possible to make more progress and avoid crisis point, by referring the family and placing interventions at an earlier stage.

Summary report produced by Ros Hunwicks. The full evaluation study is reported in Smeaton E, (2004) Supporting the parents of runaways: A review. The Children's Society.