

# Understanding parenting programmes: parents' views

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This paper describes a pilot study to evaluate the effectiveness of a school-based parenting programme combining the use of both affective (related to feelings) and behavioural strategies. In this paper we describe the intervention, its evaluation and a summary of the quantitative information gathered. The three pre-eminent ways in which parents appeared to have benefited from this particular programme included (1) the support they received in their parenting role from other parents, including a mirroring of problems, (2) the regaining of a sense of control in the parental role, in part through an increase in their capacity to think about matters calmly, and also through the provision of new tools with which to do the job of parenting, and (3) an increased ability to empathize and identify with their children, and a better understanding of the factors which motivate children to behave in particular ways. The capacity to think about matters calmly and the ability to empathize and identify with children appeared to be important factors in the reduction of inappropriate and unhelpful parenting practices such as shouting and smacking. It is suggested that empathy in particular is central to effective parenting, and that these results support the suggestion that there is an important added benefit for parents from programmes which combine behavioural and affective strategies focusing on feelings, relationships within the family, and the parents' own experience of being parented. The limitations of the data are discussed with reference to its reliability and validity, and the need for further research using grounded theory with other groups of parents.

**Key words:** parenting; parenting programme; qualitative evaluation

## Introduction

There has been an increasing interest in parenting programmes<sup>1</sup> over the past decade, with their identification as an important means of preventing the development of mental health problems (Department of Health, 1999). However, there has been a limited amount of interest in their

evaluation (Smith, 1996). Only a few qualitative evaluations have been undertaken, and these include a study of two parent support initiatives, namely Newpin and Homestart (Oakley *et al.*, 1998), a study of stakeholders' views (including views of parents) (Grimshaw and McGuire, 1998), a study of parents' participation in a cognitive behavioural parenting programme (Todis *et al.*, 1993) and a video-based parenting programme (Webster-Stratton and Spitzer, 1996), and a study of the participation of fathers in a divorce education programme (Stone *et al.*, 1999). All of these studies suggest that parents found the programmes to be helpful, including parents who were 'forced' to take part in mandatory programmes (Stone *et al.*, 1999).

The data presented here were collected as part

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<sup>1</sup> The term 'parenting programmes' will be used to refer to all parent support programmes which utilize a structured programme, which work with parents in groups, and which are aimed at improving parenting practices and family functioning.

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of a larger quantitative evaluation of the effectiveness of a home-school-linked parenting programme which combined affective (feelings) and behavioural strategies. The aim of collecting qualitative data in this instance was to obtain a deeper understanding of the parents' views about the programme. Illustrative quotations have been selected from the data, and the objective was to present as many different perspectives as possible, both positive and negative.

One of the advantages of a grounded theory approach to qualitative data collection is that the researcher starts not with a set of hypotheses or a priori assumptions to be tested, but rather with a set of open-ended questions which become more focused during data collection, and as a result of the inductive or intuitive processes of data analysis (Webster-Stratton and Spitzer, 1986: 3). The aim is for the data, and the meaning of a particular phenomenon, to be understood within their natural context, and as perceived by those who are experiencing them, and for theories to be permitted to emerge from the data itself (Webster-Stratton and Spitzer, 1986). This approach was used because it 'offers the promise of advancing our understanding by giving new dimensions and depth to factual knowledge, embedding fact in culturally relevant meaning, and perhaps providing rich clues for new lines of investigation' (Webster-Stratton and Spitzer, 1986: 4).

## The intervention

The Family Links Nurturing Programme was developed and evaluated by Dr Stephen Bavolek for use in the treatment and prevention of child abuse and neglect (Bavolek, 1990). It consists of two parts, namely a school-based programme and a parenting programme (see below). In the USA and Mexico, about one million families have taken part in the Family and School Programmes since 1981. The first Nurturing Programmes to be run in the UK were targeted at high-risk families in the community. The Family Links Nurturing programme was established in 1997 with the aim of extending the programme to schools and thereby providing a combined parenting and school-based intervention on a population basis. By the end of 1999, training had been carried out in 55 schools, reaching approximately 12 000 children, 2000 staff

and 500 parents. An initial evaluation of the programme reported significant changes in attitudes among those children who had undertaken the programme (Layton, 1996).

The intervention consists of two parts. The first part is a 10-week parenting programme offered on a voluntary basis to the parents of all children in the participating schools. The programme is provided to parents in 2-hourly sessions, and each group is facilitated by two Family Links Nurturing Programme tutors. The Family Links Programme is based on four principles which are aimed at helping parents to develop appropriate expectations, self-awareness and self-esteem, a positive approach to discipline, and empathy.

The second part of the Family Links Programme is a school-based intervention consisting of a programme facilitated by the children's teachers, who have undergone an intensive 2-day training programme. The children's programme is provided during 1-hourly weekly lessons every term in Key Stage 1, and during 45-minute weekly lessons every term in Key Stage 2. The aims of the school-based programme are to raise children's self-esteem, increase their self-awareness, empower them to make responsible decisions and choices, improve their concentration and learning, develop their communication and social skills and positive ways of resolving disruption and conflict, reduce bullying and antisocial behaviour, and develop a positive value system.

## Methods

### Pilot cluster randomized controlled trial

The qualitative data were collected as part of a larger pilot study in which four urban schools in Oxfordshire were randomly allocated to one of four groups: a school-based intervention; a parenting intervention; a combined school and parenting intervention; and a control group that waited 1 year before receiving the intervention. In total, the participants consisted of 450 children aged 4–7 years in four schools, and 34 parents in just two of the schools (the parenting intervention and combined school and parenting intervention).<sup>2</sup> There were

<sup>2</sup> Data from schools with the parenting intervention and combined school and parenting intervention were combined irrespective of the fact that children in the latter school had received the school part of the programme, because in this

315 eligible parents who were invited to take part in the parenting programme at two schools. The uptake was similar in both schools, 12% ( $n = 18$ ) and 10% ( $n = 16$ ), giving an overall uptake rate of 11% ( $n = 34$ ). This would appear to be a fairly typical uptake rate for programmes which are offered to parents through the school. The dropout rate was small in both schools, the overall rate being 13% ( $n = 4$ ), which compares very favourably with other programmes (average dropout rate 28%; Forehand *et al.*, 1982). The 34 parents were recruited to the parenting groups by members of the Family Links team using a mixture of advertising with incentives (the offer of a draw with a number of prizes, including a day at Alton Towers for the family) and personal contact (standing at the school gates at home-time and talking to the parents). Letters were sent to all parents inviting them to participate, and parents who had completed the programme also recommended it to other parents. Two consecutive groups of parenting programmes were undertaken at two schools as follows.

- 1) School 1: January 1998 – March 1998 ( $n = 9$ ) and October 1998 – December 1998 ( $n = 9$ ).
- 2) School 2: January 1998 – March 1998 ( $n = 8$ ) and October 1998 – December 1998 ( $n = 8$ ).

In addition to the qualitative data (see below), quantitative data on children's emotional well-being and behaviour were collected from the parents and teachers of all 4- to 7-year-old children using standardized questionnaires. Data on psychosocial well-being (depression, anxiety, social support and self-esteem) were also collected from all parents who took part in the parenting programme, using a range of standardized questionnaires (Barlow *et al.*, 2000).

### Qualitative study

The aims and objectives of the qualitative study were first to complement the quantitative data and secondly to gain a better understanding of parents' experiences of a parenting programme (e.g., whether parents had found taking part in a group with other parents helpful and, if so, in what ways).

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instance there were no effects detected from the school part of the programme.

The qualitative evaluation of the parenting programme consisted of semi-structured interviews with over one-third of the parents who took part in the parenting programme. Resource and time constraints meant that it was not possible to undertake interviews with all of the parents who took part in the parenting programme. Therefore the parents to be interviewed were selected on the basis of timing – all of the parents who participated in the first two parenting groups between January and March 1998. In total, 16 parents were contacted and 11 parents agreed to be interviewed. All of the parents who participated in an interview had attended at least 90% of the programme. The interviews were conducted by the lead researcher on the project and a newly recruited member of the Family Links team who had had no previous contact with the parents involved. The interviews took place approximately 9–10 months after the completion of the parenting programme, and ranged in duration from approximately 30 to 90 minutes. None of the interviewed parents had any continuing contact with the programme providers. It was also stressed that the interviewers were independent of the programme, that parents were completely free to express their views about the programme without comeback, and that although the data might be used at a later date, none of the individuals who had taken part in the interviews would be identified.

A number of questions were used as prompts to elicit parents' views concerning the content of the programme, the methods and manner whereby it was delivered, the group leaders, and the aspects of the programme which parents felt were helpful or unhelpful. All of the interviews were recorded and the data were transcribed externally. Square brackets in the quoted text indicate that words have been added or removed in order to improve the coherence of the text.

### Characteristics of interviewed parents

The mean age of the interviewed parents was 35 years, and over 90% of parents were white. A third of the sample were single parents, and just under half were living in rented accommodation. In total, 40% of the parents had left school before they were 16 years of age, and approximately 20% had children who were receiving free school meals. Two sets of interviewed parents were couples who had taken part in the parenting programme together.

This data indicates that a large proportion of the parents who took part in the parenting programme were from a high-risk background. Based on the results of a standardized questionnaire, over half of the parents perceived their children to have borderline or abnormal behaviour (the Goodman's Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire) (Goodman, 1994). Table 1 shows the profile of the interviewed parents.

## Findings

### Reasons for participating in the programme

Parents gave a variety of reasons for participating in the parenting programme. These included the desire to be a good parent in the context of marital breakdown, the need to establish new ways of dealing with the demanding behaviour of children, the opportunity to mix with other parents in order to exchange ideas, and the desire to be supportive of school activities.

Well, my kids were so demanding and they were really hyperactive because I was stuck in a tower-block thing so they couldn't go

out to play or anything, and they were out of control really. (11)

Well, um, not anything specific, um, the only thing that I've had ongoing difficulties with is the children spend most of their time with me, but they go to their father's every second weekend, supposedly. Now although I try and be the best parent that I can while they are here [ ], a lot gets undone when they go to their dad's because there is still a lot of animosity between us. And that gets spread through the children, from his end not from this end you know. So for me the only specific thing that I was looking for was, how can I be a good parent to my children with this ongoing animosity going on elsewhere? (8)

### Overall feelings and thoughts about the programme

The clear consensus from all parents who were asked what they thought about the programme was that it had been a worthwhile and valuable experience. 'Brilliant', 'good', 'excellent', and 'useful' were the adjectives used to describe it. Parents suggested a range of reasons for their positive thoughts about the programme.

Brilliant. I didn't want it to stop because I really enjoyed the Monday afternoon. Sort of getting tension from you really. Listening to others helped your problems be less, and I felt I couldn't wait for Mondays, it was brilliant. (1)

Very, very useful. I'd like it to have been longer or to have continued as sort of an indefinite kind of thing to keep me going. (2)

### Ways in which parents benefited from taking part in a parenting programme

Parents appeared to have found their participation in this parenting programme beneficial in three main ways: first, the support that they received in the role of a parent from other parents; secondly, the feeling of having regained control in the parental role; and thirdly, an increased ability to empathize and identify with their children. The

**Table 1** Profile of parents who were interviewed

Demographic characteristics	Interviewed parents	
	%	<i>n</i>
Mothers	100	(11)
Mean age (years)		35
Parental ethnicity		
Black	0	(0)
Asian	9.1	(1)
White	90.9	(10)
Mixed		
Children's ethnicity		
Black	0	(0)
Asian	9.1	(1)
White	81.8	(9)
Mixed	9.1	(1)
Free school meals	18.2	(2)
Single parents	27.3	(3)
Left school at age 16 years or under	40.0	(4)
Living in rented accommodation	45.5	(5)
Behaviour problems (parent report)		
Borderline	42.9	(3)
Abnormal	28.6	(2)

remainder of this section will explore some of the factors which contributed to parents benefiting in these ways.

*Support in the role of parent*

**1) Support from other parents**

Parents were asked what they had really liked about the programme. One of the dominant themes to emerge was the experience of being in a group with other parents, which provided the opportunity both to get to know and trust other parents, and to be oneself in an accepting environment.

Yes, basically because you are with other people I think that is one of the biggest helps. All of the information they give you is good, but the fact that you are there, talking about it with other people seeing that they have similar, if not the same problems, or just problems of any kind, that they are looking for help with makes you feel less alone. And you start saying hello to more people because you realize, you know, you can speak and that you know them, you know more people and it just feels better for being in a group, a personal situation.

(2)

When asked what they had liked about the programme, parents referred to the fact that a great deal of bonding had taken place between themselves and other parents taking part in the programme. The strength and importance of such bonds is possibly best indicated by the fact that many of these parents continued to meet as a group on a regular basis after the completion of the programme.

Frankness and, um, the bond that we reached between the parents. We were not afraid to express our particular problems or issues and were there for each other and give advice and take advice. So, you know it is give and take.

(3)

Yes. I know, at first I kind of thought 'Oh no, I don't know if I'll fit in with these people', you know, because I didn't know anybody and it was just, the whole thing was alien to me. But over the weeks [ ] you

get a kind of bonding between the people who are doing the course which is good. . . . And I still see the people that have been in the group.

(8)

Parents suggested a range of reasons for feeling that it had been useful to be in a group with other parents, many of which related to the possibility of getting to know people who had previously just been 'nameless faces'.

Well, all the people I've met, well I hadn't met them before but I knew they were there, but afterwards it was nice to say hello to that person and know their name. We were there every day meeting all these people coming in and out of corridors, we couldn't put a name [to], and you know there's ten of us now that know each other and know a lot about each other's children so, yes, that was good.

(1)

**2) The mirroring of concerns by other parents**

When asked if it had been helpful to be in a group specifically with other parents, many of the interviewees indicated that they had been reassured by the realization that other parents have similar problems, and the subsequent recognition that this was not an indictment on themselves as parents.

Oh yes, it was really helpful to hear, well, to find out that you weren't the only one with certain problems. I think that is always helpful because you do tend to think, all the other children go to bed nicely and do all this and yours is the only one that doesn't, but once you got talking you found that, you know, people have quite similar problems. So that was good, and hearing ideas as well was quite encouraging as well, you know, somebody would come back and say they have tried such and such and it was good and you know, I think that was really helpful. I think, you know, it was good.

(7)

**3) Not being taught how to be a parent but being supported in the parenting role**

Some of the parents found it helpful that they were supported in the parenting role, rather than being taught how to be a parent.

Well, I just think they are very supportive, they are sort of, as I say it is not, you are not being told how to be a parent, you are just being supported for being a parent. . . . I think a support group is a really good idea, especially if it is not sort of, it wasn't a teaching process, although you are learning, I didn't feel like I was being taught how to be a parent or a better parent or, sort of, anything like that. I felt I was just being supported for being a parent, you know stuff like that. I mean, that's why I think they are such a good idea, I think they'd help everybody, every parent.

(5)

#### 4) Working in partnership with parents

In addition to the fact that many parents had found the programme supportive of them in their role as parents, they had also felt that their current parenting practices were not criticized, and the course leaders were not prescriptive in terms of what parents should do.

I liked the openness and honesty from all the other parents and once one opened up the whole circle could feel relaxed about anything they said. That was the most important bit for me. That I could go up there and nobody would criticize things that may be right [or that might] be wrong, there was nobody to criticize.

(1)

Some participants felt that other parents were less judgemental than professionals such as health visitors and midwives.

I wouldn't have done it if it wasn't for the parents. Health visitors and midwives, you know, they sit and judge and tell you 'Oh no, you shouldn't have a baby at that age, and you know, breastfeed' and all this, and most of them haven't got kids themselves, you know. It wasn't false though, if you like, because of the parents on there. And none of them were false either, you know, they didn't come in pretending their kids were angels.

(6)

#### 5) A reduction in feelings of guilt

A reduction in feelings of guilt was also cited

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as being an important reason for finding a parenting group helpful, alongside the associated recognition that things which had gone wrong were not always the parent's fault.

You know, I felt real guilty that things weren't how they should be for T, but half-way through I realized that I wasn't doing anything wrong and progressed from there really.

(1)

Really to make you stop and think about how you handle situations, and it made me stop and think that [given] all the circumstances that were surrounding [particular] situations, [the ways in which] I reacted [weren't always] my fault. You know that if the circumstances had been completely different you'd have reacted in a different way, and sometimes all the circumstances aren't [within] your control [ ] so you act that way. And it isn't a bad thing to do that. But if you can realize that and not feel guilty about it [ ], that was the thing for me, I think.

(4)

#### 6) Support from the group leaders

In addition to the support that parents received from each other, they also felt supported by the two group leaders. Parents referred in particular to their enthusiasm, their empathy, and the information and feedback that they provided.

The staff. The ladies that were doing it. They were just so keen to help. Interested in what you had to say and full of suggestions. I mean obviously they couldn't spend every week talking to me about my problems, but at any time when, you know, my problems came up or anyone's problems came up, they were full of suggestions for people, supportive suggestions, ways in which they could help, and therefore I think that, you know, they were the best thing about it.

(2)

#### 7) A reduction in traditional forms of support for parents

Parents also referred to feeling 'isolated' in the

parental role. Furthermore, they spontaneously referred to the need for support as parents, perhaps most importantly in the absence of more traditional forms of support.

And I think you lose that, with the extended family now you lose all the support you used to have from your mum, your dad, your in-laws and your brothers and sisters. You don't have that quite so much any more, and you sort of can't, sometimes you are kind of out there on your own, you and your partner and your kids and that's it.

(5)

### 8) The importance of self-nurturing

When asked if they nurtured themselves more since doing the programme, many parents indicated that it had helped them to re-establish a sense of themselves, with needs of their own, and of the importance of nurturing themselves as individuals outside the parental role.

Yes, I can nurture myself now, which I never did before. I can sort of be pleased with things and pleased about things, so yes, definitely.

(1)

I just felt as well that it made me recognize that I was a human being as well, you know. And I have needs and requirements as well, [ ] whereas before I was trying to be the super-duper wonderful parent, trying to do everything without actually paying any attention to myself. I think I recognized that, yes, I can still be a good parent but still look after myself as well. So I think recognizing that was good for me.

(8)

### *Regaining feelings of control*

The second principal way in which parents appeared to have benefited from the programme was that they felt that they had regained a sense of control in the parental role. This appeared to be associated with an increased capacity to think about matters calmly, in addition to the acquisition of new tools for the job.

### 1) Increased sense of control in the parental role

Many parents indicated that the programme had helped them to manage their children better, and had increased their feelings of control, and their ability to change or deal with particular issues.

Yes. I mean using the things that we just talked about definitely helped. And then I was starting to get power back as well, you know, as the group went on I got stronger and they knew that. They knew I was changing and it was almost as if they changed with me to a certain extent. Yes, I did learn to manage it.

(6)

Discussing their behaviours and 'time-out' I found was really helpful, and me starting to control them and not them controlling me. I used to give in to them all the time, but not now.

(11)

### 2) Increased capacity to think about matters calmly

The programme also appeared to have helped parents to stop and think about things, such as the reasons why particular behaviours occurred, in addition to increasing their ability to stay calm.

Yes, I have better understanding because I used to always shout at them bad, you know, instead of saying 'What do you want now?', sort of nice and calm, I used to shout at them. I used to lose my rag with them quite a lot, but now I just calm myself down and say 'What do you want? Can it wait?' or, you know, I calm myself down as well as the children.

(11)

Some days, yes, they have got a calmer mother [ ]. Yes, I think it is just the fact that I can be calmer some days. I spend days and days being really uncalm and really frazzled and it is not nice for anybody, me included. And I think for them a calmer mother has got to be a plus, and it happens more because of things which, albeit sometimes I'm not conscious that I am doing [ ]. I think sometimes [that] I am, you know,

reacting to things in a better way than I might [have done].

(2)

**3) New ways of supporting children's emotional and behavioural development: having the tools for the job**

Many of the parents who were asked whether their participation in the programme had helped them to support their children's development, made reference to the acquisition of new tools or methods, as well as the increased ability to think about matters calmly. This appeared to have played an important role in the cessation of less helpful parenting practices such as shouting, smacking and threatening.

Yes, yes. I think particularly the sort of positive reinforcement rather than the negative, and it is something that I keep trying to do, and my husband now is doing much more as well. Instead of threatening, you know, you cannot do something if you are naughty, it is much more a case of if you are good you can do something nice. And [ ] I think that is better for the children, particularly as half the time when you threaten [ ] you know jolly well that you are not going to stick to it anyway. So finding positive reinforcement where they have got to do something and then get a reward I think is something I make a conscious effort to do.

(3)

I do a lot less shouting and I'd occasionally smack but I don't do that now. . . I don't think we ever had a problem with the children because we were quite easygoing but . . . learning to reward rather than punish, I don't think we hardly [ever] punish now, do we. . .

(9: Mother)

**4) The impact of the programme in other areas of life**

Parents highlighted a range of ways in which they felt that their participation in the programme had brought about improvements in themselves, their children and the family as a whole, including an increase in feelings of closeness with their partner.

I think I can speak more openly now. I don't know whether that's because I've moved on myself. You know like with regard to their dad. I don't know whether it is because I've moved on myself or if that has made me stronger, you know. Only things are great at the moment they couldn't be any better. You know, the boys are behaving at school and their dad's home quite a bit anyway, so that's good. I'm not quite sure if it was as a result of that because their dad wasn't around when I was on the group so I don't want to connect the two without obviously wanting to back it up. Yes, it has made a difference [ ], so yes.

(6)

We seem, well, I seem a lot closer to my husband than I was before, because I was always short-tempered with him as well because he is sort of like the person who did things for other people and forgot what had to be done at home. But he's, you know, I've calmed down a lot with him as well [ ]. If I can let things out instead of keeping things in that helps me a lot. If I had a problem I could share it because it would go no further, and that made me feel a lot better, knowing everything that was built up inside had come out and I felt more relaxed that way. We got a bit closer.

(11)

With regard to improvements in their children, parents cited less demanding behaviour, reduced contact with Social Services, and the increased recognition and expression of their children's feelings, including the capacity to deal with their anger.

Before it builds up he can say, I mean not all the time obviously, but he will sometimes say 'I'm really cross now' and stamp or slam the door or something which, you know, I can live with that. So I think he sort of can recognize some of his own feelings now, which is quite healthy, isn't it? I mean if you can recognize them and put them into words it is.

(7)

With regard to benefits for the family as a whole, one parent suggested that they had better family boundaries.

Yes, I think as a family, yes, we all sort of, with the boundaries that we have made, we all understand why you get told off or why there is a 'no' there, or why you can't have that, or why this isn't fair. So I suppose yes, as a family it has made things much easier.

(5)

*Increased feelings of empathy and ability to identify with their children*

**1) Increased feelings of empathy**

The third way in which parents appeared to have benefited from the programme was by an improved capacity to empathize with their children. An increase in feelings of empathy appeared to have led many parents to be able to identify more fully with their children. As a result of this, they had come to recognize that, as with adults, children have feelings and anxieties with which they need help.

Um, the one thing that I would say was the most helpful was that I recognized that my children have the same feelings and anxieties as adults have, and for some reason I think adults have this misconception that they can speak to children any way that they like. That they don't have the [same] feelings, you know, and I think that has been really helpful for me, just to recognize that sometimes [that] they need to talk about things as well. And it is often harder for kids to talk about things because they don't have the vocabulary, they don't have the words to express the way that they are feeling, and that it is up to me to try and [help them to] express how they are feeling, you know. And I think that more than anything else has been a benefit.

(8)

I guess I'd forgotten what it was like to be a child, and it is nice sometimes to actually see it [from] their perspective.

(9: Father)

**2) Recognizing the reasons for children's behaviour**

One of the factors which appeared to have contributed to the improved ability to identify with their children was an improved capacity to recognize and understand the reasons for children's behaviour.

Yes, but as to how or why is more difficult to pin down, but possibly because it gave me more potential reasons or ideas as to why the behaviour was happening, and I could then possibly be a little bit more sympathetic with things than I would have been otherwise. Can't say as it is lasting all that well, but I'm doing my best, so, you know.

(2)

There is an awareness that has been raised that there may well be other things behind naughty behaviour than a desire to be naughty.

(2)

**3) Recognizing factors relating to one's own childhood**

In addition to an increased understanding of children's behaviour, many parents also felt that the programme had helped them to 'find a way forward', not only through its advocacy of useful methods such as praise and rewards, but as a result of the opportunity with which the course had provided them to reflect on the difficulties they had experienced during their own childhood, and their own experiences of being parented, and from which much of the expertise as parents had been derived.

Recognizing that a lot of the things that I was trying to do with my kids was trying to make up for deficiencies that I had when I was young from what my parents didn't give me [ ]. I'd remember that was the way that my mother used to speak to me. I didn't have a particularly happy time at home, and I think some of the things you do automatically to your own children. But I think it was good [ ] just to actually take a step back from the situation and think, how did that make me feel when my mum or my dad used to say it to me.

(8)

Well, I think understanding about [ ] some of what is going on for them, you know. It is like you think 'Oh, he's always in a bad mood when he comes home from school' [ ], but understanding what might have gone on, especially when we looked back at our own childhood [ ]. Yes, when people talked about what had happened to them at school, how they had been treated or by parents and how it made them feel, [and] then you could understand some of the feeling that maybe your children were going through, and they weren't just doing it to annoy you, you know. So I think that was quite helpful.

(7)

Some of the parents referred to the difficulties they had felt about looking back at their own childhood.

I don't think there was anything that I didn't like as such. There were things that were hard, you know. Especially the going into your own past. I found that difficult but beneficial, you know, at the time I'm saying 'Oh, what the hell am I doing this for, I don't need this'. I cannot remember what week it was, but it was like, you know, looking at how your parents treated you and I thought 'No I don't like this, don't go there'. But I still, I still did it and went through the process and read the book and did the homework for next week and whatever because I found, you know, it was worthwhile, but at the time I thought 'I don't need this!'

(8)

#### 4) **The use of role play in increasing feelings of empathy**

Role play appears to have been an important method by which parents came to recognize more fully the implications of some of their actions towards their children.

Like role playing they had about listening and mother's cooking and the child is trying to say something to the mother and the mother is just like 'That's nice, dear' and not listening at all and carrying on. A lot more eye-to-eye contact, and there was that

role model of how you felt then when your mum is completely ignoring you, or when your mum actually turns round and stops and listens to you. And that was quite dramatic actually, and I try to actually listen a bit more, it happened yesterday.

(8)

#### **Aspects of the programme that parents did not like**

None of the parents had found the programme to be unhelpful. This feeling is summarized by the comment made by the following parent:

No. There was nothing difficult about it either. It had a crèche, it was local, it was free. It was all fine.

(6)

Most of the parents who were asked felt that the programme had not been long enough. The main criticism of the programme focused on 'time', in terms of (1) the fact that parents enjoyed it and wanted more, (2) the large amount of material with which they had been presented, (3) the possibility of taking things in and practising them and (4) the fact that there were around 8–10 parents in each group, all with a great deal to say and much to offload.

Despite the brevity of the programme, parents indicated that the benefits were still present 9 months later.

Um, I found lots of it very helpful. A lot of the ideas were very helpful. I found lots of, you know, feedback from mediators and the other parents very helpful, that was always very nice. I suppose it was mainly just the support that I kind of felt that I got. And sort of like, even now, you kind of hold on to that like you know, I say, 'I'm not a bad parent just because you are in your room screaming your head off, I am not a bad parent' [ ], and you can just hold on to the sort of feelings that you had while you [were] on the course, even now.

(5)

A criticism made by one couple was that the group leaders had very 'defined views' about how to raise a child. This couple also pointed out the difficulty for parents who were not 'extroverts',

and who felt pressurized to take part in discussions. They cited the case of one parent who had not turned up for several weeks, which suggested that she had 'felt too pressurized'. There is very little information available at the present time concerning parents who drop out of parenting programmes, and the difficulties encountered by parents in this type of group work may well be an important explanatory factor.

## Discussion

### The findings

The evidence obtained from this study is consistent with the findings of other studies showing in particular, the existence of various motivational patterns (Grimshaw and McGuire, 1998), the benefit of being in a group with other parents (Schultz *et al.*, 1993; Grimshaw and McGuire, 1998), the personal gain (Schultz *et al.*, 1993), a lessening of feelings of guilt (Webster-Stratton and Spitzer, 1996), the discovery of new parenting techniques/tools (Webster-Stratton and Spitzer, 1996), feeling able to adapt what was taught to meet their own needs (making the shoe fit) (Webster-Stratton and Spitzer, 1996), evidence of an increase in feelings of empathy, understanding and acceptance (Webster-Stratton and Spitzer, 1996) and the importance of caring for themselves, evidence of a reduction in feelings of isolation (Webster-Stratton and Spitzer, 1996), the desire that such programmes should be longer (Schultz *et al.*, 1993), and some evidence pointing to the possible existence of a small group of parents who found the group process to be an uncomfortable and isolating experience (Grimshaw and McGuire, 1998).

One of the three most important ways in which parents appeared to have benefited from this parenting programme was the support that they received from other parents. This is consistent with the findings from a study of family centres in the UK which showed that disadvantaged parents had a preference for having 'other adults to talk to', over and above the availability of expert advice (Smith, 2000), and a further study of mothers with low-birth-weight babies which showed that mothers valued groups almost as highly as family support (Oakley, 1993). The valuing of this type of support is reflected in the training of 'community

mothers' within the voluntary sector (Grimshaw and McGuire, 1998) and projects such as Sure Start, which are based on the community principles of self-empowerment and peer support.

It has recently been suggested that the success of parenting programmes depends on their capacity 'to work with parents in a spirit of *partnership* that confirms the parent as a decision maker' (Grimshaw and McGuire, 1998: 151). These authors go on to suggest that 'groups are potent mechanisms for delivering messages to parents and for helping them to reduce behavioural problems', and that part of what makes them so successful is their power to 'support the individual, to mirror concerns, and encourage achievement'. They suggest that 'such effects may impact on the long-term future of families by reinforcing networks of help within localities and communities' (Johnson and Molloy, 1995, in Grimshaw and McGuire, 1998: 155). In this study, the group certainly appeared to have been an important vehicle for change. The mirroring of concerns on the part of other parents also appeared to have played an important role in facilitating change. However, this is not to ignore the fact that groups can also work in a way which prevents change, and which excludes certain individuals or groups of individuals. For example, Grimshaw and McGuire suggest that 'groups can represent a Faustian bargain if they promote the interests of categories among their members at the expense of others – not least, minorities' (Grimshaw and McGuire, 1998: 155). Men, women from minority groups, single parents, women with disabilities or outside the sexual norms, and step-parents are some of the people who might potentially be excluded by the group process, as well as parents who find the process of disclosure and group participation difficult. The majority of parents who took part in the current parenting programme were Caucasian mothers. The few negative views that were expressed were made by one of only two ethnic-minority fathers who took part in the programme. The main criticism, that the group leaders had very specific views about how children should be raised, was in sharp contrast to the views of the remaining parents, who expressed the view that the group leaders were nonprescriptive. The fact that the study included such a small number of fathers and parents from ethnic-minority groups precludes the possibility of disaggregating this result and assessing whether

fathers and/or ethnic-minority parents are less satisfied with the programme than other groups of parents.

Two of the most important things that appeared to have happened for many of the parents in this study were an increase in feelings of empathy, and an increased ability to identify with their children. This appeared to be associated with an alteration in parental (i.e., maternal) perceptions concerning (1) the reasons for children's behaviour and (2) the appropriateness of particular courses of action (i.e., shouting, smacking and threatening). Thus, as a result of the sometimes painful process of looking back at their own childhoods, parents appeared to have recognized that their behaviour was sometimes a repetition of their own experiences, and to have remembered the pain associated with some of these parental practices (e.g., being shouted at and humiliated).

The primary importance of parental empathy in the early years has been indicated most recently by the work of Daniel Stern, who suggests that such maternal 'attunement' consists of the mother's capacity to match the infant's behaviour in a way which shows that she has apprehended his or her feelings or internal state (Stern, 1998). Maternal empathy is also thought to play a key role in the social development of the child (Feshbach, 1989), and in the development of intersubjectivity (Thompson, 1998). Failures in maternal empathy at the beginning of life in particular have been shown to be associated with the development of psychopathology (Feshbach, 1989). It has also been concluded by individuals working in the field of child abuse and neglect that 'no other single quality of parenting is as critical to the overall growth and well-being of the child as is the parental characteristic of empathy' (Bavolek, 1990), that lack of empathy in a parent is related to an increased propensity to abuse, and that children who are exposed to such parenting develop deficits in this attribute (Feshbach, in Cicchetti and Carlson, 1989). Deficits in the ability to empathize are marked in criminals, and in particular in adults committed for violent crimes (Lyons-Ruth and Repacholi, 1993; West and Farrington, 1973, in Child Psychotherapy Trust, 1999). An increase in empathy on the part of parents in this study appeared to have helped them to replace inappropriate and unhelpful practices such as shouting and smacking with more appropriate

and helpful parenting practices such as staying calm and listening to their child.

There is now evidence from a number of systematic reviews which shows the effectiveness of parenting programmes in improving behavioural outcomes in young children (Barlow and Stewart-Brown, 2000), and also in improving maternal psychosocial outcomes, including depression, anxiety and parental stress (Barlow and Coren, 2000). One of the questions raised by these reviews is to what extent the behavioural and nonbehavioural (relationship) programmes differ in the results that they produce. At the present time there is more trial-based evidence concerning the benefits of behavioural programmes, reflecting in part the greater ease with which it is possible to assess the effectiveness of such programmes as a result of their more highly standardized nature. However, one of the questions which has yet to be addressed is whether parenting programmes which combine behavioural and feelings-based strategies are more effective than the behavioural programmes. The results of this qualitative study would suggest that there are further benefits for parents from such a combined approach. In particular, some of the most important outcomes in this study (i.e., the increased capacity for empathy and identification with children) occurred as a result of a combination of affective strategies such as role play (which helped the participating parents to focus on feelings, relationships and the parents' own experiences of being parented), with the provision of behavioural strategies aimed at providing the parents with new methods of supporting their children's emotional and behavioural development.

One of the concerns about parenting programmes which are based on a purely behavioural approach is the extent to which behavioural strategies such as 'time out' and 'ignoring' can be used in abusive ways by parents who are unable to identify empathically with their children. In such circumstances, behavioural strategies may simply be used to replace shouting and smacking as the medium of abuse. Furthermore, the appropriateness of some behavioural outcomes might also be questioned. For example, behavioural compliance is an outcome of many behavioural parenting programmes. However, children who conform behaviourally are not necessarily healthy or happy children, and over-compliance is an unhealthy trait. By increasing parents' capacity to empathize and

identify with their children, programmes which contain an affective (feelings) component can protect against such outcomes.

### **Validity and reliability of the data**

The external validity of qualitative data is not as good as that of quantitative data, and the internal validity of qualitative data is on the whole superior to that of quantitative data. This reflects the fact that, on the one hand, qualitative methods are usually undertaken with small unrepresentative samples, while on the other, they permit the collection of a richer and more valid type of data.

It has been suggested that the 'trustworthiness' of qualitative data can be evaluated by assessing its credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Lincoln and Guba, 1989). The credibility of the data refers to the extent to which it is possible to have confidence in the truth of the finding (e.g., whether the respondents were appropriate and representative informants). The respondents who were interviewed in this study were drawn from a population group of parents who volunteered to take part in a parenting group. Although only a third of the parents who took part in the groups were interviewed, there were no significant differences on a number of important demographic factors between the parents who were interviewed and those who were not interviewed. The only factor discriminating the parents in the parenting groups from the remainder of the sample was the fact that their children had more parent-reported behaviour problems. As the qualitative data show, this was an important motivating factor for parents to take part in the parenting programme.

Transferability refers to the extent to which the results are 'context bound' (i.e., whether they adequately represent a particular cultural or social group). Although the parents in this study were drawn from a mixture of social backgrounds, parents from ethnic-minority groups were seriously under-represented. Therefore the results of this study are probably not transferable to parents from ethnic-minority groups, and further research is needed to establish their views concerning the experience of taking part in a parenting programme. In addition, the term 'parent' has been used throughout this paper. However, the majority of parents who took part in both the parenting

groups and the interviews were mothers. Thus it also seems likely that further research is needed to establish the views of fathers who take part in parenting programmes.

Dependability refers to the extent to which the coding of the data was undertaken reliably, and confirmability refers to the extent to which it is possible to conduct a formal audit of the study procedures. No formal assessment by an independent reviewer was undertaken of the dependability and confirmability of the data obtained in this study, but the data are consistent with the findings of other studies.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, the qualitative data obtained in this study suggest that the parents who participated in and completed the Family Links Nurturing Programme were both satisfied with it and felt that they had made beneficial changes in their lives as a result of it. This suggests that brief interventions such as parenting programmes can have a long-term beneficial effect for parents. Support and feedback from other parents was one of the primary ways in which parents felt that the programme had been helpful. In addition, the programme appears to have helped parents to re-establish a sense of control in the parental role, partly through an increase in their capacity to think about matters calmly, and also through the provision of new tools with which to do the job of parenting. Perhaps most important of all, many parents referred to an increased sense of empathy with their children, and a better understanding of the factors which motivate children to behave in particular ways. Many parents appeared to feel that they were in a better position, having completed the programme, to address the emotional and behavioural issues presented by their children. It seems likely that these outcomes were the result of a combination of affective strategies which helped the participating parents to focus on feelings, relationships and the parents' own experiences of being parented, in addition to the provision of behavioural strategies aimed at providing the parents with new methods of managing their children's emotional and behavioural development. Programmes which combine both affective and behavioural strategies may well be providing parents with important benefits which are not provided by behavioural strategies alone.

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