

**Understanding parenting programmes:  
the benefits for parents of a home-school linked  
parenting programme**

**Jane Barlow, DPhil, Hon MFPHM**  
*Primary Care Career Scientist*  
*Health Services Research Unit, Institute of Health Sciences,*  
*University of Oxford, England*

**Sarah Stewart-Brown, FRCP, FFPHM, PhD**  
*Director*  
*Health Services Research Unit, Institute of Health Sciences,*  
*University of Oxford, England*

**Please address all correspondence to:**

Dr Jane Barlow  
Primary Care Career Scientist  
Health Services Research Unit  
Institute of Health Sciences  
Old Road  
Headington  
OXON  
OX3 7LF

Tel: 01865-226930

Fax: 01865-226711

**email: [jane.barlow@dphpc.ox.ac.uk](mailto:jane.barlow@dphpc.ox.ac.uk)**

# Understanding parenting programmes: the benefits for parents of a home-school linked parenting programme

Jane Barlow, DPhil, Hon MFPHM  
Sarah Stewart-Brown, FRCP, FFPHM, PhD

## Abstract

This paper describes a pilot study which was conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of a school-based parenting programme that combined the use of both affective (feelings) and behavioural strategies. The paper begins by briefly describing the intervention, and the evaluation which was conducted, and goes on to summarise some of the qualitative results which were obtained. The three pre-eminent ways in which parents appeared to have benefited from this particular programme included: (i) the support that they received in the role of a parent from other parents, including a mirroring of problems; (ii) the regaining of a sense of empowerment in the parental role in part through an increase in their capacity to think about things calmly, and also through the provision of new tools with which to do the job of parenting; and (iii) an increased ability to empathise and identify with their children, and a better understanding of the reasons which motivate children to behave in particular ways. The capacity to think about things calmly and to empathise and identify with children both 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 strategies with affective strategies that focus on feelings, relationships within the family, and the parents' own experience of being parented. The limitations of the data are discussed with regard to its reliability and validity, and the need for further research using grounded theory with other groups of parents.

## 1. Introduction

There has been an increase of 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 (DoH, 1999). There has, however, been a limited amount of interest in their evaluation (Smith, 1996). In particular, there appears to be a paucity of *qualitative* studies of parents' experiences of taking part in parenting programmes. The data that is presented here was gathered as part of a larger quantitative evaluation of the effectiveness of a home-school linked parenting programme which combined affective (feelings) with behavioural strategies. The aim of collecting qualitative data in this instance was: (i) to complement the quantitative data and; (ii) to gain a better understanding of parents' experiences of taking part in a parenting programme, such as for example, whether parents had found taking part in a group with other parents to be helpful, and if so, in what ways it was helpful to them. Quotations have been

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

selected from the data to illustrate particular points, and the aim 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 does not start with a set of hypotheses or a priori assumptions to be tested, but rather a set of open-ended questions which become more focussed during data collection, and as a result of the inductive or intuitive processes of data analysis (Webster-Stratton and Spitzer, 1986, p.3). The aim of this is that the data, and the meaning of a particular phenomenon is understood within its natural context, and as perceived by those who are experiencing it, and that theories are permitted to emerge from the data (ibid.). 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' (ibid., p.4).

## **2. 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 comprises two parts - 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 were run in Oxford by a charity called the Family Nurturing Network (FNN), and were targeted at high-risk families in the community. Family Links was established as a separate charity in 1997 to develop the programme in schools. By the end of 1999 training had been carried out in 55 schools, reaching approximately 12,000 children, 2000 staff and 500 parents. At present, funding is provided by the Department of Health, Oxford City Council, and a number of major charities. An initial evaluation of the programme reported significant changes in attitudes amongst those children who had undertaken the programme (Layton, 1996).

The intervention comprises two parts: i) 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 over the course of ten weeks, and each group is facilitated by two Family Links Nurturing Programme tutors. The Nurturing 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.

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

### **3. Methods**

#### **3.1 Pilot cluster randomised controlled trial**

The qualitative data was collected as part of a larger pilot study in which four urban schools in Oxfordshire were randomly allocated to one of four groups - (i) a school-based intervention; (ii) a parenting intervention; (iii) a combined school and parenting intervention; and (iv) a control group who waited a year before receiving the intervention. In total, the participants comprised 450 children aged 4 – 7 years old in four schools, and 34 parents in just two of the schools (ii and iii, above).<sup>2</sup> A total of 4 parents dropped out of the programme, and some parents failed to return questionnaires.

The parenting groups were recruited by members of the Family Links team through two schools, 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). Parents who had completed the programme also talked about and recommended it to other parents. Letters were also sent to all parents inviting them to participate. Two consecutive groups of parenting programmes were undertaken at two schools as follows:

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

Data on children's emotional well-being and behaviour was collected using standardised questionnaires from the parents and teachers of all 4-7 year old children. Data on psychosocial well-being (depression; anxiety; social support and self-esteem) was also collected from all parents who took part in the parenting programme, using a range of standardised questionnaires.

#### **3.2 Qualitative study**

The qualitative evaluation of the parenting programme comprised semi-structured interviews with over one-third of the parents who took part in the parenting programme. The parents were selected on the basis of timing - all of the parents who participated in the first two parenting groups - Jan to March 1998 - were invited to take part in an interview in their own homes. Sixteen parents were contacted, and a total of 11 parents agreed to be interviewed. All 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 following the completion of the parenting programme, and ranged in duration from approximately 30 to 90 minutes. All of the interviews were recorded and the data was transcribed externally. Square brackets in the quoted text [ ] indicated that words have been added or removed to improve the coherence of the text.

Overall, there were 315 eligible parents invited to take part in the parenting programme at two schools. The uptake was similar in both schools - 12% (n=18) and

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<sup>2</sup> Data from schools (i) and (iii) were combined irrespective of the fact that children in school (iii) had received the school part of the programme because in this instance there were no effects detected from the school part of the programme.

10% (n=16), making 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 drop-out rate was small in both schools, 13% (n=4) overall, which compares very favourably with other programmes (average dropout 28% - Forehand et al, 1979).

The only significant differences between the parents who completed the parenting group (n=30) and the remainder of the parents in the study (n=250) was that the parents in the parenting group had significantly more children with borderline and clinical behaviour problems ( $p<0.01$ ). On all other measures including ethnicity, free school meals, marital status, and education there were no significant differences between the groups.

Table 1 shows that there were no significant differences between the parents who were selected for interview, and the remaining parents who were not invited or who were unwilling/unable to take part in an interview.

**Table 1: Comparison of the demographic characteristics at baseline of the parents who were not interviewed with the parents who were interviewed**

Demographic characteristics	Non-interviewed parents		Interviewed parents		Sig
	%	n	%	n	
% of mothers	100	(19)	81.8	(2)	ns
Mean age	40		35		ns
% parents					
Black	5.3	(1)	0	(0)	ns
Asian	5.3	(1)	9.1	(1)	
White	89.5	(17)	90.9	(10)	
Mixed					
% children					
Black	10.5	(2)	0	(0)	ns
Asian	5.3	(1)	9.1	(1)	
White	73.3	(14)	81.8	(9)	
Mixed	10.5	(2)	9.1	(1)	
% Free school meals	31.6	(6)	18.2	(2)	ns
% Single parents	31.6	(6)	27.3	(3)	ns
% Left school 16 years or under	68.4	(13)	40.0	(4)	ns
% Rented accommodation	68.4	(13)	45.5	(5)	ns
% Behaviour problems (parent-report)					
Borderline	35.3	(6)	42.9	(3)	ns
Abnormal	17.6	(3)	28.6	(2)	

Of the parents who took part in interviews the mean age was 35 years and over 90% of parents were white. A third of the sample were single parents, and just under a half were living in rented accommodation. Forty percent of parents who were interviewed had left school before they were 16 years of age, and approximately one-fifth of parents had children who were receiving free school meals. Two sets of parents who were interviewed were couples who had taken part in the parenting programme together. Over half of the parents interviewed perceived their children as having borderline or abnormal behaviour using a standardised behaviour questionnaire (the Goodman's Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire - Goodman, 1994). Thus, a large proportion of the parents who took part in the parenting programme were from a high-risk background.

## **5. Findings**

### **5.1 Reasons for participating in the programme**

A number of different motivations for participating in the parenting programme were given by the parents who were interviewed. 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 for mixing with other parents in order to exchange ideas, and the desire to be supportive of school activities.

'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 on-going animosity going on elsewhere?' (8)

'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)

'I did actually see it advertised when it first came to the school but I was working so I couldn't actually do the course. I remember [thinking] in particular it would be a good idea to actually mix with other parents and sort of, not with problems, because I haven't really felt that I've had problems, but sort of ideas. I thought it might be easier for ideas not, I don't know, the way it was worded was sort of like you know, more of a support and sort of idea exchanging scheme which is what it was. And I felt that that might be quite a good idea, sort of, sometimes you tend to mix with sort of 4 or 5 people, 4 or 5 mums that you know [ ]. It's different [in a] group, and [with its] being, if you like sort of mediated, I felt [it] would be easier. And I also felt that it had the link with the school, which is [ ] sort of you know what happens at school happens as home. Not exactly, but sort of like [ ] there are similar boundaries like you have at school you have at home or have at home you have at school. And I would know what the teachers are sort of expecting behaviour-wise and

sort of although not being able to mimic them exactly but would understand sort of what they were aiming for and what I was aiming for' (5)

'Well I suppose because I wanted to support the school in what they were doing. I suppose that was the first bit and then I am always interested in doing anything to do with parenting because I never get a chance to talk much, [ ] so I was quite interested' (7)

## **5.2 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 having liked 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)

'I thought it was very good. I think it was, without actually having any sort of particular expectations of it I think it was better than I would probably have expected it to have been. From my own point of view I found it useful because it made me analyse far more the way I dealt with the children, which was good. And it has widened the group of parents that I know fairly well, and we still meet up' (3)

Um, I thought it was brilliant, I thought it was really good and everybody who has asked me about it, a lot of people come up and say you know "I've been approached what do you think about it?" and I say "I recommend that you do it". I thought it was really good and interesting and I recommend that you do it' (4)

'Actually I thought it was a great Programme. I thought it was a real [help]. I really felt it helped everybody on the course, [ ] yes everyone got something out of it. And I got quite a lot out of it. ...'(5)

'I think it is good. I think they should get more funding and do it in more areas, you know. There is no such thing as a perfect parent, I won't say that, but, there's things [in the programme] that I'd never heard of before, and I'd had trouble with my son since he was 3 [ ]' (6)

'Excellent. I think people don't realise how much you can learn from the group and how much you get, the feedback you get [ ], you know, is brilliant, brilliant' (1)

## **5.3 The ways in which parents benefited from taking part in a parenting programme**

There were three main ways in which parents appeared to have found the participation in this parenting programme beneficial - (i) the support that they received in the role of a parent from other parents; (ii) the feeling of having regained control in the

parental role; and (iii) an increased ability to empathise and identify with their children. The remainder of this section will explore some of the factors which contributed to parents benefiting in these ways.

### **5.3.1 Support in the role of parent**

#### **(i) Support from other parents**

Parents cited a number of things that 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 both the opportunity 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 realise, 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)

'The fact that it existed as something that I could go and join in with. Meeting the other people and realising, you know, that albeit that other people on the surface look fine and dandy when you are walking through the school gates, it isn't necessarily the case when they go back home again. And the fact that you could then be supportive for other people as well as being supported yourself, right there and then, it wasn't something you did on the phone, by paper, by reading a book, it was something you were doing, interacting with other people, on the spot' (2)

'Well I think it led me to [find] support, you know, from other parents and sharing with other parents which I don't often [do]. I don't normally get the opportunity, you know, when you just meet at the school gates or something and say "Hello, how are you? Fine" You don't really get the opportunity to sit down and discuss [things], so I think that was good anyway. And then obviously the different strategies and things for dealing with behaviour and that was good' (7)

'That you had a chance to sit down and be just you. No children around and you could talk to other adults about any problems that you had. And you learned to trust the other mums in your group and anything that you said you knew would not go outside. And you had to experience people there, you know, giving you their views and giving you an alternative view' (4)

When asked what they had liked about the programme, many of the 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, beyond the end 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)

'Well it sort of made me feel a bit better in myself, really, knowing that I had somebody to share my problems with. Like people who have the same problem at the moment that made me feel a bit, you know, relaxed instead of keeping it all to myself' (11)

Parents suggested that there were 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 for getting to know people who had previously 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 everyday meeting all these people coming in and out of corridors, we couldn't put a name [to], and you know there's 10 of us now that know each other and know a lot about each other's children so, yes that was good' (1)

#### **(ii) 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 realisation 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)

'Yes, yes because a lot of the difficulties that I had been finding, which I thought were only unique to me, I suddenly find that everybody felt the same, you know, [ ] and that's good. Yes, I found that beneficial. To feel that you are not the only one going through all these difficulties and bringing up children isn't easy you know, and I think when you are in a situation that is very difficult you look at everybody else's situation and say "Oh well they are managing so much better than I am, it must be me, I must be doing something wrong". But it was good to get involved with people [ ], and everybody seemed to say that you know "Oh I thought it was only me that was doing this" but you know [ ] it was a thing common to us all really, which was good' (8)

'Because it just makes you realise, I mean when you meet people every day round at the school you think everyone is not having any problems at all and

everything is hunky dory in every household but when you get together as a group you realise that it isn't. And knowing [that is] half the battle. [Knowing that] you are not the only person who has trouble is half the battle because you realise that other people are in the same situation as you or even worse that can make you feel even better' (4)

'I think talking to the other parents. It was, I mean, I don't know if all groups are like that but our group was very open and they really did talk from the heart a lot of them and it was quite nice listening to things that they are going through. Because you, I mean, I think generally I just [think people are] having a wonderful life and their children are wonderful and everything just seemed unreal and then this group of real people were like really talking and you know, it is nice to discuss things. That was an important part for me, and realising you know, everybody has their hard [times] but we all muddle through, somehow, yes' (9: Mother)

'...And of course realising that everybody has exactly the same problems, you know, or at least similar problems. You know, getting them up in the morning, getting them out in the morning and all this sort of thing and I think that that is always useful because there are times I think when you feel you are the only one with a particular problem. You suddenly discover that you are not' (3)

'Yes, absolutely. I mean you kind of got feedback from one another, sort of, like if I was having trouble with my daughter or something somebody would say "Oh God, mine's like that as well, oh God, you know what I did the other day I just put her in her room and just told her to stay there and shut up, [and] leave me alone for 10 minutes" and stuff like that. You actually got [the] feeling back from [others] that you are not the only one out there feeling that you are about to murder your kids. It was very good once sort of everyone had got to know one another you kind of knew that you were not the only one out there ready to, sort of you know, turn round and strangle your child. Well because sometimes you do you feel like you are the only person in the world that's sort of like ready to slap them, you know you think "I could murder them" then you go to the course, and think "My God, I came that close to killing them the other day". And sort of like, somebody will say "Oh mine wind me up as well" and although they are not the same kid or anything [ ], someone else is saying "Yep, I know how you feel!" Yes, I used to sort of, sometimes if I'd had a particularly bad week I used to just feel like going there to tell everyone that I'd had a bad week. No, I used to look forward to going, I used to think it was quite sort of, even if I'd had a good week it would be nice to go there and say "I've had a good week" as well' (5)

'It was nice to hear their stories of their children as well, because you see them for 5 minutes at school when you are dropping the kids off and picking yours up or whatever and they are all very angelic. They are all responding to the teacher nicely and you think good grief! Why have I just spent an hour struggling to get the kids ready and they start telling you about all the similar stories about they have exactly the same problems' (9: Father)

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

When asked how the parenting groups had been helpful, some of the parents suggested that they hadn't felt that they were being taught 'how to be a parent' but were simply being supported in the parenting role.

'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 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)

**(iv) 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 criticised, 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 criticise things that may be right [or that might] be wrong, there was nobody to criticise' (1)

'Actually I thought it was a great Programme. I thought it was a real [help]. I really felt it helped everybody on the course, [ ] yes everyone got something out of it. And I got quite a lot out of it. I also felt that it was very supportive of anything you did. Whether it was included in the Programme or not, when you said "No actually I don't do that, this is what we do", it was very supportive of your methods say rather than actually saying "No, no this is how you have got to be a parent" it was very supportive of you completely as a parent and just adding bits of "Well, try this or well ok, if that's not working try this, but if that's working that's brilliant". So I mean that's why I felt the course was very good actually, it really helped' (5)

Yes, [they] were just so supportive, so willing to be flexible in [their] attitude. In the whole attitude towards the manner in which you used all of the clues, tips, help that they gave you. [ ] whichever way it worked whether it was upside down, back to front it didn't matter so long as what you were doing worked with your situation. They were very, very supportive and I liked the staff and the way they worked' (2)

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, breast feed" 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)

**(v) A reduction in feelings of guilt**

A reduction in feelings of guilt was also cited by a number of parents 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 realised 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 realise that and not feel guilty about it [ ], that was the thing for me I think' (4)

**(vi) Support from the group leaders**

When asked what parents had liked about the parenting groups, many parents cited the support that they felt they received from the two group leaders, in addition to the support that parents felt they received from other parents. Parents referred in particular to the group leaders' enthusiasm, to their empathy, and to the information and feedback which the group leaders 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)

'I liked the atmosphere more than anything. [The group leader] was nice. She was, you know, she always listened to the extreme [things people said]. She always said "opt out if you don't like [it]", you know, and she'd always be there afterwards for if there was anything you wanted to say. And it didn't matter what you said or how you felt, she accepted that. But you know she didn't judge or say it was wrong to do that, she just said "OK, that's fine". So yes, you know, I think that was fair' (10)

'You know, in there we were just like our little group and they knew you know, going over our ground, we could say what we wanted. Everyone was sort of like "Yes, I understand". I mean [the group leader] is really special [ ], there is something about her that can make you feel like you can go and slip your shoes off, you know, I could light my fag only I couldn't smoke in the house things like that. You know, she just makes you feel welcome and accepted [ ]' (6)

**(vii) A reduction in traditional forms of support for parents**

Parents referred also 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)

'Well I think it is just the job that you get absolutely no training for do you? You suddenly give birth and a lot of people nowadays have not had any experience of children until they get them and you are supposed to just know how to do it really.....So I think, yes, it is really good. You are just supposed to manage along on your own aren't you? And there is no-one much, I mean health visitors don't have a lot of time really, so I think it is very good, yes' (7)

**(vii) The importance of self-nurture**

When asked if they nurtured themselves more since having done the programme, many parents indicated that the programme 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)

'Yes, because now I recognise that I'm a person as well, although that's quite difficult. I still need to work a wee bit at that, you know. Yes, just that I have needs too which to a certain extent I can turn and say to the children "I'm feeling really, really tired tonight" you know "I'm just going to sit with my feet up, have I got any volunteers to make me a cup of tea?" you know, whereas before making a cup of tea I'd say "Can somebody make me a cup of tea" and they would say "No, I'm watching Eastenders" or whatever else they were doing. But I think if you explain to them how you're feeling "Oh I've had a really hard day and I'm really worried about my exams coming up" you know, as far as me recognising, like self-nurturing, I'm trying but that's difficult and I think I need to try harder' (8)

'I just felt as well that it made me recognise 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 recognised that, yes, I can still be a good parent but still look after myself as well. So I think recognising that was good for me' (8)

'...And well, I suppose the idea of trying to get a bit of time for yourself as well. You know, that you can't just be giving, giving all the time, that you need time and you know you shouldn't feel guilty for when you try and get a bit, you know, I think that' (7)

### **5.3.2 Regaining of feelings of empowerment**

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 empowerment in the parental role. This appeared to be associated with an increased capacity to think about things calmly, in addition to the acquisition of new tools for the job.

#### **(i) Increased feelings of empowerment in the parental role**

In response to a question concerning whether they felt that the programme had helped them to manage their children better, many parents indicated that the programme had increased their feelings of empowerment, and the 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)

'Yes, yes, I still find it difficult, it is not an easy job to do, and it has not just suddenly waved a magic wand and made things brilliant, you know. It still needs work and it still, you know, I think you reap what you sow, you know. You are only going to get back what you are prepared to put in and in that sense I realise, yes you know, that I can manage it. You know, I can take control of the situation rather than sitting and feeling miserable and saying "Oh no, this situation is awful" I realise that I can make it better' (8)

#### **(ii) Increased capacity to think about things calmly**

In addition to an increase in feelings of empowerment, 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 the ability stay calm.

'Yes, it has helped me to manage my children better when I am remembering the clues [ ], because it helped me to react in calmer ways to think about my options before I got into situations whereby I might be regenerating a bad behaviour rather than calming it down, stopping it and getting on. So therefore I think it gave me tools to use in terms of [recognising that] this kind of behaviour gets that kind of response, another kind of behaviour gets a different kind of response and it was, you know, just useful so long as I can remember it all, that's the thing I find the hardest now' (2)

' 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)

'Yes I think so, like I was saying, I can calm myself down and the children can calm themselves down. I don't lose my temper so much any more' (11)

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

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

'Once I had been to the group [I realised that I was] shouting a lot and if I talked to him, even if he had been naughty, if I talked to him I found he would go off and come back quicker and be talking to me on the same level. [ ] If he had been naughty, I sent him upstairs or whatever at the end of the night, when I kissed him goodnight he said "Why do you still kiss me and you say you love me when I've been naughty all day?" And then you try and answer them the best way you can. But yes I think it really did help [me to] sort of manage them. I had a big thing about being an old parent, that was the bit for me and being much older, it was like I was on a guilt trip all the time, you are probably doing all this wrong, and I found I wasn't at all. You know, as soon as we all got in the group and got talking about things I thought "Perhaps I haven't forgotten at all how to bring a child up"' (1)

'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 easy going but ... learning to reward rather than punish, I don't think we hardly [ever] punish now do we...?' (9: Mother)

'Choices and consequences' that's the main thing. Very occasionally [I use] the 'time-out' [strategy] but that is something that I've never had to really use on a regular basis. Yes, being able to speak to the children differently rather than shouting at them to get them to do something. Just say "Look this is the situation, we all want to go out at such and such a time, before we go out this, that and the other has to be done, the beds need to be made, the breakfast dishes put away or whatever, let's all work together so that we can all go out and have a good day" and whatever. And although that wasn't a technique as such [as] 'choices and consequences' it just [helped] me [to] be able to express myself better with the kids. To say "this is the situation"' (8)

**(iv) 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 wrought 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 regards 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 forget 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)

As regards 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.

' Um, it has probably helped L a lot because he was a difficult child, um, trying to get him to understand why you get cross and why you get angry about things that he is doing. If you can talk him through it and make him understand, then you are on the same level' (1)

*Interviewer: Has there been any difference in him at school?*

'Yes in leaps and bounds' (1)

*Interviewer: What sort of things?*

'He used to have to see, not a psychologist, it was a lady that came from social services. And she used to have to talk to him about his behaviour problems, but by the time he had left that school he didn't have to see her any more and he still hasn't got to see her. I still get a few problems but nothing like they were, nothing like 18 months, 2 years ago' (1)

'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 recognise some of his own feelings now which is quite healthy, isn't it? I mean if you can recognise them and put them into words it is' (7)

'Well they are not so demanding and they are not 'wanting' all the time, like if they saw something "I want this now" because if I ever took them to the

shops, like with yo-yos at the moment “I want this” and I will say “No, when I say no I mean no”. But before I used to just give in to him and say “Here you are, now get out of my sight” but now I say “a no is a no” because I used to give in all the time to him, but not now’ (11)

‘Yes, because I think they can speak to me a lot better and there were things going on when they were at their Dad’s, and when they come back I’ll say to them, “Well how did that make you feel, S, it isn’t that bad, you’re lovely”. He says “You’re like a counsellor” he says “because you always ask how I’m feeling but my Dad never asks that he just tells me to go and do things, go and do that and go and do that” he says his Dad’s girlfriend always tells them that he’s looking scruffy, and he says “But you never say that Mum, you always say that I’m lovely and I like to hear you say that”. So I think that I’m getting feedback from the kids that when it’s reinforcing what we are trying to do, you’re getting the benefits from it, and I can only see that is a benefit to the kids that they can speak like that to me and feel that they can open up, and they cannot do that with their Dad, so, it must be some good’ (8)

In terms of 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)

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

#### **(i) Increased feelings of empathy**

The third way in which parents appeared to have benefited from the programme, was the increased capacity of many parents to empathise with their children. An increase in feelings of empathy appeared to have led many parents to feel an increased sense of identification with their children. This had resulted in the recognition that children have the same feelings and anxieties as parents have, and that children should be helped to recognise and talk about these things in a similar way.

‘Um, the one thing that I would say was the most helpful was that I recognised 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 recognise 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 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)

‘...I see things completely differently. Where, you know, you don’t always think about the child’s point of view, you just see your point of view because you are under stress or under pressure. You can’t think what is upsetting them

or why they are acting like that, [the programme] makes you stop and think about them a lot more' (4)

'Probably making me think more about how I actually deal with the children when they are naughty. I mean I don't always manage to stick to it now but I think far more before I, or probably more after I've shouted, than I did before. I think I am more aware of the effect that I'm likely to have on them when I'm negative with them. Which I think has to be a good thing. I don't always manage to live up to it [though]' (3)

'Probably coming down to their level. If you are on a child's level you tend to try and think like they are thinking. Sometimes their thoughts are totally obscure and sometimes if you try and get down to their level you can co-ordinate with them better' (1)

## **(ii) Recognising the reasons for children's behaviour**

One of the factors which appeared to have contributed to the increase in parents' ability to identify with their children, and which emerged in response to a question concerning whether the programme had given them a better understanding of their children, was an increased capacity to recognise 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)

'Yes, because you just, I mean you are so busy, or I'm so busy most of the time you never stopped and thought about where they are coming from. Which angle they were coming from, you know, if they are crying or being in a temper or something, it is for a reason. There is something that is causing that and you should stop and think 5 minutes to find possibly what the reason is and if you can't do that then give them just a bit of attention for a little while and then maybe they will come to you later and tell you what the problem is after the situation has [calmed down] - a couple of hours later then maybe talk about it then. Then you will get the real reaction not just two people shouting, ranting and raving at each other, because you don't learn anything that way' (4)

'And a few sort of specific things like, the girl, tends to go off, tends to get very upset with every little tiny scratch and every tiny little knock, you know. And I find that quite hard to deal with continually, you know "Oh Mummy, Mummy, I've hurt myself" you know, you just think, "Oh gosh it's only a little knock, pull yourself together"! And [then it was pointed out to me] that she is actually crying out for attention [ ] so you like will go and give her the fuss, not like [before]. Like my attitude before was, "come on you have got to be a bit braver than this, you know, you won't get through life if you cry over every little knock" and that's the way I thought was the best way to deal with it, but [our group leader] pointed out that she's actually wanting attention and

that is her way of [getting it]. So now, more, I mean not all the time but more I just say “Oh you poor thing” and give her a hug and a cuddle [ ]. I used to worry that was like turning her into a softie and I didn’t want her to be too fragile because [ ] fragile ones don’t survive very easily and I just thought, you know, that if I give in to all her little knocks she’ll take them out of proportion. But now it is just like hug and kiss a bit more, and hopefully she will grow out of it. That was one thing' (9: Mother)

### **(iii) Recognising 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 experienced during their own childhood, and their own experiences of being parented, and from which much of the expertise as parents had been derived.

'...recognising 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 to me try harder you’re not trying hard enough, you’re not doing this right or you know, the criticisms rather than praise, you know. And I thought, ah, change your ways. Not that I was ever ultra-critical of the children but I think it just takes somebody to point it out, because a lot of the things that you do, you don’t realise what you are doing. Simple things like praising the children instead of saying “Oh you’ve not done that right” you know, just say “Oh that was really good” this time “It’s really good that you are trying to do that”, trying to help out, you know, and recognising that. So I think I [got] an awful lot of benefits from it' (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)

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

Role-play appears to have been an important method through which parents have come to recognise more fully the implications of some of their actions toward 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)

'Just that, I mentioned earlier it has made me realise that they've got feelings too. And although they cannot express them in the way that an adult can I think the one of the exercises that we did on the Programme was criticising one another and how does it make you feel? Awful, terrible, I'm not going to try that again just in case I get it wrong type of thing. I think that that was a good exercise because I just thought it was amazing some of the things that I used to say to the kids. Not bad, but just realising that they would feel the way I would feel if somebody said it to me' (8)

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

None of the parents who were interviewed, had found the programme to be unhelpful. This feeling is summarised by the comment from 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 about the programme focused on 'time', in terms of (i) the fact that parents enjoyed it and wanted more; (ii) the large amount of material with which they had been presented; (iii) the possibility for taking things in and practising them and; (iv) the fact that there may be up to 12 parents in each group, all with a great deal to say and much to offload.

'... I really enjoyed going on a Monday, [ ] any tension that you went in with you didn't come out with. And I think that is really important for all mums to be able to go somewhere once a week and just off-load all the things that have niggled you for 7 days and share it with others. It is brilliant. And loads of mums should go. You know all mums that I talk to I say "Go to the nurturing", you know "I can't do nothing with this one, I can't do nothing with that one" if you go there you will, you will get there. You have got to persevere, you have got to keep all the things going, you know, it is consistency, you have got to be consistent with a child. It is no good making a rule today and then forgetting it tomorrow, because the child just thinks "Oh I don't have to do that, she'll forget tomorrow". You must be consistent' (1)

'... I think when you have got 12 parents, there are 12 of us, 2 hours a session and just 10 sessions, sort of, no I don't think that was long enough, I think you could have, especially our group could have gone on for, you know, each session could have gone on for another 2 hours. And then sometimes [there were things] that we couldn't quite fit in. So I think the Programme could be [ ] a few weeks longer [and], maybe you'd be able to take things a little slower' (5)

Despite the shortness of the programme, parents indicated that much of what they had been taught and how they had felt during the programme, had been internalised sufficiently for it to be continuing 9 months after the end of the programme.

'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 from one couple that took part in the programme was that the group leaders had very 'defined views' about how to raise a child:

'There were several things I think that [the group leader] said, she had very defined views about what she thought or the Programme thought, was the best way to raise a child. For example, I think having 'time-outs' and not so much time-outs as a place to put the child if they have been naughty, and sit them down and make them sit there. I think we'd tried that. We knew about that before and we had given it a really good go before. Possibly they were too young then I don't know. But I didn't, I wasn't very impressed with that' (9: Father)

This couple also pointed to the difficulty for parents who were not 'extroverts', feeling pressurised to take part in discussions, and highlighted the case of one parent who had not turned up for several weeks suggesting that she had 'felt too pressurised'. There is very little information available at the current time concerning parents who drop out of parenting programmes, and the difficulties encountered by parents in this sort of group-work may well be an important explanatory factor.

## **6. Discussion**

### **6.1 The findings**

There are to date only a few published studies of parents' views about parenting programmes. These include qualitative evaluations of two parent support initiatives - Newpin and Homestart (Oakley, Rajan, Turner, 1998); a study of stakeholders' views (including parents) (Grimshaw and McGuire, 1998); a study of parents' participation in a cognitive behavioural parenting programme (Schultz 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, McKenry, Clarke, 1999). All of these studies suggest that parents found the programmes to be helpful, even parents who were 'forced' to take part in mandatory programmes (Stone, McKenry, Clarke, 1999).

The evidence from the above studies are consistent with the findings of the present study, in particular the existence of various motivational patterns (Grimshaw and McGuire, 1998); the benefit of being in a group with other parents (Grimshaw & McGuire, 1998; Schultz et al, 1993); the personal gain (Schultz et al, 1993); a lessening of feelings of guilt (Webster-Stratton & Spitzer, 1996); the discovery of new parenting techniques/tools (Webster-Stratton & Spitzer, 1996); feeling able to adapt what was taught to meet their own needs (making the shoe fit) (Webster-Stratton & Spitzer, 1996); evidence of an increase in feelings of empathy, understanding, and acceptance (ibid.); and the importance of caring for themselves (ibid.); evidence of a reduction in feelings of isolation (ibid.); the desire that such programmes should be longer (Schultz et al, 1993); and some evidence to point to the possible existence of a small group of parents who found the group process to be an uncomfortable and an isolating experience (Grimshaw & 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, 1998, p.118 in Grimshaw, 1999), 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 in Grimshaw, 1999). The valuing of this type of support is reflected in the training of 'community mothers' within the voluntary sector (Grimshaw, 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 the capacity of programmes to work with parents in a spirit of *partnership* that confirms the parent as a decision-maker' (Grimshaw, 1999, p.151). Grimshaw goes 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', and that 'such effects may impact on the long-term future of families by reinforcing networks of help within localities and communities' (Johnson and Malloy, 1995 in Grimshaw, 1999, p.155). The group certainly appeared to have been an important vehicle for change in the group of parents who were interviewed in this study, and the mirroring of concerns on the part of other parents also appeared to have played an important role in the facilitation of change. This is not, however, to ignore the fact that groups can also work in a way which prevents change, and which excludes certain individuals or groups of individuals. Grimshaw, for example, suggests 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' (ibid., p.155). Men, women from minority groups, single parents, people with disabilities or outside the sexual norms, and step-parents, are some of the people who might potentially be excluded by the group process (ibid.). To this list might be added the 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 which were expressed about the current parenting programme, were made by one of only two ethnic minority fathers who took part in

the programme. His main criticism was 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 non-prescriptive. The fact there were such a small number of fathers taking part in the study or 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.

One of the other most important things that appeared to have happened for many of the parents in this study was an increase in feelings of empathy, and an increased ability to identify with their child(ren). This appeared to be associated with an alteration in parental (i.e. maternal) perceptions concerning (i) the reasons for children's behaviour; and (ii) 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 recognised that their behaviour was sometimes a repetition of things that were done to them, 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 the infant's 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). A number of individuals working in the field of child abuse and neglect have concluded 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 the lack of empathy in a parent is related to an increased propensity to abuse, and that children exposed to such parenting develop deficits in this attribute (Feshbach in Cicchetti and Carlsen, 1989). Deficits in the ability to empathise are marked in criminals, and in particular, in adults committed for violent crimes (Lyons-Ruth and Repacholi, 1993; West and Farrington, 1973 in the Child Psychotherapy Trust). An increase in empathy on the part of parents in this study appeared to have helped parents to change inappropriate and unhelpful practices such as shouting and smacking with more appropriate and helpful parenting practices such as staying calm and listening to the child.

There is now evidence from a recent systematic review to show that parenting programmes are effective in improving behavioural outcomes in young children (Barlow, 1997) and also in improving a range of maternal psychosocial outcomes including depression, anxiety and parental stress (Barlow and Coren, forthcoming). One of the questions raised by these reviews is to what extent the behavioural and non-behavioural (relationship) programmes differ in the type of results which they produce. There is at the present time more trial-based evidence concerning the benefits of behavioural programmes, reflecting in part the greater ease with which it is possible to assess their effectiveness as a result of the more highly standardised nature of behavioural programmes. Thus, one of the questions which remains 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 children's emotional and behavioural development.

One of the emerging concerns with 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 the service of abuse by parents who are unable to empathically identify with their children. In these circumstances, the above behavioural strategies may simply be used to replace shouting and smacking as the medium of abuse. Furthermore, the appropriateness of many behavioural outcomes might also be questioned. For example, behavioural compliance is the major outcome of most behavioural parenting programmes. Children who conform behaviourally, however, are not necessarily healthy or happy children and over-compliance is an unhealthy trait. By increasing parents' capacity to empathise and identify with their children, programmes which contain an affective (feelings) component can protect against such outcomes.

### **6.1 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, this type of method permits the collection of a richer and more valid type of data.

It has been suggested that the "trust-worthiness" 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, for example, 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. While 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 the parents who were not interviewed. The only factor discriminating the parents in the parenting groups from the remainder of the sample was that their children had more parent-reported behaviour problems. As the qualitative data shows, this was an important motivating factor for parents taking 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. While the parents in this study were from a mixture of social backgrounds, parents from ethnic minority groups were seriously under-represented. As such, while the results of this study are transferable to other white parents from both middle and working class backgrounds,

it is possible that the results from this study are not transferable to parents from other ethnic groups, and further research is needed with ethnic minority parents in particular 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. As such, 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 is consistent with the findings of other studies.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, the qualitative data obtained in this study suggests 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 impact for parents. Support and feedback from other parents was one of the pre-eminent 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 empowerment in the parental role, in part through an increase in their capacity to think about things calmly, and also through the provision of new tools with which to do the job of parenting. Perhaps most importantly, many parents referred to an increased sense of empathy with their child, and a better understanding of the reasons which motivate children to behave in particular ways. Many parents appeared to feel that they were in a better position, having done the programme, to address the emotional and behavioural issues presented by their children. It seems likely 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 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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