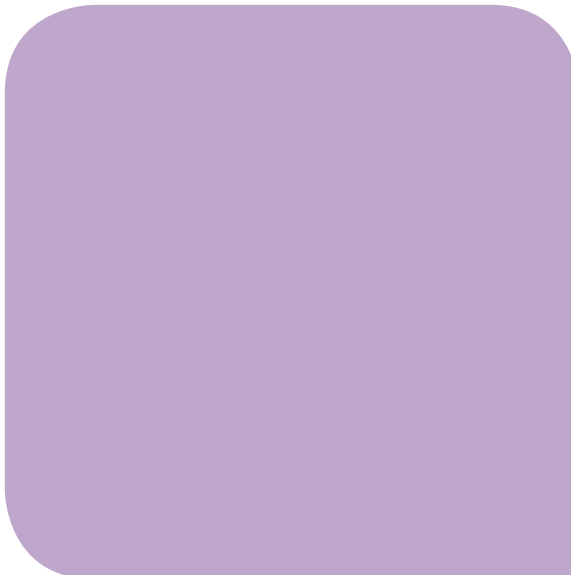
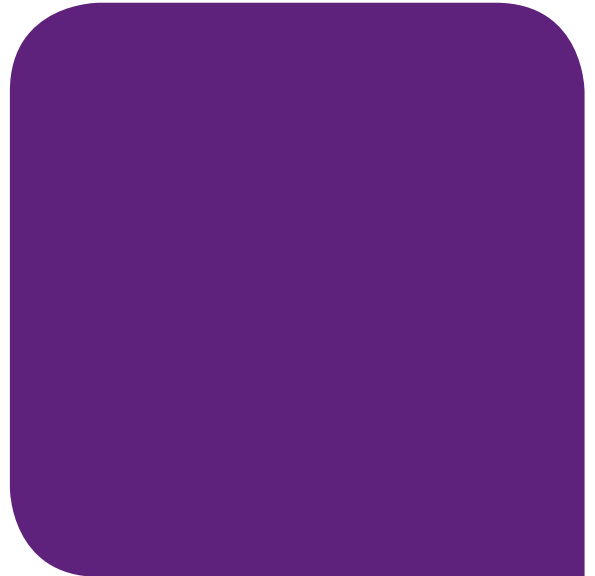


Reaching parents: Improving take-up of parenting programmes



Reaching parents Improving take-up of parenting programmes

**A guide to promoting access to parent education programmes and
maintaining attendance**

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1 Introduction

This guide provides advice on how to ensure that all parents are able to access parent education programmes. It explores current take-up of parenting programmes and potential barriers to access. Drawing on ideas about good practice, it also describes some solutions to overcoming these barriers. The aim is to help programme facilitators develop their own solutions to address their local concerns.

There are signposts to key resources throughout the guide. These provide further background information and ideas for good practice.

The guide has been developed for frontline practitioners delivering parent education programmes as well as their managers. It aims to further develop the skills and knowledge required by the National Occupational Standards for Work with Parents (www.parentinguk.org/2/standards). It can also be used to assess the accessibility of existing parent education programmes.

In compiling this guide, we built on work carried out by the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) and the Social Care Institute for Excellence (NICE/SCIE)¹ and follow-up work commissioned by SCIE from the Family and Parenting Institute² and the Race Equality Foundation.³

2 Why focus on parent education programmes?

Parenting makes an enormous impact on children's lives. A recent World Health Organization (WHO) review reported that responsive parenting, where parents observe children's cues, interpret and understand them and act on them to meet children's needs, is beneficial to children's development, and provides them with protection from disease and mortality.⁴ Where parenting is harsh or inconsistent it worsens other risk factors⁵ and increases the likelihood of poor outcomes for children. This evidence has prompted the government's interest in parenting, as summarised in the policy document *Every parent matters*.⁶

Parent education programmes do have an impact.⁷ They promote parents' confidence and competence in their parenting role and help parents to:

- understand child development better
- promote their children's self-discipline and social abilities
- communicate better and establish strong warm relationships with their children
- improve relationships with other adults in the household
- pass on their ethnic, cultural and other values and traditions.

Better practice box 1

A NICE and SCIE review⁸ recommends parenting programmes in group settings to help parents address conduct disorders in children under 12 years old. Programmes work best if they:

- are structured and have a curriculum informed by the principles of social learning theory
- include strategies for improving family relationships
- offer a sufficient number of sessions, with an optimum of 8–12
- enable parents to identify their own parenting objectives
- incorporate role-play during sessions, as well as setting 'homework' between sessions, to help establish new behaviours at home
- are delivered by appropriately trained and skilled facilitators, who are able to establish therapeutic relationships with parents and receive high-quality supervision with access to ongoing professional development
- adhere to the programme developer's manual and employ all of the necessary materials to ensure consistent implementation of the programme.

They also say:

Programmes should demonstrate proven effectiveness, based on evidence from randomised controlled trials (RCTs) or other suitable rigorous, independent evaluation methods. Programme providers should also ensure that support is available to enable the participation of parents who might otherwise find it difficult to access these programmes.

However, parent education programmes do not work for all parents in all circumstances. Many programmes have been designed and 'tested' for parents of children of a particular age. Others need to be adapted before they will work for some ethnic groups. Sometimes parents' circumstances are complex enough to indicate that they are unlikely to benefit from a group-based programme and will require more intensive one-to-one support for a time.

In summary, parenting programmes enhance the protective factors associated with children leading healthy, safe lives as well as helping parents develop strategies for dealing with the risk factors associated with poor outcomes.

3 Are programmes reaching everyone who could benefit?

Parent education programmes may still not be reaching everyone who could benefit.^{7, 9, 10} Mainstream programmes attract mainly women, and when men do attend, they are often in a minority.¹¹ Most agencies report difficulties in engaging fathers from all communities.¹²

While there has been an improvement in take-up by black and minority ethnic (BME) parents since the 1990s,¹⁰ this has largely been due to the development of specific services for these parents.⁷ Mainstream services are still struggling to engage them,¹³ and combined with uncertainty about the suitability of some programmes^{7, 14} there are concerns that these parents, especially those from Asian families, are still not able to access the support they need.

The picture for disabled parents is unclear. Evaluations of parenting programmes do not often assess whether disabled parents have accessed the course. However, other sources of evidence suggest that disabled parents are rarely able to find appropriate parenting support.¹⁵ In particular, parents with learning disabilities are more likely to have their children taken into care¹⁶ and less able to access programmes that are tailored to meet their needs.¹⁷

Recent government policy has focused on families who are experiencing poverty or social exclusion, which has improved access to parent education programmes for these parents.¹⁸ Nevertheless, parents experiencing the range of challenges posed by poverty may still struggle to secure the support they need. Similarly it is unclear whether teenage parents or parents from other marginalised groups (for example asylum seekers) are able to access parenting programmes as often as required.

Key resources 1

Barrett, H. (2008) *Follow-up work to support implementation of the NICE/SCIE guidance on parenting programmes (CSDI)*, London: Social Care Institute for Excellence.⁹

Lewis, C. and Lamb, M.E. (2007) *Understanding fatherhood*, York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.¹²

Olsen, R. and Tyers, H. (2004) *Think parent: Supporting disabled adults as parents*, London: Family and Parenting Institute.¹⁵

Phoenix, A. and Husain, F. (2007) *Parenting and ethnicity*, York: Joseph Rowntree Foundation.¹⁹

SCIE (Social Care Institute for Excellence) (2005) *Helping parents with learning disabilities in their role as parents*, SCIE research briefing 14, London: SCIE.¹⁷

3.1 Summary

Not all parents who could benefit from parent education programmes are able to access them. Fathers, BME parents, disabled parents (particularly those with learning disabilities), teenage parents and parents experiencing poverty appear to be at a particular disadvantage.

4 What are the barriers?

The cultural component of the course was highly emphasised as the women live in a very multi-cultural part of Bristol. Also many of the women have mixed heritage children. It was also very important to help everyone see the value and importance of their own cultural background. (facilitator, quoted in Wilding and Barton, 2007)

The content of some parent education programmes may be a barrier to access. These programmes have tended to promote 'white middle-class' values, while ignoring other approaches to parenting.^{7, 10, 14} Even the development of more inclusive content, as for example in the Incredible Years (www.incredibleyears.com/) and *Strengthening Families, Strengthening Communities* programmes (www.raceequalityfoundation.org.uk/sfsc/index.asp), has not guaranteed that all parents will engage.

In addition to programme content, a 2004 report identified three other main barriers to parents accessing programmes:⁷

- getting parents to the programme
- ensuring parents keep coming to the programme
- ensuring parents benefit from programmes.

Inevitably the effects of these barriers overlap. For example, for some parents the demands of daily life may make attending a 12-week programme appear unrealistic from the start, or once they do engage, may make it very difficult to stay for the duration. Nevertheless, in trying to develop solutions it is worth exploring these barriers individually.

4.1 Getting parents to the programme

Some parents aren't comfortable with something being called a parenting group. (facilitator, quoted in Barrett, 2007)

There are a number of barriers to getting parents to attend a parenting programme. From the perspective of parents these include:

- not knowing what is available
- practical problems such as transport, childcare, timing
- not knowing anyone who has been on the programme.

Some parents have also expressed concern that they will:

- be labelled as 'a bad parent', as only bad parents go on parenting programmes
- not understand what is being 'taught'
- not be understood themselves
- be 'told what to do'
- (conversely) not be told what to do, and just sit around talking about feelings
- not learn anything practical or anything that they can use with their own children.

The strength of these concerns varies from parent to parent and between groups of parents: fathers tend to be most concerned about too much time being spent talking about feelings; worrying about being labelled a 'bad parent' appears to be a particular concern for parents experiencing poverty; a lack of knowledge about what services are available, combined with not knowing anyone who has been on a programme, are the reasons BME parents usually give for not accessing support.

4.1.1 Ensuring parents keep coming to the programme

I use this phrase all the time; they have to be in the right place at the right time. And also when you've engaged them they have to be in a place where they actually have the understanding and awareness that they need to change something in order to help their child to change. And if it's all just locating the problem in the child then they probably won't change. (facilitator, quoted in Barrett, 2007)

The content of the programme is a key factor in keeping parents engaged. However, other barriers include:

- the behaviour of other participants who can be dominating/judgemental/argumentative
- not trusting participants/facilitators to keep things confidential
- parents feeling isolated because they are the only father/black parent/disabled parent
- not feeling welcomed by the facilitator
- daily life getting in the way of regular attendance.

The effect of these barriers will again vary from parent to parent depending on their experience and circumstances; parents with a complex set of needs, and often parents in poverty, are likely to find regular attendance at a course difficult to manage, whereas parents who are in a minority are more likely to report feeling isolated.

4.1.2 Ensuring parents benefit from programmes

I have had the chance to do parenting courses run by the community learning disabilities team and these have helped me to communicate better with the children and manage tantrums. It has helped with my confidence. (parent, quoted in Olsen and Tyers)

Effective programmes are based on an interactive approach and incorporate the principles of adult learning into their delivery. It is difficult for parents to gain from a programme if facilitators fail to:

- establish and maintain relationships with all parents
- create a safe and welcoming atmosphere
- communicate effectively with all parents
- encourage and value all parents' contributions
- manage any conflict, particularly over values or traditions.

Communication problems are often the main reason parents find it difficult to learn from parenting programmes. The language used, the level of reading ability required and the pace of delivery can all pose problems. Any course information therefore needs to be tailored to specific groups of parents (for example parents whose first language is not English, and parents with learning disabilities). This can only happen if facilitators establish and maintain good relationships with all parents.

4.1.3 Overcoming barriers

To some extent, these practical issues and concerns will influence every parent's decision about whether to attend a parenting programme and whether they stay, as well as what they gain from the experience. Overcoming these barriers has been shown to be especially important for parents who have previously been excluded, but as importantly, by successfully addressing these concerns, it is likely that the experience of all parents will be improved.

In considering how best to overcome these barriers it is important not to conclude, for example, that all BME parents will feel isolated or that all fathers do not like to talk about feelings. This would lead to poor recruitment, retention and engagement. However, it is helpful to consider these general tendencies when planning the delivery of a programme, as this will:

- ensure easy access for all parents
- make it easy for all parents to participate
- ensure that all parents gain from the time and energy that they put in.

Key resources 2

Barlow, J., Shaw, R. and Stewart-Brown, S. in conjunction with the Race Equality Unit (2004) *Parenting programmes and minority ethnic families: Experiences and outcomes*, London: National Children's Bureau.¹⁴

Moran, P., Ghate, D. and van der Merwe, A. (2004) *What works in parenting support? A review of the international evidence*, Research Report 574, London: Home Office.⁷

SCIE (Social Care Institute for Excellence) (2005) *Helping parents with learning disabilities in their role as parents*, SCIE research briefing 14, London: SCIE.¹⁷

4.2 Summary

The barriers to access and take-up of parenting programmes relate not only to the programme itself, but also to getting parents there and keeping them engaged. Different groups of parents tend to experience different kinds of barriers. It is valuable to try to address them all in order to improve everyone's experience.

5 Solutions: getting parents to the programme

That's really the key to getting people who've got complex needs involved in a parenting programme, they have to do all the extra work beforehand and then gaining their trust and stuff. And if you just offered a programme without doing that what do you think would happen? They won't come. (facilitator, quoted in Barrett, 2007)

Getting parents to attend a parenting programme requires:

- focusing recruitment on parents from specific target groups
- ensuring parents are informed about the programme
- tackling practical barriers.

5.1 Focusing recruitment on parents from specific target groups

A starting point for practitioners is to first identify local parent groups who may benefit. For many organisations this will involve reviewing data held on the characteristics of current service users. Staff knowledge is also a useful source of information.

Part of this intelligence gathering must also ask the question: which groups of parents are not accessing or using the service at present? This will help identify the parents who have been excluded as well as those who have tried and then rejected the service, because they did not like what was offered.

Choosing a parenting programme that has been shown to work and meet the specific needs of the target parent group is part of the solution. Some organisations have held local consultation events or conducted surveys to find out about local parents' needs. This has helped match the programme to the local population.

It is also important to consider how best to recruit the parents who can be 'hard to reach'. Translating leaflets and publicising information about the service in local media can help. However, the two most successful methods are:

Outreach: the most effective means will vary from area to area, but usually involves home visits or going to other places where parents can be found, such as the school gate or supermarkets.

Contact through local and community organisations: local voluntary and community groups provide easy access to specific groups of parents. For example, Hyde Sure Start in Tameside worked with a mosque to help recruit Muslim fathers. Other practitioners have made contact with their local Youth Offending Team to reach their target audience,⁹ or worked with a housing association to recruit 'vulnerable' parents at risk of homelessness.

Some parent education programmes require an assessment of families to be carried out before parents are offered a place. This allows the facilitator to assess how well the programme meets a parent's needs as well as how it might be better tailored to

meet their needs. Other programmes prefer open recruitment. At present there is no evidence to suggest that either approach is more or less inclusive.

5.2 Ensuring parents are informed about the programme

Maybe if you've somebody who's very angry who's on a parenting order, you may need to do additional preparatory visits; that makes the point of picking them up and easing their entry into the group. But that's what we would do with anyone because sometimes people who are coming on a voluntary basis are still incredibly anxious about coming, even though it's been a choice. So you just need to do different preparation, depending on the needs of the individual parent. (facilitator, quoted in Barrett, 2007)

It is important to reassure parents that they will not be labelled 'a bad parent' when they attend. It is also important for parents to gain more information about the programme, such as how it will be delivered and who will deliver it, to encourage them to attend. There are a number of ways this can be done:

- Programme facilitators can carry out outreach – this helps to build the trust that is crucial to successful programme delivery.
- Leaflets can be left in doctors' surgeries, libraries, including toy libraries, distributed by health visitors and given to schools – these can also be translated into relevant community languages.
- Parents who have already attended a parenting programme can be used to encourage others, for example, a video of parents talking about what motivated them and what they gained can be shown to parents at different events, such as parents' evenings.

While the cost of carrying out outreach may be a deterrent to some organisations, it has proved to be one of the most successful methods of reaching parents who either lack information about a programme or who may have decided that parenting programmes are not for them. Spreading information by 'word of mouth' has also proved particularly effective, but even the best programmes still need to be 'marketed'.

Better practice box 2

The possibility of committing to a 12-week course may be a daunting prospect for some parents. One solution tried by a number of organisations is to provide an introductory or taster session, for example running one part of the programme in a three-hour workshop format. *Strengthening Families, Strengthening Communities* facilitators often run an introductory session that explores the issues that parents face, as well as giving an overview of the programme. This 'gentle start' provides parents with a better understanding about the commitment they are making and how they might personally benefit. It may also help facilitators to find out what they could do to maximise parents' engagement.

5.3 Tackling practical barriers

We've crèche facilities and that's been the best thing that we've ever done because it gives the parents a chance to have a break, and it also gives them a chance to talk about things that they may not have talked about in front of the children, and they're not having to watch the children all the time, or we're not having to watch them. (facilitator, quoted in Barrett, 2007)

Lack of childcare is the most common practical barrier to parents. Some organisations try to overcome this by running programmes during school hours and term time. However, this is of little help to parents who work or have very young children. Providing good quality childcare is more likely to make a bigger impact on whether parents will attend.

The choice of venue can also make a difference because it has both a symbolic and practical value. A community setting rather than a clinical setting is less stigmatising for parents attending programmes. Additionally, a familiar venue is more likely to make them feel comfortable. Some practitioners advise against using a local school because parents may associate this with their own negative experiences or those of their children, but there is great value in its familiarity.

Accessibility demands attention: a venue that is only accessible via a set of stairs will exclude wheelchair users as well parents with other mobility problems. Any audio-visual equipment must also be suitable for the parents attending the programme. For example an induction loop system may be needed for parents who use hearing aids.

Sometimes a more complex situation will arise because parents may be reluctant to use a particular venue. For example some BME parents may refuse to go to a venue that is thought to be at the heart of an area where racial attacks are prevalent.

The delivery of a programme must also be timed to maximise parents' participation. Parents who work are less likely to attend sessions during the day, and few people are happy to attend sessions on Friday evenings. Running various local programmes at different times should ensure that all those who need support are able to access it.

It is important to ask each group of parents about the specific practical barriers they face and to try to tackle these as far as possible. However, it is also important to be honest from the start if there are some things that cannot be done, for example, if it is not possible to pay for transport. Alternative solutions may need to be sought.

Below is a useful checklist that can be used to assess whether the most common practical barriers have been considered and addressed:

- Is the venue and location acceptable?
- Will transport be provided to and from the venue?
- Is the venue accessible for disabled parents?
- Is childcare provided?
- Is the timing of the programme suitable?

- Have practical arrangements been made to ensure the facilitator can communicate effectively with all parents?

5.4 Summary

Getting parents to attend parent education programmes requires:

- a better understanding of the target group of parents
- implementing effective methods for recruiting parents
- taking action to deal with any practical problems parents may face.

6 Solutions: ensuring parents keep coming to the programme

The key factors that influence whether parents will keep coming to a programme week after week are:

- the content of the programmes and the way the material is delivered – it is vital these are tailored to the needs of the individual parents in the room
- creating a welcoming and safe environment
- engaging parents between sessions.

6.1 Tailoring parenting programmes

This was ... what the parents wanted ... from session 1, discipline was an area where parents felt they needed to know what it was that they were doing wrong, and how best to modify existing methods of discipline – if not change them completely. (facilitator explaining why more time was spent on the positive discipline component of a programme, quoted in Wilding and Barton, (2007)

Parenting programmes must be tailored to the needs of the participants if they are to successfully engage people. It is important that facilitators find out about parents' needs at the beginning as this will determine what information is given out as well as how it is provided. Introductory/taster sessions (see Better practice box 2) have proved to be a useful approach. They have also helped with identifying and overcoming potential barriers to participation.

When parents are asked about what helped them engage with a parent education programme, they often mention the content of the programme and the flexible approach of the facilitators. Good facilitators enable parents to decide what they want to focus on and use methods that allow each parent to explore what is most feasible and practical for them. They also modify the delivery of the programme to reflect the specific interests of the parents on the course, for example to reflect the interests of teenage parents.

However, there are limits to this flexibility. It is important that a programme is delivered in its entirety if it is to have the outcomes required. So, for example, parents may need to be encouraged to discuss challenging and complex issues, such as the differing treatment of girls and boys, or violence in the family, even if they would prefer these subjects were avoided. Facilitators therefore have a responsibility to ensure their delivery remains faithful to the original programme.

6.2 Creating a welcoming and safe environment

Very supportive staff ... made you feel comfortable to talk, share experiences and opinions. (parent, quoted in Wilding and Barton, 2007)

We respect their point of view and their feelings about how things are at home and we offer suggestions about how things can be done differently and then it's up

to them to decide. So we're not just judgemental in that respect. Even if we don't agree we can say well, I certainly wouldn't do things that way, but I have respect for what you're saying and if it's not working, how about trying this. (facilitator, quoted in Barrett, 2007)

It is an essential part of the role of the facilitator to create a welcoming and safe environment for parents. Key features of good practice include:

- establishing and maintaining warm relationships
- listening to parents and communicating clearly
- showing empathy and avoiding being judgemental
- establishing clear rules about confidentiality (see Better practice box 3)
- encouraging everyone to participate
- showing genuine interest in the lives of individuals and their families
- encouraging shared exploration of parenting issues, rather than appearing to be an expert.

Co-facilitation has proved to be a particularly successful model of delivery. Two facilitators are better able to share the load and manage the dynamics of the group. They can deal more effectively with people's emotional responses and manage the parents who either dominate discussions or who are unwilling and unable to operate in a group setting. This can pose one of the biggest challenges to facilitators: whether to exclude a parent from the programme. On some occasions it may be best to refer a parent to another agency that is able to provide one-to-one support.

Better practice box 3

Establishing a safe and supportive atmosphere is valued by parents and plays a part in parents' decisions to stay with a programme. An important element of this is establishing rules about confidentiality. This is best done via a discussion of ground rules at the first session, and follow-up if necessary at subsequent meetings. An honest statement of what facilitators will do if evidence of child abuse is revealed must be part of this initial discussion.

A simple but effective way of creating a welcoming environment is to start or end a session with a meal. This encourages parents to relax and to focus on the tasks, particularly if they have not had time to eat beforehand. For many parents, the provision of food is a demonstration of the value being attached to their involvement.

6.3 Engaging parents between sessions

... just, sort of, say, you know, are you okay, and, and we just, you know, just missed you, or the group were concerned about you and just wondered if you're all right and, and to see if there's anything we can do to help them just, you know, to access the group. (facilitator on telephone calls, quoted in Barrett, 2007)

Parents can be kept engaged in a programme through regular contact from facilitators between sessions. This typically involves checking what parents thought of the previous session and whether they are ready for the next one, as well as reminding them of the time of the next session. Facilitators sometimes make contact with parents when they use other services, or simply telephone or visit families at home.

Contacting parents between sessions also enables any changes in their circumstances to come to light. The facilitator can then consider the implications for their continued participation in the programme and whether anything can be done to limit disruption. Ensuring continuity of participation of all group members benefits everyone involved. As with any form of groupwork, people dropping in and out will adversely affect the group dynamic. Investing in this continued support between sessions is therefore highly recommended.

6.4 Summary

The content and delivery of parenting programmes is key to ensuring parents keep attending. Tailoring the programme to meet the needs of parents at the same time as creating a welcoming environment helps ensure parents continue to return. This can be significantly enhanced by contacting and providing continued support to parents between sessions.

7 Solutions: ensuring parents benefit from parent education programmes

The course has given me the confidence to make choices in how I bring up my children, stay with them and be happy about them. (parent, quoted in Wilding and Barton)

The key factors that influence whether parents benefit from parent education programmes include:

- the skills and knowledge of the facilitators
- regular evaluation
- effective communication
- a facilitative (as opposed to a didactic) approach.

7.1 The skills and knowledge of the facilitators

Groupwork for anybody, for most people is pretty daunting. But for those [parents] who are not used to doing that, kind of, work and being in that, kind of, situation, it's very daunting. So, I think a familiar face, someone they connect to as soon as they walk through the door, is going to make it much easier for them to settle down, to come in the first place and then to feel comfortable while there. (facilitator, quoted in Barrett (2007))

The skill of the facilitator is central to parents getting the best from parenting programmes and is made clear by the National Occupational Standards for Work with Parents. The establishment of the National Academy for Parenting Practitioners has given new impetus to ensuring that those delivering parent education programmes have the right skills and knowledge.

The required skills include being able to:

- empower parents to identify their own goals
- take a non-judgemental approach
- develop relationships with parents
- communicate effectively
- understand and manage group-based learning
- tailor the programme to reflect parents' needs.

The required knowledge includes:

- recognising and understanding the needs of diverse parent groups
- knowing what approaches work with different parent groups
- understanding effective outreach
- knowing what other support is locally available.

There has been debate as to whether it is also important to match facilitators with parent groups, for example to employ black facilitators to run programmes for black

parents. There is no conclusive evidence that this makes much difference, particularly if the facilitators are highly skilled and knowledgeable. However, some previously excluded parents might feel they are more welcomed and shown more empathy by someone from their own community.

Better practice box 4

An area of contention is how far we should go to matching facilitators with parents. Some argue that this is key in reaching, for example black parents, or fathers, or teenage parents. However, the evidence is not conclusive as parents often consider that facilitators' skills and knowledge are more important than identity. Parents who have been excluded from provision are more likely to require evidence that they will feel welcome and for fathers this may mean male facilitators, and for black parents this may mean facilitators from a BME group. The positive role model that this demonstrates may confer additional self-confidence.

7.1.1 Regular evaluation

Debriefing after each session is essential for facilitators to know what went well and what could be improved. It also helps to check that all parents are being engaged effectively and to take any necessary remedial action.

This evaluation is most effective when it is followed up in supervision. Good quality supervision should not only focus on the programme content, but also on the successes and shortcomings of how the sessions were delivered. Supervisors need to be involved in discussions about how to improve delivery, as this may require further training/development to improve the skills and understanding of facilitators.

7.2 Effective communication

Effective communication requires tailoring the delivery of parenting programmes to meet the needs of parents (see Better practice box 4). For example, parents with learning disabilities are most likely to benefit from programmes that are interactive, practical, involve repetition and make use of pictures¹⁷. In fact many parents will benefit from this approach. It also helps overcome one of the other main barriers to engaging parents – literacy problems. The most effective programmes now require little or no reading ability. Sometimes facilitators read out all the written materials, while others use video-based information. Making information easy to access will benefit everyone involved.

It is also important to recognise that communication is a two-way process. Facilitators need to use active listening skills to show that they value parents' contributions and to check that parents have absorbed the right messages.

Better practice box 5

Some programmes use interpreters or British Sign Language interpreters to communicate with different groups of parents. While this is a solution, the *Strengthening Families, Strengthening Communities* programmes suggest that it is better to train facilitators who can deliver the programme in the appropriate language. This is the preferred option because of the complexity of the subject matter, the need to regularly check parents' understanding and the potential difficulties caused by introducing another person (the interpreter or signer) into the group dynamic.

7.2.1 A facilitative approach

Learnt a lot! Both about myself as a facilitator and about parenting. Very valuable and empowering experience – also at times draining and emotional. Definitely a worthwhile journey. (facilitator, quoted in Wilding and Barton, 2007)

A facilitative (as opposed to a didactic) approach is much more effective in all forms of adult learning and is therefore required by the National Occupational Standards. It has a number of advantages. Most importantly, it helps parents to develop the parenting strategies that best suit them and their families. This is because parents are encouraged to identify their own goals and empowered to find their own solutions. A facilitative approach also eliminates some people's concerns that they will be 'told what to do', or that they will not be given help to solve their particular problem.

Facilitative techniques also enable the group to function well. Parents often gain as many valuable insights from each other as they do from the course materials. Parents may need encouragement from the facilitator to contribute and to be convinced that their experience and 'expertise' is of value.

Facilitators often report that they gain personally from delivering parenting programmes and this helps them sustain the energy and enthusiasm they need to continue to run programmes. By letting the participants know that they are learning as much by 'sharing the journey', facilitators also help to distance themselves from the role of 'expert'.

7.3 Summary

Skilled and knowledgeable facilitators are at the heart of all successful parent education programmes. The best facilitators are good communicators and able to support and empower parents to identify their own problems and solutions. The effectiveness of programmes needs to be regularly assessed. Facilitators also need to be properly supervised to ensure they can make any necessary improvements to programme delivery and continue to develop themselves.

8 Conclusion

Evidence shows that parent education programmes can be very effective in supporting a wide and diverse range of parents in improving their family outcomes. By helping parents develop protective factors such as warm and responsive relationships, and strategies for reducing factors that increase risks, like harsh and inconsistent discipline, programmes can make a real difference to the lives of families and children.

To achieve this, programme providers must choose effective courses that will work for their target groups of parents. They must also find ways of attracting parents to sign up, such as outreach, and liaison with voluntary and community organisations, to maintain their attendance, such as support between sessions, and to ensure that they benefit, such as using methods to empower them to identify both their problems and their own solutions.

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Reaching parents: Improving take-up of parenting programmes

Part B of this report provides advice on how to ensure that all parents are able to access parent education programmes. It explores current take-up of parenting programmes and potential barriers to access.

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