
PARENTING CLASSES

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THE CENTRE FOR
SOCIAL
JUSTICE

Introduction

In his ‘Life Chances’ speech in January, the Prime Minister placed a particular emphasis on the importance of parenting:¹

‘I believe if we are going to extend life chances in our country, it’s time to begin talking properly about parenting and babies and reinforcing what a huge choice having a child is in the first place, as well as what a big responsibility parents face in getting these early years right.’

In the same speech, the Prime Minister said that his Government would look to do a number of things around parenting:

- Encourage the growth of high-quality courses that help with all aspects of becoming a good parent;
- Include a plan for significantly expanding parenting provision in the Life Chances Strategy to be published in the spring – this would ‘examine the possibility of introducing a voucher scheme for parenting classes and recommend the best way to incentivise parents to use them’;
- Ensure that parenting skills and child development assistance to the Troubled Families programme is ‘both targeted and delivered’.

The Centre for Social Justice (CSJ) strongly supports this agenda – we agree with the Prime Minister that proper parenting is an essential component of improving children’s life chances and that government should do what it can to help parents acquire the skills they need. In order to help the Government in the development of this policy, in February the CSJ convened a roundtable of expert providers and practitioners to look at how these ideas could be implemented. Below we set out some of the findings and suggestions from that roundtable and suggest some possible ways forward for the Government.

Background: the previous parenting voucher scheme

Between April 2012 and January 2014 the Coalition Government ran a scheme piloting vouchers for parenting classes. The CanParent scheme gave parents a £100 voucher to spend on classes which could be accessed through health visitors, midwives, doctors’ surgeries and children’s centres. However, only four per cent of eligible parents took advantage of the scheme and once the pilot period had been completed the scheme was not renewed.

A detailed evaluation of the CANparent trial has been published by the Department for Education.² Reflecting on its findings, and their own experience, our expert roundtable concluded the following things about the previous scheme:

¹ Rt Hon David Cameron MP, *Prime Minister’s speech on life chances*, 11 January 2016 [accessed via <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/prime-ministers-speech-on-life-chances>] (7/03/16)

² Lindsay G et al, *CANparent Trial Evaluation: Final Report*, London: Department for Education, 2014

- There was insufficient groundwork preparing local providers and services to run programmes and to market them to their communities;
- Programmes struggled when they were attempted in situations where the organisation did not already have a relationship with the parents;
- Most parents were not aware of what the benefits were for them and assumed that classes were solely for parents of ‘problem families’;
- There was poor marketing and advertising of the programmes available;
- One reason take up was limited was because parents felt they could not afford the time or childcare to engage;
- The pilot was heavily weighted towards mothers: initially vouchers were only given to women and even in Phase 2, 92 per cent of parents engaged were women;
- The funding model placed all risk on class providers – this exacerbated frustrations that the voucher value did not cover the costs of delivering classes unless they were run at full capacity;
- The trial did not stimulate a self-sustaining market as intended: only five per cent of parents said they would be willing to pay for universal parenting support, and when vouchers were withdrawn in Phase Two, the number of providers went from 12 to four, and just 164 parents were engaged;
- There was an overcomplicated referral process: parents had to receive a voucher from a professional or Boots, then visit the CANparent website, then register with a class provider (although this was improved when e-vouchers were introduced).

Building a new scheme of parenting classes

There was agreement that a voucher scheme could be made to work if the pitfalls in the original pilot were addressed. The CSJ heard that the scheme should be structured along the following lines:

1. Aim to make parenting classes a standard part of having a child

It was agreed that almost all parents would benefit from parenting classes and that it was therefore extremely important that classes were aimed at everyone, not just those families who would need them most. By building an idea that it was ‘normal’ to attend such classes – as has happened with, for example, National Childbirth Trust (NCT) classes – it would also prevent them from being stigmatising.

Achieving this would require a long-term, national campaign, backed by evidence of programmes’ successes as experienced by families who had taken them. By shifting parents’ perceptions of what parenting classes could offer and who they were for, it would be possible to create a new demand for services and encourage the growth, in the long term, of a much wider-reaching, self-sustaining model of provision. This would ideally also direct parents towards services currently available in their area.

Indeed, there is the potential to build on the success of NCT classes, which are popular and successful with parents from a wide income spectrum. For instance, encouraging groups of parents from antenatal classes to then attend parenting classes together would normalise the experience for people from a variety of backgrounds.

2. Take advantage of existing programmes

The CSJ heard that it was essential that a new national drive to improve the take up of parenting classes expands the use of existing programmes rather than attempt to ‘reinvent the wheel’.

It was suggested that local authorities should be given the responsibility for compiling details of local parenting classes and making these details available to parents. This information could be used to populate an online registration process (below).

3. Build a system easy to access and use

A new system must make it easy for parents to find out what courses are available to them locally and, equally, to register with that course. Whilst some local authorities already present some information about courses online, they often only promote those provided by the local authority itself. Instead there should be a concerted effort to catalogue all local parenting services including, for example, those offered by the NHS and charities.

There was consensus that parents should be able to do everything (find local services, sign up, learn about vouchers) through a single gateway. This simplicity was seen as being a major asset towards improving take up.

4. Use vouchers to improve take up

Attendees agreed that vouchers had the potential to improve take-up – particularly amongst those families who would struggle to afford classes themselves. These should be easy to acquire (above) and accessible to both fathers and mothers.

In a new pilot scheme in a limited geographic area, the Government may wish to offer vouchers to all parents (or all new parents/all parents of pre-school children) for a limited time in order to encourage engagement. However, it is possible that limited resources might mean that this could not be done in the first instance at a national level. In this case voucher entitlement might be limited to, for example, low-income families.

A simple, online system of booking would allow administrators to pay funds direct to providers. It would also allow vouchers to take the form of online codes and passes, so that those in need of a subsidy could simply enter their password into the online booking form so that they did not have to pay. This scheme could be administered either by central government passing funds to providers or by central government devolving money to local government. Because local authorities should have the opportunity to make additional vouchers through the form of online booking codes available to their own target groups there is a good case for these resources to be administered locally.

One contributor mentioned that language is very important to avoid re-stigmatizing free parenting classes. They suggested that the term ‘voucher’ should be avoided as this was old-fashioned and not aspirational. Instead, modern and matter-of-fact terms such as ‘codes’, or ‘passes’ could be used.

5. Encourage provision to reach out to fathers

Poor paternal take up was a feature of the original scheme. One participant pointed to 2012 research showing that the most common setting for working with fathers in family services was Sure Start Children’s Centres and suggested that provision in this setting should be encouraged.³ In addition, there should be consideration of how parenting classes could be combined with childcare so as to help both parents attend classes together.

6. Use the existing accreditation scheme

The existing scheme of accreditation, the CANparent quality mark, which is already used by over 60 organisations, can continue to be used moving forward in order to validate programmes.

7. Include online programmes within the scheme

There is considerable potential for encouraging parents to engage with online parenting classes. The CSJ’s attention was drawn to the fact that Family Links has a very popular online course that is offered through Netmums that has been completed by 35,000 parents. Making this and similar programmes accessible through the gateway would very likely increase the number of parents involved.

Parenting Classes and the Troubled Families Programme

Because parenting interventions are productive interventions for families with a child with a conduct disorder (i.e. severe behavioural problems), there are great merits in creating a parenting component to the Troubled Families programme.⁴

However, the roundtable believed it to be very important that there was a clear separation between any initiative to make parenting a more fundamental part of the Troubled Families programme, and the kind of national ‘voucher’ scheme we have outlined above. The fear was that, if the two were confused, it would again encourage people to believe that parenting classes were for ‘problem families’.

³ Scourfield J, *Working with fathers – what’s going on out there?*, Cardiff: Cardiff University, 2012

⁴ Scott S, ‘Do parenting programmes for severe child antisocial behaviour work over the longer term, and for whom? 1 year follow up of a multi-centre controlled trial’, *Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapy*, 33, 2005, pp 403–421; Scott S, ‘Parenting programmes for attachment and conduct problems’, *Psychiatry*, 7, 2008, pp 367–370

Moreover, while parents on the Troubled Families programme could obviously become eligible for vouchers in the mainstream parenting scheme, it should be acknowledged that they may need more specialised attention as well. Better training for Troubled Families workers would help them to identify appropriate services in the community that would meet those needs.

It was noted that many parents are only in contact with the Troubled Families programme for a relatively short period of time and that they might benefit from longer involvement with parenting classes. For this reason current or previous involvement in the Troubled Families programme would need to be the gateway to services (rather than simply current involvement).

Conclusions and recommendation for implementation

The Government's ambitions fall broadly into two categories:

- To make parenting classes an aspirational part of family life;
- To engage high-need families with parenting programmes.

As demand for provision is grown, so the number of services available to families can be grown to meet that need. To grow that demand a sustained publicity campaign is needed in order to draw parents' attention both to how parenting classes can help them and to the fact that there are services in their area.

By working with local authorities and charities, the Government could develop an online service that would ideally act as a one-stop-shop for parents. This would:

- Provide parents with a list of all the accredited parenting classes in their area;
- Allow them to book sessions/make contact with those classes;
- Inform them about voucher entitlement and give them access to that voucher.

However, as research suggests that parents are more likely to access classes if they are referred by services they are already engaged with, it will also be necessary to work with local services (such as children's centres, nurseries and schools) to encourage them to provide or host classes and refer their existing parents, and to work with existing providers to expand their provision into these settings.

The Government may choose to offer vouchers for all parents in pilot areas in order to encourage take up and to experiment with growing local demand. Given that it is unlikely that, in the first instance, there will be public funds sufficient for fully funded universal parenting classes, resources will need to be reserved for low-income families (perhaps JSA and ESA recipients) and those who have been in contact with Troubled Families programme (though some of these may also require more specialist services).

The drive to encourage more parents to use parenting classes should be careful to have broad appeal, reaching out to both fathers and mothers, and seeking to engage parents at each phase of their child's upbringing.

By doing these things, it should be possible to build a culture in which parents, by default, seek to extend their understanding of parenting – in much the same way as, a generation ago, parents were persuaded to take up the offer of antenatal courses. The long-term advantages of this work for parents, children, communities and society should not be underestimated. The family is by far the best environment to prepare children for the challenges they will face in life – helping families to do this better can only benefit us all.

About this report

On 10 February 2016, the CSJ convened a roundtable to discuss the issue of parenting classes with a select group of stakeholders who work within this area of policy. This report is the outcome of that discussion.

Organisations who participated in the roundtable included:

- Care for the Family
- Community Connect
- Department for Communities and Local Government
- Early Intervention Foundation
- Family and Childcare Trust
- Family Links
- Hartlepool Borough Council
- Kids Matter
- Parenting UK
- Relate
- Sodexo
- The Children's Commissioner
- The Tavistock Centre for Couple Relationships
- UnLtd
- Westminster Advisers

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