

An Exploratory Evaluation of a Community Interactive Training Programme for Parents of Children Aged Birth to Five.

Submitted by Geoffrey John Robert Morgan to the University of Exeter as a thesis for the degree of Doctor of Educational, Child and Community Psychology (D.Ed.Psy) in June 2011.

I certify that all material in this dissertation which is my own work has been identified and that no material has previously been submitted and approved for the award of a degree by this or any other university.

Signed.....

Student Number: 580030546

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Project Summary

Background

Conduct problems (CPs), a persistent pattern of challenging, oppositional, defiant or aggressive behaviour are a significant concern to educators, families and other professionals. CPs in preschool children are related to poorer educational and social outcomes in addition to a range of behavioural and emotional difficulties. Although there is evidence for hereditary and temperamental influences, parental factors are widely considered to be significant in the development of CPs.

Parents experiencing psychological or social distress are considered to be at risk for challenging behaviour in their children. Psychologists and other theorists have suggested several possible reasons for this association. Firstly, it is possible that parents in distress have difficulty managing stress and as a result use harsh, inconsistent or coercive approaches to parenting. Secondly, parents with children who have CPs may be low in parental self efficacy, a consistent belief in their capacity to parent, which leads them to parent ineffectively and inconsistently. A third possibility is that parents in distress struggle to form stable attachments with their children which can lead to later behavioural difficulties. Finally, it is possible that parent's distress is influenced by external contextual factors which also influence children such as family or social conflict.

Studies suggest that training programmes for the parents of preschool children are effective in reducing child behaviour problems. Training approaches are influenced by a combination of psychological theories including behaviourist, social-cognitive, attachment and ecosystemic approaches. There have been many quantitative evaluations supporting the

use of parent training programmes (PTPs). However, there has been limited inquiry into the process of PTPs from the perspective of those who attend them.

Aims

The first part of this study was designed to evaluate vulnerability factors related to conduct problems; parental self efficacy, stress and child behaviour problems over the course of a community parent training programme designed to help participants to understand and manage the behaviour of young children.

The overall research aim was to evaluate the outcomes and process, using different methodologies to address several questions. A realist methodology was applied to evaluating: 1. was there an association between parental stress, parental self efficacy and child behaviour problems at the start of the programme consistent with the established theory? 2. Did the parents attending the course experience higher than expected levels of stress and child behaviour problems? 3. Did quantitative and qualitative data indicate that these vulnerability factors changed over the duration of the course? Finally, an interpretivist methodology was used to explore how parents of young children evaluated as at risk of challenging behaviour described the experience of learning in the programme.

Methods

The study utilised a pragmatic approach to evaluation with mixed methods and differing methodologies. At the start of the programme, a cohort of 38 parents agreed to participate in the study prior to the programme and completed self report measures related to parental stress and parental self efficacy. Parents with concerns about the behaviour of a child aged over three also completed a questionnaire relating to child behaviour problems. Of the

original cohort, 27 completed self report measures at the end of the programme. 17 parents completed the same measures at a follow up meeting at the Children's Centre, five to six weeks after the programme was completed. At this meeting 16 parents were interviewed to discuss their experience of the programme and any subsequent changes which had occurred.

Results

The results of the first part of the evaluation suggested a significant relationship between parental self-efficacy and stress and between stress and child behaviour problems.

However, there was no statistical association between self-efficacy and child behaviour problems, as expected. This tentatively indicates that parental self-efficacy is less important in the development of child behaviour problems than has been previously suggested.

The analysis of stress data at the start of the programme indicated that the frequency of parents reporting moderate to extremely severe stress was 4.42 times that which would be expected in a typical British cohort. At the start of the programme, frequency of child behaviour problems in the cohort were 5.9 times higher with conduct problems being 9 times what would be expected based on British norms. This suggests that the programme is being accessed by parents whose children are evidencing behaviour problems and, in particular, conduct problems. However, methodological issues are likely to have led to a slight overestimate of relative prevalence of child CPs in the cohort.

Results indicated that parents reported significantly increased self efficacy, significantly reduced stress and child behaviour problems, including conduct problems, between the start and end of the programme. Thematic analysis and subsequent content analysis of

outcome themes from interviews suggested that the majority of parents interviewed identified changes in parenting behaviour, knowledge, confidence, reduced stress and improved child behaviour as outcomes from the programme. However, changes in the quantitative data were not observed as frequently, reliably or to the same extent in the interview subgroup as they were in the main cohort, suggesting a sampling bias or a discrepancy in findings between methods.

The self report data and interviews for all interviewees were then reviewed and interviews with six parents evaluated as having moderate to high stress, social or psychological difficulties and possible child behaviour problems were sampled. These were then re-analysed using a rigorous inductive approach to Thematic Analysis to identify emergent themes relating to the experience of participating and learning through the programme. Six themes emerged from analysis including; Understanding Difficulties, Identifying and Connecting, New Knowledge, Stopping and Thinking, Approach and Interaction and Reconstructing.

The Understanding Difficulties theme described the different ways in which parents understood of their difficulties relating to themselves, their children and others which motivated them to attend the programme. The Identifying and Connecting theme described the importance to parents of personal identification with several aspects of the programme in terms of “being understood” in addition to identifying connections with established support, learning objectives and personal development goals. New Knowledge was categorised into three sub-themes of theoretical, practical and contextual. Contextual knowledge was constructed as understanding the experience of other parents, for example, identifying that other parents had similar difficulties. Theoretical knowledge about child

behaviour and development encouraged parents to “stop and think” about the reasons for their children’s behaviour. Practical knowledge was constructed as parenting strategies which, when used, helped parents to feel more confident in themselves, more relaxed and more in control. The Stopping and Thinking theme described parents withholding action and considering the motivations for their children’s behaviour or the best approach to interacting with them. Approach and Interaction described changes to the way parents interacted with their children. The parents in question described changed or reconstructed understandings of their children, themselves and their difficulties as a result of participating in the programme.

The theoretical implications of analysing the learning experience are that it highlights the importance of personal identification with the course objectives and experience. Moreover, results confirm previous authors’ conclusions that individual reflection and new understandings are important aspects of parental learning. Implications for practice with vulnerable parents include the importance of programmes being appropriately supported, relevant to parent’s needs and delivered in an appropriate context or through services with which they have established connections. The use by practitioners of approaches to support reflective parenting may also be helpful in supporting better outcomes for parents considered at risk for child behavioural difficulties.

Table of Contents

Paper 1: An Evaluation of Parental Self Efficacy, Stress and Child Behaviour Problems in a Community Interactive Training Programme for Parents of Children Aged Birth to Five.....	12
Abstract.....	13
1. Introduction and Background	14
2. Theoretical Background	15
2.1. Child Factors.....	15
2.2. Parental Difficulties and Child CPs	15
2.3. Parental Stress Management and Child CPs.....	16
2.4. Parental Self-Efficacy and Child CPs.....	16
2.5. Parent Child Attachment and Child CPs.....	18
2.6. Ecosystemic Theories of Parental Distress and Child CPs.....	19
2.7. Training Interventions for Parents of Children with CPs.....	19
3. Research Aims and Questions.....	22
3.1. Parental Self Efficacy.....	22
3.2. Stress.....	23
3.3. Child Behavioural Difficulties	23
4. Methodology and Methods	24
4.1 Methodology.....	24
4.2. Participants and Sampling.....	25
4.3. Measures.....	26
4.4. Intervention	28
4.5. Procedures	29
4.6. Interviews.....	31
4.7. Ethical Considerations.....	30
4.8. Data Analysis.....	31
5. Results	34
5.1. Parental Self Efficacy.....	34
5.2. Stress.....	35
5.3. Child Behavioural Difficulties	36
6. Discussion and Conclusions	39
6.1 Parental Self Efficacy.....	39
6.2. Parental Stress	41
6.3. Child Behaviour Difficulties.....	43

6.4. General Methodological Issues.....	45
6.5 Conclusions	48
Paper 2: The Experience of Learning in a Community Interactive Training Programme for Parents by Mothers of Young Children Evaluated as at Risk for Conduct Problems.	50
Abstract.....	51
7. Introduction and Theoretical Background.....	52
7.1. Introduction	52
7.2. Theoretical Background	53
8. Research Aims and Questions.....	56
8.1. Research Aims.....	56
8.2. Research Questions.....	56
9. Methodology and Methods	57
9.1. Participants and Sampling.....	57
9.2. Intervention	59
9.3 Procedures	59
9.4. Interviews.....	60
9.5. Ethical Considerations.....	60
9.6. Analysis	60
10. Results.....	63
10.1. How Parents Understood their Difficulties.....	63
10.2. Identifying and Connecting.....	66
10. 3. New Knowledge	69
10. 4. Stopping and Thinking.....	70
10.5. Interaction and Communication	70
10.6. Reconstructing	73
11. Discussion.....	78
11.1. Theoretical Implications.....	78
11.2. Methodological Issues	83
11.3. Practical Implications	84
12. References	88

Appendix	99
Appendix A: Details of the Community Programme for Parents.....	100
Appendix B: Self Report Questionnaire for First Session, Last Session and Follow Up.	110
Appendix C: Statistical Norms and Scoring	113
Appendix D: Statistical Analysis	114
Frequency of Stress Score Data in Norm Categories Pre Intervention.....	114
Frequency of Child Behaviour Data in Norm Categories Pre Intervention.....	114
Descriptive Statistics for Parent and Child Data	117
Tests of Normality for Parent Raw Data	118
Tests of Normality for SDQ Raw Data Pre Phase	118
Tests of Normality for differences between pre and post for SDQ Data.....	119
Tests of Normality: Pre and post score difference for all parent data (pre post difference) .	119
Example Histogram for PSAM Pre Phase	120
Descriptive and Mann Whitney U Statistics Comparing SDQ Scores Between Interview Subgroup and Remaining Cohort.....	122
Appendix E: Pilot Semi Structured Interview Schedule for Playing Up Follow Up Evaluation....	124
Appendix F: Revised Semi Structured Interview Schedule	126
Appendix G: Sample Interview Transcript (Paper 1).....	129
Appendix H: Examples of Open Coding for Paper 1.....	136
Appendix I: List of Open Codes for Paper One Thematic Analysis.....	140
Appendix J: Sample Thematic Map Displaying Grouped Open Codes.....	144
Appendix K: Sample Codebook	145
Appendix L: Inter-Analyst Comparisons of Second Stage Coding.....	147
Appendix M: NVivo Coding List for Outcome Themes (Paper 1).....	150
Appendix N: Examples of Final Themes (Paper1)	151
Sample Theme: Confidence or Self-Efficacy	151
Sample Theme: Reduced Distress or Stress.....	155
Appendix O: Data Used for Sampling in Paper 2.	158
Appendix P: Sample Interview Transcript (Paper 2)	160
Appendix Q: Open Coding.....	169
Example Interview Excerpt and Open Codes	169
List of Open Codes (Paper 2).....	170
Appendix R: Examples of Handwritten Memos Used During Qualitative Analysis (Paper 2)	179
Appendix S: Examples of Memos and Reflections Used in Thematic Analysis.....	181

Appendix T: Example Thematic Maps.....	184
Appendix U: List of Tree Nodes Used for Final Themes.....	186
Appendix V: Example Sub-theme Coding from NVivo	188
Appendix W: Ethical Procedures and Ethics Form	197
Appendix X: Consent Forms	205
Consent Form for Main Cohort.....	205
Consent form for Interview.....	206
Appendix Y: Literature Review.....	208

List of Tables and Figures

Table/Figure	Page
Table 1: Number of Participants by Programme, Phase of Data Collection and Data Type	31
Table 2: Correlation Coefficients for Questionnaire Data Pre-Programme	34
Table 3: Descriptive Statistics and Dependent Measures T test for Parent Data	35
Table 4: Frequency of Cohort Scores in SDQ Child Behaviour Categories at the Start of the Programme	36
Table 5: Descriptive Statistics and Wilcoxon Signed Ranks for SDQ-P Data Pre and Post.	37
Table 6: Descriptive Statistics and Friedman’s ANOVA for Interview Subgroup Questionnaire Data	38
Table 7: Frequency and Intensity for Perceived Outcome Themes.	38
Figure 1: A Diagram Summarising Constructions of the CIWP Learning Process	76
