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**An exploration of children's centre users' experiences of being  
a parent and of support for the role**

Submitted by Jennifer Patricia Townsend to the University of Exeter as a thesis  
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Jennifer Patricia Townsend

## 5. **Abstract for Paper 1**

Provision of support for parents is recommended at an ecological level in order to be effective since many of the problems associated with poor parenting are linked to social disadvantage (Puckering 2009). Sure Start Children's Centres have developed strength in delivering such holistic support (Barlow et al, 2007). Sure Start Local Programmes were set up in 1998 by the then Labour government as part of its policy to eliminate child poverty. In 2003 Sure Start's initial focus on disadvantaged areas was changed to a universal Children's Centre service accessible by families in all areas (Lewis, 2011). Children's Centres continue to operate a universal service under the current Coalition government, with an emphasis on improving outcomes for the most disadvantaged families (DfE, 2010).

Support for parents sits uneasily within a cultural context in which an intensive parenting discourse is linked to undue expectations of parents (Furedi, 2009; Wall, 2010). This study explores Children's Centre users' experiences of being a parent and of support for the role and uses IPA to analyse the data. Data were collected initially from a focus group discussion which is analysed and integrated into the main study following a protocol for IPA of focus groups developed by Palmer, Larkin, De Visser and Fadden (2010). Further data were collected from semi structured interviews with a purposive sample of four women with both preschool and secondary aged children. The data were analysed following a protocol for IPA outlined by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009). Findings suggest that for these parents ecological support (including community facilities, employment and social support) was important for their functioning as parents. Their level of engagement with an intensive parenting discourse appeared to be linked to their identity and self-actualisation. Implications are drawn for the way in which parenting support is framed within services and the media.

## **15. Abstract for Paper 2**

This exploratory study is set within the context of a national policy that aims to normalise parent training and increase parenting skills in order to improve children's life chances (DfE, 2012; Field, 2010). The local context is a city in the South of England where the Incredible Years (IY) parent training programme (Webster-Stratton, 2004) has been delivered since 2009. There is robust evidence of improved parent and child outcomes from the IY (Lindsay et al, 2008). In this city the IY is offered as both a universal and targeted service with participants either self-nominating or being nominated by involved professionals. This study addresses a gap in the research for process studies to illuminate how change came about for parents on the IY (Lindsay et al, 2008). It also builds on research by Miller and Sambell (2003) into how parents perceive parenting support. A 14 week IY programme was attended by the researcher to ensure prolonged engagement with participants. Semi structured interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of participants during and on completion of the IY course. Semi structured interviews were also conducted following the course with the two facilitators to add another perspective and see how they reflected parents' experiences. Data were analysed following a procedure for IPA outlined by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009). Findings revealed that the group setting was both a challenge to access and a source of peer support. Leader qualities emerged as essential for parental engagement. This was reflected in facilitators' accounts and underpinned by their non-judgmental ethos. Within this accepting group setting with approachable leaders parents' accounts suggest that change had come about for them through experiential learning putting strategies into practice in their own contexts with opportunities to reflect in group discussion. Issues are raised regarding Social Services nominations and constructs around discipline. Implications are drawn for practice and the role of the EP. Further research directions are suggested.

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