

Evaluating Sure Start's Parents Plus

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Background: Parents Plus is a parenting intervention offered by Flying Start (formerly Sure Start) in South Wales. Parents Plus (PP+) is an evidence-based, holistic intervention and aims to promote positive parent-child interactions. The service is individually tailored following in-depth assessment. (PP+) usually consists of around 10-15 weekly home visits by experienced play workers. The aim of this pilot study was to evaluate the long-term effects of (PP+) :

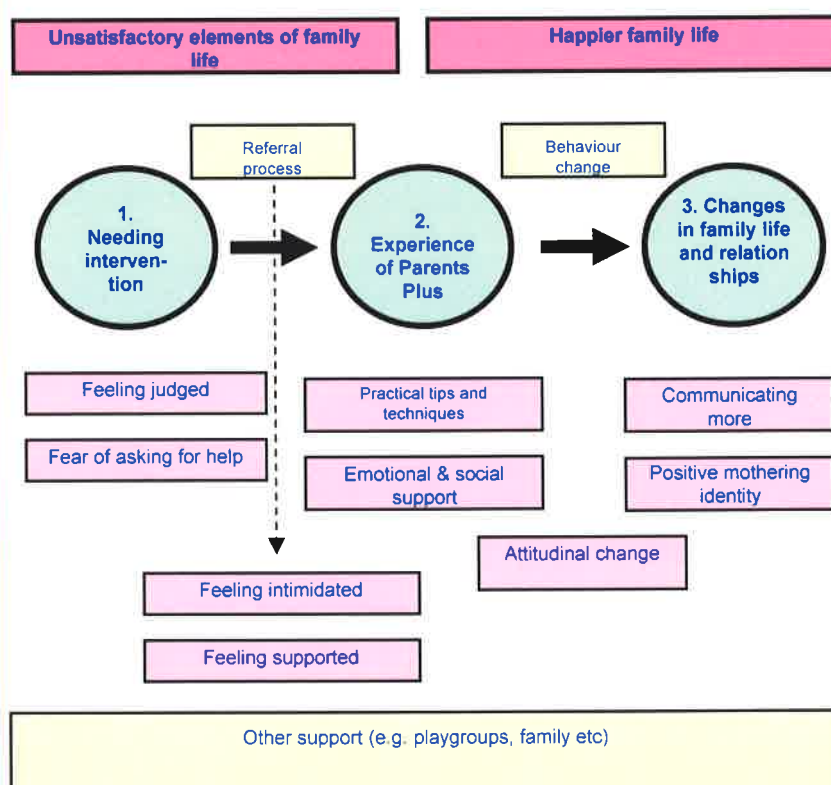
- What were families' experiences of the service provision?
- What were key process components and outcomes that made a difference in the short and longer term?
- What are potential methods for a larger scale evaluation?

Methods: The study used a mixed methods design comprising a telephone survey and semi-structured interviews. A random sample of service provision files was retrieved, and letters were sent to 197 families who received PP+ between 2000 and 2007. 106 telephone numbers were wrong or no longer in use, reducing the total number of potential respondents to 72, which gives a response rate of 29%. Of those families who could be reached by phone, 21 participated in the telephone survey. A convenience sample of six mothers agreed to be interviewed face-to-face about their experiences.

Results: telephone survey

- 17 parents (out of 21) felt that Parents Plus helped a lot;
- 3 parents felt that Parents Plus helped a bit;
- None felt Parents Plus had made things worse;
- 1 parent said Parents Plus made no difference;
- Ignoring bad behaviour and being able to notice good behaviour were the most helpful techniques;
- Approximately half (n=11) of the parents cited other influences on their parenting, the most common being Sure Start groups and other interventions and courses.

Figure 1. Findings from semi-structured interviews: mothers' experiences of Parents Plus



Parents' suggestions

- 1) *Expand* the service, and publicise Parents Plus more widely in communities.
- 2) *Improve* communication between health services, education providers and Parents Plus to ensure all families in need of help are offered a referral.
- 3) *Provide* alternative ways for parents to initially receive the intervention, for example at drop-in sessions at local playgroups.

Discussion: Parents Plus provided mothers with a set of practical tips in order to manage their child's behaviour, as well as emotional support and encouragement, boosting parental confidence and re-constructing positive maternal identities. The intervention also improved parent-child interactions, serving as a precursor to school-readiness. Parents Plus provided mothers with contact that widened their social network and increased social cohesion.

The low response rate raises some practical questions in relation to larger scale evaluations. An experimental or quasi-experimental design would be required to discover whether the same parenting advice presented in group settings or through videos or leaflets might have been equally effective. Another important line of enquiry is to explore further the experiences of those more rarely heard of in early years intervention research: the experiences of fathers and of pre-school children themselves.

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