



# ‘Hard to reach’ families: Under-represented, invisible or service resistant?

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# Overview

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1. Background: the study/studies
2. Defining 'hard to reach' families and parents
3. Heterogeneity of 'hard to reach' families
4. Strategies for engaging families
5. Conclusions

# Background: Initial Study

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- Literature review
- Semi-structured interviews (in England)
- 10 organisations in the voluntary and community sector
- Each with reputation for quality of work and history of success with engaging 'hard to reach' families
- Interviews with one strategic and one front-line manager in each organisation
- Organisations spanned urban and rural communities, and served diverse populations

# Background: Second Study

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*Provides confirmatory evidence -*

- Semi-structured interviews at 8 sites across voluntary, community and public sectors
- Spanning urban and rural communities, and serving diverse populations in England and Wales
- Interviews with experienced programme facilitators and managers
- Focus on strategies for effective delivery of structured parenting programmes

# Definitional problems

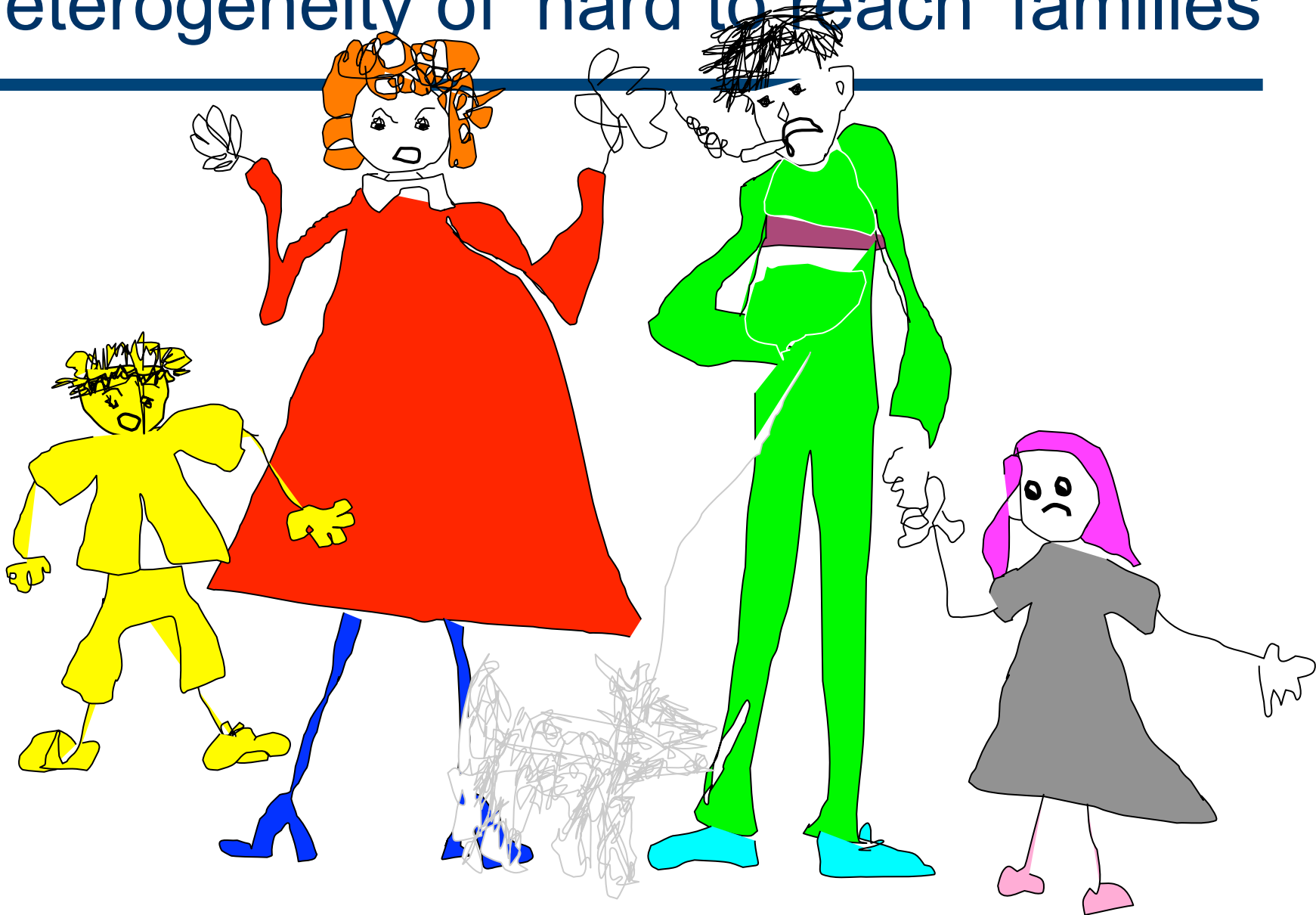
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- Discomfort with/Ambivalence towards term 'hard-to-reach'
- Varying views/definitions, e.g. all parents are hard to reach, no families are hard to reach, contradictory definitions – hard to reach families are not hard to reach
- Difficulty of specifying a water-tight taxonomy, e.g. the 'service-resistant', the 'under-represented', the 'invisible' (On Track team, Doherty et al. 2003)

*If we can reach 'hard to reach' families and parents, are they really hard to reach?*

# Heterogeneity of 'hard to reach' families

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The 'Under-represented', e.g.

- Refugee and asylum-seeking families
- Homeless families
- Minority ethnic families
- Traveller families
- Prisoners
- Parents of disabled children
- Parents with disabilities
- Parents with learning difficulties

*Marginalised, economically disadvantaged, socially excluded*

# Heterogeneity of 'hard to reach' families

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## The 'Invisible', e.g.

- Young carers
- Fathers
- Parents with mental health problems
- Domestic violence/abuse perpetrator
- Gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered parents
- Socially isolated parents
- Families with needs below thresholds
- Homeless families
- Refused-asylum-seeking families
- In some areas, White working-class families

*Slip through the net, may have difficulty articulating needs*



# Heterogeneity of 'hard to reach' families

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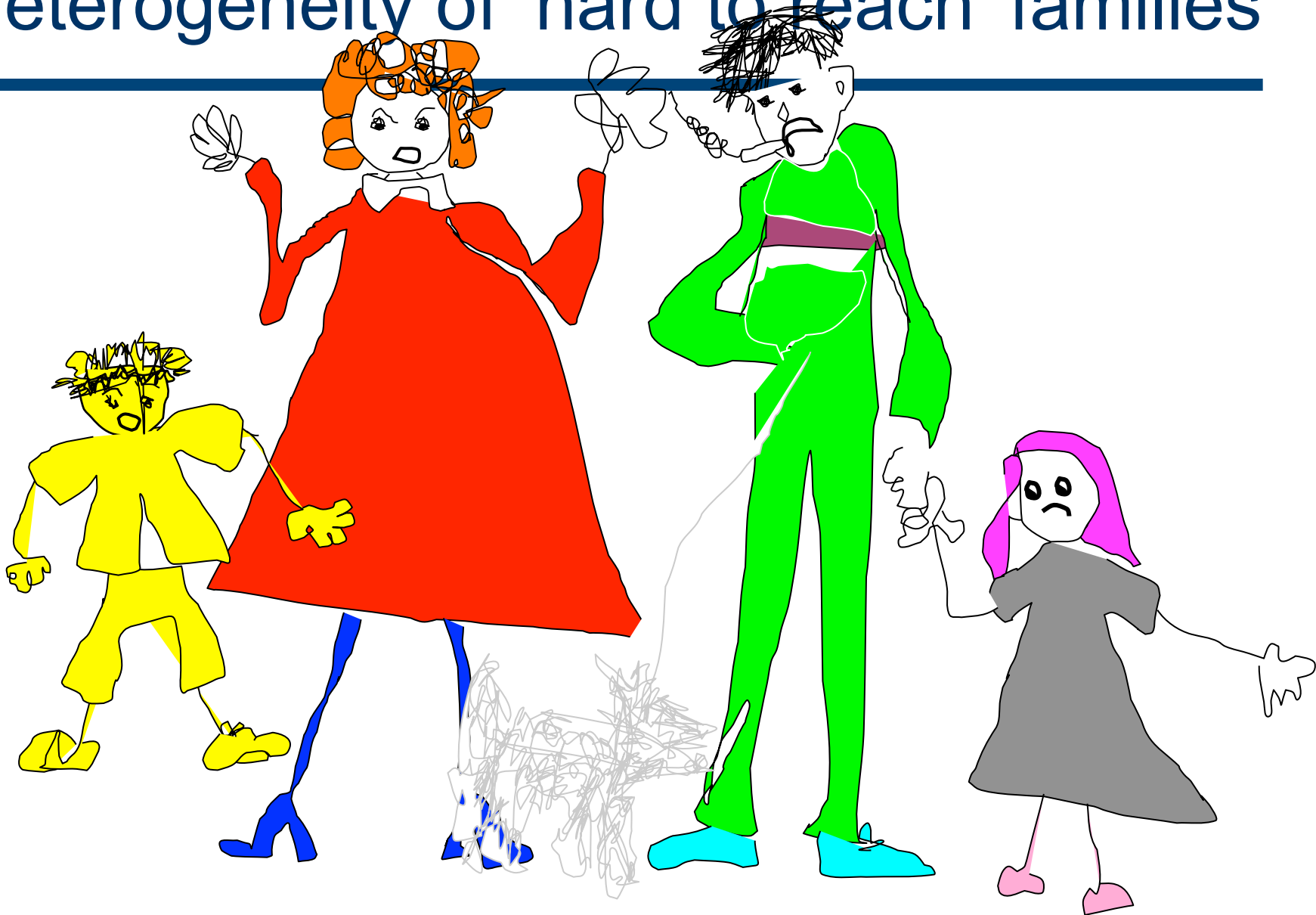
The 'Service-Resistant', e.g.

- Long-term multi-problem families
- Criminally active families
- Domestic violence/abuse perpetrators
- Anti-social families
- Substance abusing parents
- 'Fringe-dwelling' families

*Unwilling to engage, suspicious, disengage from opportunities, blind to problem? Over-targeted?*

# Heterogeneity of 'hard to reach' families

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# Heterogeneity of 'hard to reach' families

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- May need more than one form of provision
- May have chronic, mutating difficulties which demand different forms of input at different times
- Across generations; across various family branches
- Though appearing chaotic, may have adapted to function outside accepted norms of behaviour
- May, intentionally or unintentionally, appear to play organisations off against each other

# Need for a range of strategies

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- To determine which services to offer – where, how, when
- To assess local population's need for services
- To assess/match individual families' needs with services
- To publicise services
- To encourage uptake
- To facilitate continued engagement
- To monitor impact – not just through 'happy evaluations'

# Key Emergent Principles

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- Importance of relationship building – practitioner skills
- Need for, and lack of, secure organisational status
- Costliness of adequate provision - fear of inundation
- Multi-entrance, multi-exit and multi-re-entrance opportunities
- Need to embed structured programmes within more general provision
- Inappropriateness of ‘one-size-fits-all’ assumption
- Essential Ground Rules: Confidentiality, honesty, respect for difference, parent empowerment – collaborative approach

# Relationship-building: Crabs come first

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- Assessment of population and need for services
- Outreach work – perseverance, time, cost
- Attractive shop window – drop-ins, universal services, etc
- Side/Back door entrances via good relationships
- Parents as ‘buddies’
- Skilled individual needs assessment
- Networking to ensure appropriate referrals
- Publicity

# Relationship-building: II

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- Parents as partners - collaborative vs directive approaches
- Matching programmes to parents
- Use of parenting orders/contracts
- Involving parents in goal-setting – honesty, confidentiality
- Facilitating relationships between parents
- Accepting and respecting different outlooks
- Sharing skills and ideas – the omnipresent potential for mistakes and tips for making amends
- Working in partnership across agencies

# Relationship-building: III

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- Follow-up parent support groups
- Signposts/Links to other services/career development
- Encouraging parent volunteers/further training
- Accepting that the time might not be right and letting parents know that this does not mean they have failed – they can always try again later or try something else
- Possibilities for re-engagement
- Follow-up assessments - new problems



# CONCLUSIONS, I

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- Need for multi-level provision (ranging from short focused interventions to longer term support), based on accurate assessment of population and individual needs
- No one-size-fits-all solutions and few cheap quick fixes
- Group-based parenting programmes are expensive and valuable but, in themselves, are unlikely to suffice; choice of programme is also important
- The effectiveness of targeted services for 'hard to reach' families essentially depends upon their social context (the universal services, buildings, information networks and personnel) within which they are embedded

# CONCLUSIONS, II

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- Relationships are crucial to successful engagement – between parent and all providers, between parents, and between providers
- Relationship-building takes time and resources
- Relationship-building is compromised by organisational insecurity
- Relationship-building is therefore severely challenged by the UK funding context
- The current UK funding context seems structurally set to disadvantage many families and to create the conditions that foster the emergence of ‘hard to reach’ families

# CONCLUSIONS, III

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- Evaluation will almost inevitably be more complicated than simplistic RCT-based evaluation designs demand, because ‘hard to reach’ families are not a homogeneous group
- Providing only “evidence-based” parenting programmes may deter engagement for some of the families with the most complex and varying needs
- There is a huge amount of expertise around and, in many places, structures are beginning to be put in place to utilise and maximise it
- **BUT THE BIGGEST PROBLEM IS INADEQUATE FUNDING AND ILL-ADVISED DECISIONS ON SPEND**

# CONCLUSIONS continued..



# References

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